PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 399

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2002–03

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3 February 2003

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2001]

FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 399**

SIXTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2002–2003

House of Commons

Monday 3 February 2003

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

School Sports

1. **Mr. Michael Foster** (Worcester): What plans she has to extend the provision of school sports co-ordinators. [94790]

5. **Phil Sawford** (Kettering): What action she is taking to promote sport in schools. [94795]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): PE and sport are vital to the Government's view of the development of young people in terms of their health and educational achievement. That is why my Department and the Department for Education and Skills are investing £459 million over the next three years to transform PE and school sport. We have set ourselves the challenging target of taking the percentage of schoolchildren who spend at least two hours a week on high-quality PE and school sport from some 25 per cent. in 2002 to 75 per cent. in 2006. That money will more than treble the number of school sports co-ordinators to 2,400—school sports co-ordinators are the linchpin of the partnerships that drive participation forwards—and will nearly quadruple the number of primary link teachers to 13,500. I shall today place in the Library the initial results of the survey of school sports co-ordinator partnerships that took place at the end of 2002.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. She will know of my support for Worcestershire county council's bid for a school sports co-ordinator to cover the Worcester city school pyramids, and I hope that her Department will look favourably on that. Does she think that school sports co-ordinators should be concerned with participation in sports, or with the unearthing of talent such as another Beckham, Botham or Paula Radcliffe, or both?

Hon. Members: Both.

Tessa Jowell: In response to the second part of my hon. Friend's question, the answer, which we heard echoing round the Chamber, is that they are intended to do both—to ensure that sport becomes part of every child's life at school and to create the opportunities for children with talent and ambition to progress. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his advocacy of school sport on behalf of his constituents, and I very much hope that there will soon be a partnership in an area near him.

Phil Sawford: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work that she is doing to encourage sport in schools, and welcome the £900,000 that is being provided through the new opportunities fund for the Montagu school in my Kettering constituency. The difficulty that we face is that the project requires £1.2 million. Will she look into that and offer some advice on additional funding to ensure that the project can go ahead?

Tessa Jowell: If my hon. Friend would like to write to me, I shall certainly consider the costs of his project. The partnerships are funded at more or less equal cost,

but if particular problems are being encountered in his local partnership, we shall of course attempt to solve them.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I welcome the extra money, in particular for the development of Canterbury high school as a sports community college. However, will the Secretary of State address the real scandal—the continuing sell-off of school playing fields, which happened under successive Governments and has accelerated under this one?

Tessa Jowell: We have been here before. The hon. Gentleman should know better. It is absolutely not the case that the rate of school playing field sales has increased. Any proposed sale of a playing field has to navigate very tight tests before a decision to allow it to be sold is taken. Whereas under the last Government about 40 playing fields a month were sold, it is now no more than a trickle, and they are sold only where there is no sporting case for keeping them.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) made a fair point. If the Government's commitment to sport in schools is "second to none", to use the Secretary of State's words, why have 115 major school playing fields been sold off in the past four years?

Tessa Jowell: Because in many cases, new facilities have replaced those playing fields. When we last debated the matter, I made the Government's commitment clear: more than £1 billion from the Government and the lottery will be invested in facilities for sport over the next three years. The Government are therefore putting their money where their commitment is: into the development of community facilities for children and the wider community.

Gate Studios, Elstree

2. **Claire Ward** (Watford): What representations she has received on the listed building status of the Gate Studios in Elstree; and if she will make a statement. [94792]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): The Department for Culture, Media and Sport received 10: nine in favour of listing, and one against.

Claire Ward: I am disappointed in English Heritage's decision. Its judgment is flawed in this case. The Gate studios have the oldest surviving sound stage of its type in the country. It dates from 1928 and has remained unaltered since it was erected. It played an important part in the British film industry. Of course, Elstree and Borehamwood constitute a major part of film and television in this country.

English Heritage has not examined the case properly. I ask my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to reconsider and ascertain whether it is possible, on the grounds of the rarity of the sound stage, to get English Heritage to list it.

Dr. Howells: English Heritage assessed the Gate Studios complex in 2001 and advised that it did not fulfil the criteria for listing. After careful consideration of the evidence, my right hon. Friend decided to accept English Heritage's advice. However, she has suggested that she is happy to reconsider whether to add the building to the statutory list if further new evidence of architectural significance is sent to her.

National Museums (Free Entry)

3. **Helen Southworth** (Warrington, South): What assessment she has made of the impact of free entry to national museums. [94793]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): In the first year—2001–02—of free admission, visitors to national museums that previously charged increased by more than 5 million; a growth of 70 per cent. That resounding success has been mirrored in all the regions that have sponsored museums. In the north-west, visitors to sponsored museums increased by 74 per cent. to almost 2 million.

Helen Southworth: I thank my right hon. Friend for that welcome news. People throughout the country appreciate the increase in visitors to national museums. What further steps does she intend to take to ensure equity of access for all social groups in the country and in the regions, so that people in Warrington get the same benefit and opportunity as people in Westminster to enjoy the wealth of our national museums?

Tessa Jowell: My hon. Friend asks an important question, which represents the next stage of access to museums. The answer is in two parts. First, we want to ensure that museums are more open and inviting to people from a wide range of backgrounds—wider than the groups that have perhaps traditionally visited our museums. Early figures show some success in that. Museums will be encouraged to be more open through the terms of their funding agreement. That links to their increasingly important educational role. Secondly, I hope that a new contract between national and regional museums will lead to much greater co-operation and sharing of skills, thus improving the quality of what is on offer, sharing collections and making regional museums even more inviting to the widest range of people.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): That is all very well, but as one who commends the Secretary of State on free entry, I draw her attention to the gross underfunding of some of our museums, such as the British Museum. Will she deal with acquisition grants? Does she know that many of our great national galleries and museums are unable adequately to fund purchases?

Tessa Jowell: I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognises the progress that has been made. Every one

of our national museums and galleries will from next year receive a further increase in its funding, including the British Museum. Of course, every cultural institution—indeed, almost every part of our national life—could do with more money, but what we have done in the six years since we came back into power in 1997 is to increase year on year the amount of money available to museums and galleries. That is linked to the incredibly popular policy of free entry, ensuring that the treasures in our national museums and galleries are truly enjoyed by all.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon): The House will know that I have an interest in this matter. Given the Secretary of State's continuing refusal to allow our national museums to choose whether they charge or not, thus denying them an extremely useful potential source of funding, will she undertake to review the museums' acquisitions grants on a year-by-year basis, to enable them to participate in the increasingly expensive and competitive international art market, and to help to save treasures of national importance from going abroad?

Tessa Jowell: The hon. Gentleman will know—or perhaps he does not, in which case I will tell him—that paintings to the value of some £35 million have been gifted to museums and galleries as part of the special scheme that allows the gift of pictures to be offset against inheritance tax. That is an important way of renewing and refreshing the collections. Our museums and galleries also go out to private sponsors and benefactors in the private sector. This is an area in which the Government can make an enormously important commitment, and our top priority is to ensure that our museums and galleries are free at any time to anybody who wants to visit them. Our approach contrasts with that of the Conservative party, which introduced charges and saw a collapse in the number of people who could afford to go and enjoy those paintings.

Lottery Grant Distribution

4. **Bob Spink** (Castle Point): What action she is taking to improve access to lottery grants for constituencies in the lower quartile of distribution. [94794]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): The Government have asked lottery distributors to ensure that all parts of the country have access to funding, and they have recently introduced a number of schemes to target funding to areas of need.

Bob Spink: Given that lottery sales are continuing to fall—I understand that they fell by 5 per cent. last month—I think that that is a complacent answer. Ninety five per cent. of constituencies receive more in lottery grants than Castle Point, although that figure is improving since my re-election because I am fighting for a better share for my constituency. Simply to bring Castle Point up the level of the average constituency, however, the Minister would need to give Benfleet, Hadleigh and Canvey Island some £13,700,000. Will he now review the distribution rules, stop funding controversial and political groups and schemes that command very little public support, and use more common sense—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Caborn: I was going to try to be extremely helpful to the hon. Gentleman when I came to the Dispatch Box this afternoon. Indeed, I have asked my officials to write to him, so that he can come and have discussions with them, because the underlying problem in his constituency is that people there are not making the applications for lottery funding. The average number of awards to each constituency is about 150, but the figure for the hon. Gentleman's constituency is only 60. That is because only a very small number of applications has been made. That is a problem that we have in a number of constituencies, and part of our targeting relates to that. Hon. Members on both sides of the House are having discussions with the distributors, and we are putting on a roadshow to try to ensure that, where people need assistance in making applications to the lottery, it is forthcoming. I have asked my officials to write to the hon. Gentleman, to help him and his constituents to get more money from the lottery.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Does my right hon. Friend not accept, however, that many areas of the country are very dependent on such grants, particularly for the provision of play spaces and sports facilities for children? In an age of declining lottery revenues, might it perhaps become necessary for the Government to be more proactive, to ensure that all children have somewhere to play?

Mr. Caborn: I agree, but let us keep the thing in proportion. Ours is probably the most successful lottery in the world, and it has returned billions to good causes. We have conducted two reviews in the recent past, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will report to the House later this year on a further review. We have tried to ensure that targeting is both fair and transparent. I take on board what my hon. Friends have said, but I hope they will acknowledge that lottery distribution has been both fair in terms of capital and revenue, and fair to the poorer parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): Have not disadvantaged groups benefited particularly from community fund grants? Such grants are now harder to obtain because lottery sales are falling. That is due particularly to a growing belief that the lottery is no longer properly independent, but is being used to support the Government's spending programmes rather than the original good causes. If the community fund is to be swallowed by the new opportunities fund, is there not a real danger that local voluntary and charitable organisations will lose out once again?

Mr. Caborn: Not at all. Our review has been conducted in concert with wide consultation to ensure that lottery moneys are targeted on the place of need. That is what the British public broadly want. Research and opinion polls have established that they are satisfied

with the targeting of the new opportunities fund. Had it not been for the NOF, indeed, the hon. Gentleman's constituency would not have received the largest single grant—amounting to just under £1 million—for a healthy living centre. I am sure he will acknowledge that the centre has been very successful.

Mr. Whittingdale: The new opportunities fund is already taking the biggest share of lottery proceeds, and it operates under the direct instruction of the Secretary of State. Can the Minister give a categorical assurance that if the community fund and the NOF are merged, the resulting body will not have to take its orders from the Government but will be able to operate on a properly independent basis?

Mr. Caborn: Very much so. That is being dealt with in the current discussions. But it is a bit rich coming from the hon. Gentleman, who, along with his colleagues, has constantly attacked the community fund in the recent past.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that transparency and targeting will continue to accord broadly with what the British people want, as they have under the new opportunities fund. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to draw my Department's attention to any case that he believes has involved political bias, will he please raise it in specific rather than general terms?

West End Theatre

6. **Mr. Chris Bryant** (Rhondda): What plans she has to promote West End theatre. [94796]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): There have been no recent meetings between Ministers and the Society of West End Theatre—or SWET, as it calls itself. We have received copies of letters sent by the society to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Mayor of London's office expressing its concern about the deteriorating physical state of the west end. I understand that the society has been told that if it has a specific request to the DCMS, or if we can assist in liaison with other Departments, we will help in any way we can; but to date no such request has been made.

Mr. Bryant: My hon. Friend will know that literally thousands of people travel to London every year from his constituency, from my constituency and, indeed, from the United States of America, primarily—sometimes solely—to visit the west end theatres. They see some wonderful shows, but because 37 of London's theatres are either Victorian or Edwardian, they must see them in terrible buildings whose seats were built for backsides of the Victorian rather than the modern era—indeed, rather than for Americans. [HON. MEMBERS: "Or Soames!"] The hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) clearly concurs with that.

Moreover, many of the bars are dingy and overpriced, and have not seen a lick of paint since Oscar Wilde was last there. Is it not time we bashed some heads together to make sure that more investment goes into those theatres, so that everyone can enjoy going to a west end show?

Dr. Howells: As long as only heads will be bashed together, I do not mind.

My hon. Friend is right. It has been calculated that the west end theatres are worth £1 billion to the United Kingdom economy: they are a very important asset. I am not sure about the size of seats—

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): All right. Steady.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Moving rapidly off seats, may I ask whether the Minister has done an assessment of what the implications of easier access for the disabled will be not just for theatres in the west end but for theatres and cinemas up and down the country?

Dr. Howells: I understand that it has been calculated that it will cost about £200 million to refurbish leading theatres in the west end, including making access much easier for disabled people, but a big survey is being done by the Society of London Theatre, which has promised to come back to us to talk to us about what the costs are likely to be and about the way we may be able to help to ensure that those costs can be met.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Does my hon. Friend not agree that the health of west end theatres, indeed all British theatres, depends on encouraging a new generation of dramatists? Will he therefore have speedy discussions with the Association of London Government, which I understand is threatening to withdraw funding from the Royal Court's young playwright scheme, as well as from other theatrical venues across the whole of London?

Dr. Howells: I will certainly pass on the message to the Minister for the Arts. I am sure my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the Film Council is putting aside a very large amount of money in order that we can help in the development of film scripts. There is agreement that we need to do much more to support the development of scripts in theatres as part of that big project.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Is it any surprise that west end theatre is currently going through one of its worst financial downturns, what with the failing tube system, dramatically rising street crime, uncertainty about the implications of the Licensing Bill, central London becoming inaccessible because of roadworks and the preparations for congestion charging? How are theatregoers supposed to get to the theatre and home without hassle and in safety? Is it not time that the Government addressed the crucial issues for inner London—decaying transport infrastructure, rising crime and antisocial behaviour?

Dr. Howells: That was a wonderful piece of fiction. The situation is not as bad as the hon. Gentleman suggests. I know that he has a political point to make and that he has to talk down whatever success there is in the economy, but this year is likely to be the first year in British history in which more than 12 million people will

pay to go to London theatres. That is a great achievement. He should not talk them down. He should celebrate that fact.

Music/Gun Crime Link

7. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire): What recent representations she has received about possible links between some types of music and gun crime. [94797]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): My Department has received a number of representations from members of the public and other interested parties following my comments on some gangsta rap lyrics. Those representations have been both supportive and critical.

Andrew Selous: What consideration is given to the licensing of those radio stations that continue to play a significant amount of music whose lyrics glamorise gun violence?

Dr. Howells: God forbid that we should have any influence over what people can or cannot put on the radio. The most important consideration of all is that politicians should keep their sticky fingers out of such decisions. I do, however, share the hon. Gentleman's belief that there should be a public debate about those issues and that the industry should think about doing anything to help to tackle the glamorisation of gun culture and the misogyny in some lyrics that I have heard over the years and criticised. I am prepared to debate that issue anywhere.

The most shameful thing of all is the way in which, from some liberal quarters—the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) should not panic about this—we are getting an incredibly condescending analysis, as if it does not matter what people write and sing; those analysts say that the words do not matter and are merely a reflection of poverty. There were very poor communities in this country in the 1920s and 1930s. They did not resort to those kinds of lyrics or to that kind of gun culture. We have a duty in the House to hold the line against the spread of guns and of gun culture.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): The Minister will be aware that the Hackney and Tottenham areas have the highest levels of gun crime in the country. I take this issue very seriously, and although I agree with him that the lyrics of these songs are deplorable, dreadful, misogynistic, homophobic and the rest of it, he needs to be careful about confusing symptoms with underlying causes. He also needs to be aware that middle-aged people down the ages have fulminated against the music of younger people, and that that is exactly why younger people sometimes frame their culture in the way that they do. My Hackney constituents hear of some form of shooting in a club, street or residential area every weekend, and they want Ministers to pay attention to the underlying issues, which are tackling educational underachievement in school, more promotion of sport and action on gun traffickers. Let us beware of the easy option—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That question was far too long.

Dr. Howells: I very much agree with a lot of what my hon. Friend says, but she will doubtless agree with me that sometimes, we have to take decisions about whom and what we are going to support on this issue. If we do not say these things, the assumption is sometimes made that such lyrics should be accepted and are a valid expression of a community. I do not believe that that is true, and we are on a very slippery slope if we believe otherwise. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that such lyrics and images do not turn people into murderers, but they do coarsen our sensibilities as a society, and we should be very wary of that, because it leads to some very dangerous places.

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): Given the build-up of guns in the Gulf just now, it would certainly be interesting to know what type of music George Bush is listening to. Does the Minister agree that governmental disapproval will only act as a recruiting sergeant for this music, and ensure its increasing popularity among young people?

Dr. Howells: No, I do not agree. Last year, 98 people died in this country as a result of gun crime, and 580 were very seriously injured. The hon. Gentleman seems to want to make quips to the effect that we cannot really address this issue because there is about to be a war. That is the most facile, condescending nonsense I have ever heard, and the hon. Gentleman should have the guts to stand up against such lyrics and say what he believes. Doing so would probably earn him a good deal more respect than will coming out with such parallels.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey): Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to acknowledge that hip-hop and rap music also contain lyrics that condemn gun violence? Will he acknowledge, for example, Grandmaster Flash's seminal record "The Message", which preached against gun violence, Ms Dynamite's lyrics and the work of Missy Elliott? So there is a great deal of good, as well as some bad things, and I should not like the House to get the reputation for being fuddy-duddy and not actually listening to the lyrics of rap and hip-hop, some of which can be very inspiring.

Dr. Howells: I agree entirely—having three children aged 26, 18 and 14, I have had no choice but to listen to gangsta rap.

European Capital of Culture (Birmingham Bid)

8. **Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield): What assessment she has made of Birmingham's bid to become European capital of culture 2008. [94798]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): As my hon. Friend knows, Birmingham is one of six cities on the shortlist that was recommended by an independent advisory panel, and which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced last autumn. The others

are Bristol, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle-Gateshead and Oxford. We will await the panel's further advice and recommendations before reaching a conclusion.

Richard Burden: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Is he aware that Bill Clinton visited Birmingham for the G8 summit during his presidency, and that when he was more recently asked to comment on Birmingham's bid to be the capital of culture, he said:

"The buildings, the art, the use of the water—it is an extraordinary jewel of a city, and one that I think is not very well known outside the UK. So I think if the . . . designation came, firstly it would be well deserved and secondly it would give Birmingham some of the recognition around the world that I would like to see it get."

May I ask my right hon. Friend to agree with that assessment?

Mr. Caborn: Whether I agree with it or not is probably irrelevant; indeed, those remarks ought to be sent to the panel that is making the judgment, and which will be advising the Secretary of State. However, I have no doubt that my hon. Friend will send to that panel a copy of *Hansard* when it is published tomorrow.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Given the success of the European city of culture bid, is there any reason why we cannot have a UK city of culture every year, to attract more internal tourism from within the UK?

Mr. Caborn: We will consider that. The panel has said on a number of occasions that the industrial cities of the UK are going through a significant renaissance and becoming some of the leading cities of Europe in the 21st century. We ought to encourage that process, and we have done so by using the good offices of Bradford to develop the cities that failed to get on to the shortlist. We shall take my hon. Friend's point on board and respond in the future.

Olympic Bid

9. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): What discussions she has had on the financing of the costs of an Olympic bid. [94799]

10. **Mr. Jonathan Djanogly** (Huntingdon): When she last met the Prime Minister to discuss hosting the 2012 Olympics. [94800]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): I have had many discussions about the Olympics within Government and with potential stakeholders, including the National Lottery Commission, Camelot, major interests in the City of London, the Association of London Government, the Mayor of London, the CBI and the Governor of the Bank of England. A prerequisite of Government support for any bid for 2012 will be to ensure that, unlike previous bids, the finances are sound and the liability for underwriting in the event of overspend is agreed at the outset.

Dr. Palmer: I understand that the bid would produce substantial benefits in terms of improved infrastructure for London, but Nottingham taxpayers feel that we have done our bit for London's infrastructure in continuing to fund the previous Government's millennium dome. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that taxpayers outside London will not be required to underwrite the bid?

Tessa Jowell: I understand my hon. Friend's feelings, and it is for that reason that we are looking at two sources in developing the potential funding package for an Olympic bid: the lottery, and a new Olympic game; and a precept on London, in clear recognition that London will be the principal beneficiary, but that London must pay. In the event of a bid for London, it would be our aim to ensure that, through lottery investment, facilities were developed around the country, particularly training camps that athletes would need in advance of the games to acclimatise. We must make sure that as many events as possible are held in different parts of the country, and that lottery investment funds facilities that will benefit communities after the Olympics.

Mr. Djanogly: So many other countries are jumping at the highest levels to have the privilege of hosting the 2012 Olympics. Why are our Government equivocating and not getting on with it? The Olympics would be a massive opportunity for our country and the stimulus for improving infrastructure in London.

Tessa Jowell: The hon. Gentleman would be among the first of a chorus to castigate the Government if we walked into this without being absolutely clear on the financial liabilities. Germany is still contemplating whether to bid, as is Paris, and there may well be a bid from Moscow that has not yet been announced. Cities take increasingly seriously the decision to bid. We must make sure that if we bid, win and stage the games, we are not left with years and years of debt, as so many Olympic cities have been in the past.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Will the Secretary of State assure me that if the bid were to go ahead, deprived communities such as St. Helens and many in the north-west would not be deprived of the resources they need?

Tessa Jowell: That is an extremely important question. In assessing whether to bid, we are considering ways of ensuring that existing programmes, such as the investment, through the lottery, in school support for deprived communities and other parts of the country to which I referred earlier, is not put at risk by a decision to bid for and, therefore, to fund the staging of the Olympics. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we very much want to preserve that discipline.

Nick Harvey (North Devon): Does the Secretary of State accept that 2012 is the last realistic chance for a London Olympics? Land in the capital is at such a premium that none will be available the next time that Europe has the chance to stage the games. Does she agree that London stands a good chance of winning a

bid for 2012, so would not future generations think that the Government had been extremely timid if the bid did not go ahead due to lack of Government backing?

Tessa Jowell: No, it would not be the last chance for London, although it would probably be the last chance to use the sites in Stratford, which are currently available but which, after 2012, are likely to have been sold off and used for some other purpose. It is not the last chance but it is a good opportunity, given the likelihood—although not the certainty—of the games coming to Europe in 2012. All those factors weigh heavily on the Government's decision. Incidentally, I hope that, if the Government decide to bid, every party in the House will sign up to that wholeheartedly, and that we can have a suspension of the usual hostilities of cross-party politics.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): Is the real reason that we should bid not that it would be a great festival of sport—even though that would certainly be one benefit—but the huge benefits to our economy? Is it not the case that Australia benefited to the tune of about £3 billion of extra spending on tourism and that the Spaniards benefited from net investment of about £11 billion? Is not that the real reason why an Olympic bid should go ahead?

Tessa Jowell: No. I do not agree with my hon. Friend. The case for bidding for and hosting the Olympics is not a value-for-money, economic one. If we decide to bid for and host the Olympics, we do so because as a proud country we want to host the greatest sporting event in the world.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): The need for certainty about costs and resources is understandable and we support the Secretary of State on that. However, does she recognise that the British Olympic Association needs an urgent decision from the Government? Will she recommend support for a bid to the Prime Minister? Who in the Government will take charge of the bid? If the bid is successful, preparations for 2012 would span three Parliaments, so I agree with the right hon. Lady that all-party support is vital. May I suggest that she consider setting up a cross-party ministerial group so that the Government and the Opposition can each play their part in achieving success for Britain and the Olympic movement?

Tessa Jowell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those questions and shall deal with his third point first. Securing cross-party support throughout what will be a long process is critical. We must show that the Government of the United Kingdom are four-square behind a bid and that there is no risk that it becomes prey to party politics. We shall certainly want to look into the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. Furthermore, as the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity, with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Sport, to examine the Arup report in full, I hope that he appreciated that.

Matters relating to the machinery of Government are for the Prime Minister and will be dealt with when any decision is taken to support a bid. I have made my view clear at the Dispatch Box: there is a strong sporting case for a bid. My Cabinet colleagues, whose principal responsibility is not sport, also recognise that. However, the decision must be signed up to for the whole Government because there are implications for the whole of Government. In July, the BOA has to submit its indication of bid and we shall ensure that a decision is taken well before then.

Local Radio

11. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): What measures she will put in place to ensure that deregulation of local radio ownership does not undermine the local character of radio stations. [94801]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): Clause 302 of the Communications Bill, currently being considered by the House, will impose a duty on Ofcom to ensure that local sound broadcasting services contain local content and retain the character of local radio. Ofcom is required to draft, publish and maintain a code, giving guidance on local content and character and to have regard to the code when carrying out its functions in relation to local sound broadcasting services.

Miss Begg: My hon. Friend knows that I have already raised my fears with regard to the loss of local identity in television stations, so he will not be surprised that I am asking him about local radio. My own local radio station—Northsound in Aberdeen—does a wonderful job in reflecting the local culture and in supporting and promoting north-east culture over the airwaves. Does my hon. Friend agree that the loss of that very essence, which makes a local radio station local, would be a tragedy and that the last thing that we want is a lot of local radio stations that all sound the same?

Dr. Howells: Yes, I could not agree more. To be fair to all the operators of local radio stations, I should say that they understand full well that their biggest pulling power for audiences is precisely their localness. It is entirely possible for the radio station owners to get together with Ofcom to draw up a code that will bring together the best ideas in the industry about strengthening localness. We put a great deal of stress on that in the Bill, and our proposals have had a favourable reception. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that it is absolutely vital to preserve and enhance that localness not only for the service of the community, but because of its great pulling power for audiences.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Proxy Voting

21. **Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): What plans the Electoral Commission has to stop abuse of proxy votes. [94811]

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. A. J. Beith), who normally answers for the Speaker's Committee, apologises for not being in the Chamber this afternoon. He is attending the funeral of our former parliamentary colleague, Richard Wainwright. I have been asked to reply.

The Electoral Commission is examining the use of proxy voting as part of its current review of the law and practice in relation to absent voting generally. The commission plans to publish its final report and recommendations in April this year.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reply. However, before the commission publishes its final report, will it give some attention to events that took place in my constituency in July last year, when there were 400 proxy votes in a single ward in a council by-election? I have to say—I can say it here very clearly—that there are very strong suspicions that many elderly people gave their proxy votes to individuals who then did not cast those proxy votes in the way that those people would have wished if they had known what they were doing. Can we deal with the proxy vote problem once and for all? Now that we have good availability of postal votes, is it not time that we scrapped the possible abuse and intimidation of people via the proxy vote system, got rid of proxy votes and used postal votes instead?

Mr. Viggers: The commission has no power to investigate specific allegations of electoral abuse or fraud. Any such allegation should be referred to the police. However, the commission is interested in gathering more evidence about the extent and scale of electoral abuses in the United Kingdom and intends to fund research in that area in the coming year. If the hon. Gentleman would care to make representations to the Electoral Commission, I am sure that they would be well received.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I wish to disagree with the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes) because a large proportion of people in my constituency work in the oil industry. They work offshore on a two-week-on, two-week-off rota. Sometimes they work three weeks on, three weeks off; or they work abroad for large parts of the year. In those circumstances, postal voting is not practical, especially as we still have fairly short notice of when elections will be held; so may I make a plea that proxy voting remain an option for people who cannot be present to vote on the day?

Mr. Viggers: Of course, if we were to rely entirely on postal voting, there may be circumstances in which a voter who is resident overseas might find it difficult or even impossible to register to vote within the time limit, so the hon. Lady makes a very fair point.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Open Spaces and Greenfield Land

22. **Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What is the policy of the Church Commissioners for preserving open spaces and green field land in their ownership. [94812]

Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mr. Stuart Bell): The commissioners have in place an environmental policy for their rural estates. Their primary responsibility is towards their beneficiaries, the serving and retired clergy of the Church of England. However, they are careful to balance that against the need for responsibility towards the environment.

Simon Hughes: Will the Second Church Estates Commissioner ask his colleagues to pay particular attention to a park just over the water called Archbishops park, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey)? She, I and many other people have a major concern that the Church may be pursuing the wrong course. The Church is the freeholder. Will the hon. Gentleman try to make sure that the Church negotiates that that park can remain a public park for the foreseeable future, and give a lease to the local authority, or to somebody else willing to manage it as it would wish, so that it can be protected, and that there is no risk of it being developed, built on or sold off.

Mr. Bell: I am glad to say that I anticipated the hon. Gentleman's question, and I have already made the inquiries that he would wish me to make. Lambeth borough council manages the park, and, having security of tenure under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, can continue to occupy unless the commissioners require it for their own occupation or redevelopment. The commissioners do not have plans to redevelop the park, which is zoned in the unitary plan as an open space, and are therefore seeking to agree a new lease.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Further to the inquiries that my hon. Friend has made, although we are grateful for them, it would be helpful if he would return to the issue. The reality is that the Commissioners are not prepared to negotiate the lease for any longer than 15 years. That is hopeless when it comes to bringing in other money from other agencies, which we want to do to enhance and improve that park. We must ask for the situation to be clarified so that, with the Church Commissioners, we can move forward to keep that park in its current use and to improve it for the next 115 years.

Mr. Bell: I am happy to say that I also anticipated my hon. Friend's question—*[Interruption.]* If one asks the question, one gets the answers. Lambeth borough council has sought a term of lease—given the latent value of the site, should it cease to be zoned as an open space—but the commissioners are unable to grant it.

However, dialogue between the two parties is ongoing, and I will make sure that the commissioners have heard what my hon. Friend has said.

Rents

23. **Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): What changes have taken place in the total rents received from church land over the past three years. [94813]

Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mr. Stuart Bell): The average decrease in rents reviewed in the last three years was 15 per cent., 11 per cent. and 5 per cent. respectively.

Paul Flynn: The commissioners have generously decreased or frozen the rents for many of their rural tenants in anticipation of reductions in income that, in the main, did not take place. At the same time, they meanly introduced market rents to the Octavia Hill estate: 1,600 dwellings that have been used for more than a century to provide fair rents and good-value homes to people on low and average incomes. Have the commissioners got their priorities right?

Mr. Bell: The commissioners, as important landlords, are very concerned about their farmers and their tenants. All tenants have been encouraged to contact either the commissioners' property department or their local managing agents if they are in financial difficulties. All cases will be looked at individually. That could result, for example, in abatements of rental payments, which could be delayed interest-free. On the more specific point that my hon. Friend makes, I will be glad to take up individual cases on his behalf.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): How many individuals or organisations have been evicted for non-payment of rents during the period in question?

Mr. Bell: It is a pertinant point that the hon. Gentleman makes. I am not aware of anyone having been evicted on the question of non-payment of rent.

Music Scholarship

24. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): How much the Church Commissioners have provided for the promotion of the scholarship of music in churches and cathedrals in the last five years. [94814]

Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mr. Stuart Bell): The Commissioners have made grants, under section 23 of the Cathedrals Measure 1999, for stipends and administrative costs. These may be used, for example, to pay an organist's wage, but the commissioners do not hold detail on how they are spent.

Michael Fabricant: The English choral tradition is admired throughout the world for its scholarship and its performances. It is unique; it does not exist in continental Europe or north America. However, it will die unless additional funding is found. Without such funding the likes of William Walton and Benjamin Britten would never have learned their skills in the English writing of music. What further steps can the hon. Gentleman and the commissioners take to ensure that this great and noble tradition does not end in this century?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his reference to the musical works of our churches. He will be aware that 42 cathedrals and 16,000 parish churches belong to the Church of England. The majority of them put on regular musical and dramatic events. At one and the same time, such events enhance the churches' community focus and, as he has said, extend their outreach and generate vital revenue towards the running and repair costs of the buildings.

On the point about additional funding, the Church Commissioners and the wider Church welcome the Government's tabling of an amendment that will obviate the need for cathedrals and church halls to pay licensing fees.

Historic Churches Preservation Trust

25. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will make a statement on the effect of changes in the landfill tax credits regime on funding for the Historic Churches Preservation Trust. [94815]

Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mr. Stuart Bell): The trust does not receive any money from the landfill tax credits scheme. However, an estimated £1 million from the scheme goes toward the repair of churches that qualify through their geographical proximity to landfill sites, and another estimated £1 million is administered by county historic church trusts. If this money were to be removed, it seems clear that the number of claims upon the funds of the Historic Churches Preservation Trust would increase.

Mr. Brady: What representations have the Church Commissioners made to the Government with regard to the potential £2 million loss? Has the hon. Gentleman been given any assurances that it can be defrayed or met by other funds?

Mr. Bell: Discussions with the Government are ongoing and, when I have any positive response to give, I will be glad to give it to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): As a trustee of the Historical Churches Preservation Trust, may I urge the hon. Gentleman to treat the matter as one of real urgency? If the £2 million is lost, the trust will not be able to make it up in its entirety. It is therefore crucial that the money remain.

Mr. Bell: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman is a trustee and a very vocal supporter of the trust's work. I am also well aware of the role played by the trust in preserving the nation's churches. I understand that it gave financial help amounting to £1.5 million to 326 churches in 2001. That effort is greatly appreciated.

Licensing Bill

26. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire): What recent representations he has received from clergy concerning the Licensing Bill as it relates to church premises. [94816]

Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mr. Stuart Bell): I have received no direct representations on the Licensing Bill, but the hon. Gentleman will have heard that the Church of England has warmly welcomed the Government's tabled amendment to the Bill that ensures that places of worship will be exempt from the requirements for public entertainment licensing. At the same time, the Government propose to exempt churches and village halls from the need to pay licensing fees.

Andrew Selous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that answer, but can he assure the House that he will keep a very careful watch on this issue so that churches such as All Saints in Leighton Buzzard in my constituency, which regularly use concerts as a means of fund raising to preserve their fabric, do not have future cause to worry?

Mr. Bell: I have heard the hon. Gentleman's point. He will be pleased to learn that the Bishop of London, who took up this cause in the other place, was heard by the Government. They have tabled an amendment and we welcome that. The Church also welcomes it, but we will follow the amendment through all its Committee proceedings and on to the Floor of the House.

Church Repairs (VAT)

27. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations he has received on the impact of VAT on church repairs. [94817]

Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mr. Stuart Bell): The Churches main committee and the Church of England's VAT group, having worked tremendously hard on the matter, continue to press for change with other Government Departments and with colleagues in Europe as the European Commission reviews the sixth VAT directive.

Miss McIntosh: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of my ongoing campaign in that regard. In the interim, until VAT is reduced, will he bring the regrettable administration in applying for grants to make up for the shortfall in VAT reduction to the attention of the Chancellor?

Mr. Bell: The Church appreciates the gesture made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in giving a derogation from payment of the full VAT on church repairs. He listened receptively to the concept that that should be continued in the next Budget. We appreciate his continued efforts on behalf of the Church until the sixth directive is properly revised.

Iraq

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): May I first tell the House that I have sent messages of condolence to President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon following the break-up of the Columbia space shuttle on Saturday? This was a tragedy not just for the seven astronauts and their families, but for their countries and all who value space exploration. I am sure that the whole House would want to join me in expressing our sadness and our sympathy.

With permission, Mr. Speaker, I shall make a statement on my visit to Washington.

In addition to Iraq, which I shall come to in a moment, President Bush and I discussed the middle east peace process, Afghanistan and global poverty and development. On the first, we agreed on the vital necessity of making progress based on the twin-state solution: Israel confident of its own security and a Palestinian state that is viable. I am convinced there is now a real wish across the world to push this process forward and I hope that we can take further steps on this issue soon. I believe it is of fundamental importance, not just to peace in the middle east, but to peace throughout the world.

But the immediate focus of the visit was Iraq. Over the past week, in addition to meeting President Bush, I have seen Prime Minister Aznar, President Mbeki, Prime Minister Berlusconi and Prince Saud. Today, I have spoken to President Chirac. After this statement, I will be speaking to President Putin, and I have also spoken to the Prime Ministers of Turkey, Canada, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Australia. I shall meet President Chirac tomorrow. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in regular contact with his opposite numbers from countries on the UN Security Council, in the European Union and in the middle east, and will be in New York for UN meetings later this week.

We are entering the final phase of a 12-year history of the disarmament of Iraq. The duty on Saddam to destroy all his weapons of mass destruction was a central part of the ceasefire agreement at the end of the Gulf war in 1991. In a series of 17 resolutions since then, the UN Security Council has put Saddam under 27 separate and categorical obligations to give full, final and complete declarations on its weapons programmes; to give inspectors unconditional and unrestricted access; to cease the concealment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; and to co-operate fully with the inspectors in the disarmament of all Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Saddam has consistently flouted these obligations. That is why a sanctions regime has been in place for years against Iraq which, because of the way in which Saddam has applied it, has caused wholly unnecessary suffering for the Iraqi people.

Last November, the UN Security Council concluded unanimously that Iraq was still, and I quote, "in material breach of UN resolutions." Saddam was given "a final opportunity" to comply with his disarmament obligations. Resolution 1441 imposed on Saddam a duty to give

"a currently accurate, full and complete declaration of all aspects of its programmes to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and other delivery systems";

to provide

"immediate, unimpeded, unrestricted and private access"

to all people the inspectors wish to interview,

"in the mode or location"

of the inspectors' choice; and also to co-operate actively and fully with all the inspectors' demands. Failure by Iraq at any time to comply with and co-operate fully in the implementation of the resolution was said in terms to constitute a further material breach.

Eight weeks have now passed since Saddam was given his final chance. Six hundred weeks have passed since he was given his first chance. The evidence of co-operation withheld is unmistakable. Saddam has still not answered the questions concerning thousands of missing munitions and tons of chemical and biological agents unaccounted for. Rocket warheads with chemical weapons capacity have been found by the inspectors: they should have been declared. Classified documents of relevance to Iraq's past nuclear programme have been discovered in a scientist's private house: they should have been handed over. Of the first 11 documents specifically requested by the inspectors, only three have been produced. Not a single interviewee has come to an appointment with the inspectors without their so-called official minders.

As the report we published at the weekend makes clear, and which I placed in the Library of the House, there is a huge infrastructure of deception and concealment designed to prevent the inspectors from doing their job. US Secretary of State Colin Powell will report further to the UN on this on Wednesday. As Dr. Blix, the UN Chief Inspector, reported last week:

"Iraq appears not to have come to a genuine acceptance—not even today—of the disarmament which was demanded of it."

He said that Iraq's declaration seemed to contain no new evidence; that there are indications that Iraq has weaponised the nerve agent VX, one of the most toxic ever developed; that there are strong indications that Iraq produced more anthrax than it has declared; and that the discovery of chemical rocket warheads could be, again I quote, "the tip of an iceberg".

The situation therefore could not be clearer. There is a duty on Saddam to co-operate fully. At present, he is not co-operating fully. Failure to do so is a material breach of resolution 1441. Should Dr. Blix continue to report Iraqi non-co-operation, a second resolution should be passed confirming such a material breach. President Bush and I agreed that we should seek maximum support for such a resolution, provided, as ever, that seeking such a resolution is a way of resolving the issue, not delaying or avoiding dealing with it at all. I continue to believe that the United Nations is the right way to proceed. There is integrity in the process set out in resolution 1441 and we should follow it.

We of course discussed the fact that weapons of mass destruction are not the only threat the world faces, and Iraq is not the only country posing a risk in respect of weapons of mass destruction. Over the past few weeks, we have seen powerful evidence of the continuing terrorist threat: the suspected ricin plot in London and Manchester; al-Qaeda experiments in Afghanistan to develop chemical, biological and radiological weapons; the arrests of those linked to al-Qaeda in Spain and France; and further arrests just a few days ago in Italy.

[Mr. Tony Blair]

What is more, many of these arrests show the terrorist groups actively seeking to use chemical or biological means to cause as much death and injury and suffering as they can. We know too from 11 September that these terrorists have no demands that could ever be negotiated upon, no constraint in terms of finance and numbers to carry out terrorist acts, and no compunction in taking human life.

At the same time, we know that Iraq is not alone in developing weapons of mass destruction; there are unstable, fiercely repressive states either proliferating or trying to acquire WMD, like North Korea. I repeat my warning: unless we take a decisive stand now as an international community, it is only a matter of time before these threats come together. That means pursuing international terrorism across the world in all its forms. It means confronting nations defying the world over weapons of mass destruction. That is why a signal of weakness over Iraq is not only wrong in its own terms. Show weakness now and no one will ever believe us when we try to show strength in future. All our history, especially British history, points to this lesson. No one wants conflict. Even now, war could be avoided if Saddam did what he is supposed to do. But if, having made a demand backed up by a threat of force, we fail to enforce that demand, the result will not be peace or security. It will simply be returning to confront the issue again at a later time, with the world less stable, the will of the international community less certain, and those repressive states or terrorist groups that would destroy our way of life emboldened and undeterred.

Even now, I hope that conflict with Iraq can be avoided. Even now, I hope that Saddam can come to his senses, co-operate fully and disarm peacefully, as the UN has demanded. But if he does not—if he rejects the peaceful route—he must be disarmed by force. If we have to go down that route, we shall do all we can to minimise the risks to the people of Iraq, and we give an absolute undertaking to protect Iraq's territorial integrity. Our quarrel has never been with the Iraqi people, but with Saddam.

Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and the threats that they pose to the world must be confronted. In doing so, this country and our armed forces will be helping the long-term peace and security of Britain and the world.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Prime Minister spoke about the destruction of the space shuttle Columbia. I join him in sending my deepest condolences to the American and Israeli people. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who died on board.

I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. I welcome his agreement with President Bush on the middle east peace process. On Iraq, we fully support the UN route, and I hope that a second resolution will be possible. Although it is not a prerequisite for future action, it is highly desirable. Saddam Hussein still has time to cease his non-co-operation, change his attitude and start to disarm himself. However, as Hans Blix indicated, we should not deceive ourselves. The fundamental problem is not a lack of time, but the attitude of Saddam Hussein. I also agree with the Prime Minister that if the international community backs away from dealing with Saddam Hussein now, that will be seen as a green light by every rogue state and terrorist group around the world.

The Prime Minister quoted Hans Blix. Does he believe that those comments indicate that resolution 1441 has already been materially breached? Last week the Foreign Secretary said that Iraq was already in breach. Does the Prime Minister share his Foreign Secretary's opinion that Saddam is in breach now? Dr. Blix's main concern was that Iraq is not actively co-operating with the weapons inspectors. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is clear from the resolutions that it is not, as some continue to say, for the inspectors to find the weapons; it is for Iraq to account for discrepancies in her weapons declaration and to co-operate fully with the inspectors?

Secretary Colin Powell will this week reveal US intelligence that will outline the dangers that Saddam Hussein poses to the United States—in particular, how weapons inspectors have been deceived. Many British people, we know, are still anxious about the possible use of military force, and they are entitled, of course, to as much information as possible. Will the Prime Minister publish not only Colin Powell's presentation, but the Government's assessment of that new information? Notwithstanding the information that Downing street published over the weekend, will he also make available any further intelligence especially relevant to the security of the United Kingdom or its citizens? Will his entire Cabinet take that information to the British people to make the case?

We welcome the letter sent by eight European leaders in support of resolution 1441. Can the Prime Minister confirm reports that France and Germany were not asked to sign it? What reaction has he had from the leaders of France and Germany to the letter? The Prime Minister meets President Chirac tomorrow. Will he remind the President that he was a signatory of 1441, which warns unequivocally that "serious consequences" will follow any violation of the resolution? And after that letter, what assessment has the Prime Minister made of the circumstances under which France would support a second resolution?

Does the Prime Minister agree that taking a tough stance on Iraq has already yielded results? It has focused the United Nations on taking action to tackle the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; it has secured the entry of inspectors; and it has brought Saddam Hussein under pressure to comply with his international obligations.

Does the right hon. Gentleman also agree that, if and when a second resolution is secured, those who have to date opposed action to disarm Saddam Hussein have a stark choice? They can either back that second resolution, and any military action that follows, or have the courage to admit that they are opposed to military action in any circumstances.

Saddam Hussein's day of reckoning is fast approaching. Peace or war—the choice is his. Disarm, or face the consequences.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his general support. I think that we are in agreement on the main issues.

With regard to the middle east peace process, I am now more hopeful than I have been for some time that in the medium term we can make progress. I had a very good and constructive set of talks with President Bush on that issue.

I agree entirely with what the right hon. Gentleman says about resolution 1441. We shall, I am sure, make available Colin Powell's presentation on Wednesday and our assessment of it.

We issued further intelligence over the weekend about the infrastructure of concealment. It is obviously difficult when we publish intelligence reports, but I hope that people have some sense of the integrity of our security services. They are not publishing this, or giving us this information, and making it up. It is the intelligence that they are receiving, and we are passing it on to people. In the dossier that we published last year, and again in the material that we put out over the weekend, it is very clear that a vast amount of concealment and deception is going on.

Obviously there are different positions in Europe. But people can come round behind the UN process, because resolution 1441, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly points out, was passed by a unanimous Security Council. The integrity of that process is very clear. There is a duty fully to comply. If Iraq is not fully complying, having been given a final opportunity, a fresh resolution should issue. There is an inexorable logic to that, which will in the end bring people round. If we can do this and manage it through the international community, that will be a huge boost not just for dealing with the threat of weapons of mass destruction, but also for the integrity of the UN.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Conservative party, on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, in extending our sincere sympathy over all those who were lost as a result of the terrible tragedy in the United States at the weekend. We hope that their families are aware of the heartfelt sense of sympathy that exists internationally.

With regard to the Prime Minister's statement this afternoon, he is well aware, as we all are in the House, of the extent of public anxiety about the development of events. In particular, an awful lot of people right across the political spectrum and otherwise have a sense that we seem to be hastening into war ahead of events. Will the Prime Minister recognise that over the whole developing history of this matter, going right back to the recall of Parliament last September and the publication of the security services' dossier then, the Government have from time to time been perceived to be issuing mixed messages, not least in recent weeks from the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary? That needs to be said, because that is what people in the country feel.

The Government have still to make a credible case. That case, for any fair-minded person viewing it, has to be based on credible evidence, which has not so far been forthcoming.

Would the Prime Minister also acknowledge that the weapons inspectors need time to complete their task; that this Government must, if push comes to shove, be seen to subscribe, as he rightly acknowledged in his statement, to the United Nations route; and that if the Americans decide to take some form of pre-emptive action ahead of the weapons inspectors being able to complete their task, this country will have to be clear cut as to where its sense of allegiance lies? Does it lie with the United Nations route that the Government have rightly prosecuted with full support across all parties in the House, or will it lie with the United States?

The weapons inspectors are searching for that evidence on behalf of the United Nations and the entire international community. Does the Prime Minister recognise, given his statements over the weekend, that making it appear that war is somehow now inevitable makes it hard for the public to believe that the President of the United States and he are objective about the task in front of the weapons inspectors? If Colin Powell produces on Wednesday this week the hard evidence—the so-called smoking gun—that convinces the Security Council of the need for war, will that not prompt another question? If such evidence is concrete, clear cut and so persuasive, why was it not put in the hands of the weapons inspectors sooner rather than later? Did the Prime Minister express that opinion in his discussions with the President of the United States over the weekend? If not, why not? If the weapons inspectors come back and in due course say that they need more time and request that time, will Britain actively and publicly speak up in their support; or if the Americans decide to take pre-emptive actions come what may, will we side with the United States?

Finally, did the Prime Minister clarify with the President, and can he now clarify with this House of Commons and the country, the exact command and control structure for the forces that are now being deployed in our name on behalf of Britain in that region?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I think that the right hon. Gentleman said that we were hastening into war ahead of events. We have gone through 12 years of this process—12 years in which we have tried to get Saddam to disarm. We then came together last November and passed a resolution saying that there should be one final opportunity. That is hardly hastening into a war. If he does not comply with that UN resolution—he is not complying at the moment—we are not hastening into it ahead of events, but responding to the fact that Saddam has refused point blank, as he has done throughout 12 years, to do what the United Nations has asked him to do.

As for saying that credible evidence has not been forthcoming that Saddam is in breach of the resolution, the resolution says that he must make a full and honest declaration. I simply ask the right hon. Gentleman whether he thinks that a declaration that does not even disclose what has happened to the thousands of munitions and tonnes of nerve, chemical and biological agents that we know were left over from 1999 is full and honest. Does he really believe that a failure even to declare what has happened to that is an honest undertaking and declaration of what has happened? Does he think that the refusal to allow Iraqi experts to be interviewed—a vital part of the inspection process—unless they come with so-called Iraqi minders is acceptable? None of us can be so naïve as to think that such people are present merely to offer the odd cup of coffee and comfort.

[The Prime Minister]

If Saddam is carrying on in breach of those obligations, as Hans Blix himself says that he is, that is the credible evidence that he is not co-operating. With the greatest respect, the right hon. Gentleman seems to suggest, when he says that we are not objective, that somehow it is for us to come along and prove that Saddam is a guilty party. No; the United Nations decided that he was in breach of the UN resolutions and he has got to produce the evidence that he is now co-operating fully – and he is not doing so.

Now that is not simply our view—it is the view of Dr. Blix and the UN weapons inspectors. The right hon. Gentleman says that they should have time to complete their task. Yes, they should, but their task is not to engage in an elaborate game of hide and seek with Saddam whereby the UN inspectors go in and try to find the stuff while he tries to hide it—if they find it, they win; if he hides it, he wins. That is not how the system is supposed to operate. That was how it operated in the 1990s, however, so that a weapons inspections process that was supposed to take weeks ended up taking years. This time, therefore, the resolution—1441—said, "You've got a final opportunity; you've got to make an honest declaration; you've got to co-operate fully with the inspectors." The time that they need, and the time that we need within the United Nations, is the time to make a judgment on whether that co-operation is forthcoming. At present, it is not. All we are saying is that if that does not change, Saddam is continuing to play the game that he has been playing for 12 years, which is unacceptable. That is not a sign of our failing to be objective, but a sign of our failing to be weak in the face of a threat that is posed to us in the world community.

Finally, I simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman. I know, of course, that there is huge anxiety, and that many criticisms are made of the United States, but it would be quite wrong if we used this issue to try to polarise the United States and the international community. The United States chose to go through the UN process last November, when many people thought that it would not. It was right to do so, and we should carry on through the UN process, but that process should be a way of dealing with this issue once and for all, not of kicking it into the long grass again and avoiding it altogether.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The Prime Minister referred to weaponised VX nerve gas agents. Can he recall the time when the IRA went to Libya, purchased weapons of destruction—some of which were intercepted on the high seas—and brought them back to Ireland to wage terrorist attacks? Can he tell the House how he would see a world in which a rogue state has VX nerve agents, toxin gases and anthrax, and can link up with worldwide terrorists? What kind of a world would we then be living in?

The Prime Minister: That is why it is so important, as my hon. Friend rightly says, that we regard the issues of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction as linked. The fact is that we know that if the terrorists can get hold of those types of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weaponry, they will do so. That is why it is so important that we take this stand now, to ensure that Iraq disarms itself of weapons of mass destruction at the same time as we pursue international terrorism.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Given the welcome news that the Prime Minister has made some progress on the question of the middle east peace process, and given that he will clearly not wish to go to war without exhausting every single avenue that is open to the international community, will he work with the Americans to determine whether it would be possible for a heads-of-state-level delegation from the Arab League to go to Baghdad to tell Saddam Hussein that he must honour the UN obligations?

The Prime Minister: I certainly think that we should use every possible route that we can to achieve our objective without conflict if at all possible. Some of the most interesting discussions that I have had over the past few days have been with representatives from Arab states. Without specifically commenting on what sort of delegation it should be or the exact form that it should take, I have no doubt at all that one aspect of what we do over the next few weeks will be to try to mobilise as much as we can of Arab world opinion in order to take the measures that are necessary to do all that we can to ensure that conflict is genuinely the last resort.

Mr. Peter Mandelson (Hartlepool): May I ask my right hon. Friend about Iraq's recovery and reconstruction in the event of Saddam forcing war? In addition to the need for political transition, the humanitarian and refugee demands could be immense. Will he outline to the House what preparation is being made for that at the United Nations and by key members of the international community? What structure for reconstruction is being put in place? In terms of donor funding, will Britain join America—and, I think, Switzerland and Canada—in making an early offer of resources for those purposes?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right that we must deal with those vital points. We are in discussion with allies and the United Nations about reconstruction. The Foreign Secretary and I have spoken to the Secretary-General of the United Nations about that. If there is a conflict and Saddam's regime is removed, it is important to give absolute assurances and undertakings to the people of Iraq that we shall deal with any humanitarian consequences. In such circumstances, we must also try to ensure that we move in to help get Iraq back on its feet as quickly as possible. This country is willing to play its part in that with others.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Can the Prime Minister say whether he will make allowing the inspectors to use helicopters and overfly the whole of Iraq, apart from the no-fly zones in the north and south of the country, and granting them unfettered access to scientists and individuals who have specific knowledge of the Iraqi regime's weapons programme, pre-conditions of Dr. Blix's return to Iraq?

The Prime Minister: It is for Dr. Blix to make the demands that he wants. It is up to him whether he wishes to travel in a specific way or interview specific people.

However, the hon. Gentleman's basic point is right. I recommend people to read resolution 1441 again. It could not be clearer. Any demand by the UN inspectors must be acceded to. That is not happening. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, many issues to do with surveillance, interviewing witnesses and unaccounted for material need to be resolved. There is little sign of matters changing. Dr. Blix said that there was no point in continuing unless the inspectors are given the full access that they need and all their demands are met. I agree with that.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Does my right hon. Friend fear that Russia, France or China might "unreasonably", in his words, veto a second resolution? Has the US President now agreed to publish the quartet's roadmap for the middle east peace process?

The Prime Minister: On the latter point, the timing of the roadmap's publication remains open to question. However, I have no doubt that it should and will be published. I return with more hope of progress on the middle east than I have had for some time.

On my right hon. Friend's first point, I do not know what other countries' attitude will be, but I am working on the basis that people hold to both the spirit and the letter of resolution 1441. The process has integrity. Saddam has a final opportunity and he must co-operate fully. If he does not, a fresh resolution will be issued. The logic of that will take people along with us, especially when there are further inspectors' reports to come.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): Does the Prime Minister agree that although the position with Iraq is serious, the immediate, near-term threat to people in Britain comes from al-Qaeda? Given the huge amount of work that is currently required of the intelligence agencies, special branch and the police to try to uncover the al-Qaeda cells in this country, will the right hon. Gentleman assure us that he will give absolute priority to ensuring that those bodies are fully resourced to do the job while there is still time?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. Our intelligence services and our police authorities continue to do superb work in rooting out al-Qaeda cells wherever they are. However, we do not simply have a choice of dealing with one or the other. It is important to deal with both—I believe that they are linked—not least because of the signals that we convey about the firmness of our intention.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Like me, many people believe that we are being led by the nose into war. What weight does the Prime Minister give to the emergency resolution that was carried last Thursday by the 44-member Council of Europe, which called for the weapons inspectors to be given time to complete their task and for the imposition of no artificial deadlines?

The Prime Minister: I have said that there should be no artificial deadline, but the issue comes down to the question of what the task is that the inspectors are being sent in to do. If their task is to return to what happened in the 1990s, when they stayed there for long periods of time and tried to work their way around Iraqi obstruction, it could take them years to complete it. If, however, their task is to go in there on the basis that Saddam is going fully to co-operate, it will be complete when they make their judgment either that he is doing so—in which case, they can get on and close the matériel down—or that he is not, in which case they do not need to wait months or years. That would be the situation in which, in the words of resolution 1441, there would be a further material breach, because Saddam would not have taken the final opportunity to disarm.

I must point out to my hon. Friend that Saddam cannot be in any doubt as to what he has to do. It is not a great mystery. I am told that he is calling for all sorts of people to come and visit him and talk to him, but there is no mystery about what he has to do. There is a perfectly well-trodden path in relation to UN inspectors, and it involves making a full declaration. South Africa followed it when it closed down its nuclear weapons programme after the change of regime and the end of apartheid. It called in the inspectors, told them exactly what it had, and allowed them full access to all its witnesses. The whole thing was then shut down in a matter of weeks. That is what can happen. The initial stages of it happened immensely quickly, and it could happen again. If the UN inspectors were saying to us, "Yes, Iraq is doing absolutely everything it can", I would not be standing here making this statement. I am making it not because we are being led by the nose into conflict, but because we have set out a process governed by that UN resolution. That process requires full compliance by Saddam, and he is not fully complying.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the Prime Minister tell us what the right conditions would be for the use of nuclear weapons, as mentioned by his Secretary of State for Defence? Will he rule out any pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons by either the United Kingdom Government or the United States Government? Will he also say how any use of nuclear weapons in any context could be squared with our commitments under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty?

The Prime Minister: In one sense, I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has asked me that, because it allows me to make it clear that all that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was doing was repeating the traditional British doctrine relating to nuclear weapons. We have absolutely no plans to use nuclear weapons in respect of Iraq. He was simply repeating the traditional British doctrine, and nothing of an alarmist nature should be read into that.

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill): What is the Government's best estimate of how many Iraqi civilians will be killed or injured if there is a war?

The Prime Minister: We will do all that we possibly can to minimise any civilian casualties. I should say to my right hon. Friend that we have striven hard to avoid the prospect of any casualties at all, precisely by delaying action and allowing the UN process to work. The real casualties in Iraq over the past few years have occurred as a result of Saddam's policies.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The Prime Minister is surely right to use the United Nations route

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

and to ensure that that is wholeheartedly behind whatever action is taken. I hope that he will explain to the French President and, indeed, the beleaguered German Chancellor, that the United Nations' credibility depends on facing up to the threats. Nevertheless, for those of us who are still concerned about the thought processes surrounding potential action, will he explain to President Bush that the danger of quickly settling Saddam Hussein could unleash other terrorism as a result of the destabilisation in Iraq and the knock-on effect that that could have in Jordan and possibly Turkey? Other threats could arise, as he mentioned in his statement.

The Prime Minister: It is true that we have to approach this in a careful and measured way, which is why we went through the UN process to get the backing of the international community for the demands that we have made on Saddam. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, approached in the wrong way, this could lead to misunderstandings—for example, that this is an attack on Iraq because it is a Muslim country, and all the rest of the propaganda that surrounds these issues. I believe that there is now a clearer understanding—I have certainly found this in my discussions with Arab Heads of State—that this is about enforcing the will of the UN. Done in the right way, and with the right guarantees to the people of Iraq, the whole process of disarmament could be seen as a victory not only for the international community, but for the people of Iraq. I must point out that the consequence of not having disarmed Saddam properly, and of allowing the will of the UN to be flouted over many years, is that we have had to put in place a very tough, punitive sanction regime. Because of the way in which Saddam has operated it—he need not have done it in the way that he has—it has caused the most terrible misery to the people in Iraq. More than half the population is dependent on the oil-for-food programme.

I think that in the end people, not least in Iraq, will realise not just that seeing the back of Saddam is good for the peace and security of the world, but that the first beneficiaries will be the people of Iraq.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): The Prime Minister has spoken on several occasions about the integrity of the resolution 1441 process and his faith in it. To what extent does he think that the President of the United States shares that understanding? In particular, to what extent does the President agree that bypassing the resolution could undermine the credibility of the United Nations?

Following his discussions with other world leaders, does the Prime Minister think that they fully understand the importance of consistently following through on resolution 1441?

The Prime Minister: I think everyone does. I think that what President Bush was expressing was the thought that a second resolution would be welcome for the reasons that we gave, but also—this is important—the thought that, as we have constantly said, the UN path is the way to resolve this. It is not a way of pushing it off.

When talking to other world leaders, I found that they did understand that the UN process is important. It is important to deal with it, but it is also important that it should not be seen as a way of avoiding dealing with it. I think that, at the moment at any rate, we have people camped on the right ground. It is our job, and my determination, to make sure that we see the integrity of that process through to the end.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Following that last question, may I ask whether there is any difference of opinion, or any difference of emphasis, between the US and UK Governments on the need for—and extreme desirability of—a second UN resolution?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not think that there is any difference between us on that. We want a second resolution but, as the President said at our press conference on Friday, it must be the way of ensuring that Iraq is disarmed. I am afraid that in the 1990s resolutions were passed, but increasingly Iraq ceased to take them seriously.

Before this issue arose in the context of possible military action in Iraq, we were involved for nearly two years in trying to renegotiate the sanctions regime because of Iraq's failure to disarm. This is not an issue that has popped up in the last few months; it is an issue that we have been living with for 12 years.

Let me also point out to the House and the country that every single day about 2,000 British armed forces personnel are engaged in trying to patrol the no-fly zones, and in other activity associated with the whole problem to do with Iraq. Although this is in the headlines now, it has been there for a long time. The reason why there is a certain impatience is that we must not go back and allow the UN to be used as a way of tricking people into parking the issue and not dealing with it. The determination to take the UN route is there for everyone.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): May I ask a question about US intelligence? I am sure that the Prime Minister will recall that at the beginning of the Vietnam war the CIA gave false evidence about the Gulf of Tonkin, as it now admits. I remind him that more than 2 million Vietnamese died during that war, and that the chemical weapon used by the US, Agent Orange, is still causing deformed babies to be born. More recently, President Clinton ordered the bombing of a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. In that instance, US intelligence simply got it wrong.

Given the history of lying and incompetence on the part of US intelligence, should we really believe Colin Powell on Wednesday when he presents his latest evidence?

The Prime Minister: I am not here to answer questions about the Vietnam war. Let me simply point out to my hon. Friend that the Vietnam war and Vietnam itself were never subject to a United Nations resolution. As for the intelligence that has come out about Iraq, I ask my hon. Friend to accept this: never mind US intelligence, never mind British intelligence—the evidence that Iraq is developing weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological and nuclear, is there; it

is documented in the UN inspectors' report. I do not believe that the British and American intelligence agencies are not telling us the truth about these things—I think they are right—but we need not rely on that to be worried about Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. We need only read the reports, going back for years, about those weapons and their manufacture in Iraq, and the fact that Saddam—uniquely among world leaders—has used them against his own people and against other countries.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In his statement, the Prime Minister quite rightly drew attention to the real and present dangers of terrorism. When the former chief of the counter-terrorism operations of the CIA, Vincent Cannistraro, says that

"a war would be a potent recruiting tool for terrorist groups",

does he disagree?

The Prime Minister: I do, if Mr. Cannistraro means in every set of circumstances. I remember that people said something similar to us when Afghanistan came about. It depends on the circumstances. If we are taking action where we are obviously and clearly enforcing the will of the UN, his view is not right. There is a growing recognition that Saddam is not someone we should be defending. What I have said constantly to people over this issue is that the people who will be most delighted to see the end of Saddam are the people who are his first and primary victims—his own people. In those circumstances, I do not believe that it will recruit people to the cause of terrorism, but I say to the hon. Gentleman honestly that what will recruit people to the cause of terrorism is a belief among these fanatics that the will of the international community is weak, that it does not have the determination to confront these issues, and that, when faced with the challenge, we fail to meet it.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the 12 years for which Saddam Hussein has played cat and mouse with UN resolutions. During those 12 years, many hundreds of Kuwaitis have been lost inside Iraq. Saddam Hussein has given no comfort to their families on whether they are alive or dead today.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely essential that the UN stand by its mandatory resolutions and hold firm, because it is for the good of all of us that that happens?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The point that she makes about the Kuwaitis, the missing people—there are hundreds of them—is absolutely right. Of course, they have to be added to the thousands of people who have been killed internally by Saddam and to the people who to this day face the most appalling internal oppression, torture and denial of human rights as a result of his regime.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): As one who believes that the Prime Minister is giving strong national leadership, which deserves support across the House, may I ask him to say a bit more about the middle east peace process? Does he accept that nothing is better calculated to bring the Arab states on side than seeing that a really determined attempt is being made to resolve the terrible problems that divide Palestine and the Israelis? Will he consider taking another personal initiative, notwithstanding that his last one was snubbed, during the next few, what could be perilous, weeks? *[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has just reminded me, on 10 February there is a follow-up meeting to the one that we had. There has been quite a lot of progress out of that meeting. I entirely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. Incidentally, I also believe—I will choose my words carefully—that the absence of a sense of real progress on the Israel-Palestine issue is a far bigger worry in terms of recruiting people to terrorism than is the pursuit of Iraq over weapons of mass destruction. That is why it is important that we deal with this. I also think that one of the benefits of what has happened in the past few months is that there is consensus internationally on the two-state solution. That is a huge step forward. Everyone now agrees that Israel needs to be recognised by all its neighbours, confident about its own security, and that any Palestinian state must be viable. That is an issue that will be pushed forward, I hope soon.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work that he has done to persuade the United States to remain engaged with the United Nations, but given the apparent inability of France and Germany to be persuaded of the UN route, is that route still viable?

The Prime Minister: I am an optimist in pursuit of this. Last summer, there was a certain amount of scepticism as to whether we would achieve the first UN resolution and we did; in the end, we achieved it unanimously. I entirely understand the hesitation and anxiety that have been expressed not just in this country but in other countries. Of course, people do not want us to engage in conflict if we can possibly avoid it. However, what is important is that if it is the case that UN inspectors continue to certify that Iraq is not fully co-operating, there is a logic in that that will bring everyone—I hope everyone—on board. Otherwise, the whole authority of the UN, which we all agree should be upheld, would be undermined.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to stand by the UN resolution and to want to pursue matters through the UN route. In that, he will have the support of the majority of this House, but I am sure that he is as concerned as I am that at the moment he certainly does not have the support of a very large proportion—we know not exactly what—of the British public. One reason is that in the 12 years during which, as he rightly points out, we have been trying to sort out the Iraq situation, the issue of military force has come to a head only since the 11 September tragedy, and a large number of the British people do not yet see the conjunction between the Iraqi situation and international terrorism. What is he going to do to explain to more people that

[Mr. James Paice]

there is a conjunction, so that if he has to commit our forces, he and—more importantly—the forces will have the support of the British people?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good point and a fair one, and in many ways it is the difficulty that we have with this issue. I believe that 11 September was a wake-up call to the world. It was an extremely important moment when something happened that we thought could never possibly happen: modern technology and terrorist fanaticism came together in the most devastating way for the people of the United States and for the world. What is interesting is that at our press conference on Friday, President Bush made the point that a few days before 11 September he was discussing how we ameliorated the sanctions regime against Iraq.

It is true that 11 September has changed a lot of thinking. That is why, a few days afterwards—on 14 September—I made my first statement on the matter to the House, in which I said that the next issue that we had to deal with was weapons of mass destruction. We have constantly tried to explain to people that these two issues are not separate. People say to us, "Why don't you pursue al-Qaeda and forget about Iraq for the moment?", but we have got to go on both tracks because both represent the threats of the fanatical over the rational. They represent threats to the civilised world from acts of barbarity, and both represent those people who have absolutely no compunction whatever about the amount of human life that they take, for a cause that can never be negotiated on.

So the fact is that these two issues are intimately linked. People talk about the potential links between Iraq and al-Qaeda—there is a lot of speculation—but without a doubt, if we do not deal with both of these issues at some point terrorism and weapons of mass destruction will come together. It is simply not possible to have a situation in which states are developing and trading in this stuff, with their scientists being hired by the top bidder, and in which these terrorist groups are well-financed and able to recruit people even to die in their cause. It is not possible to have those two threats operating and for them not to come together at a certain point, and the consequences would then be devastating.

People ask me why I am, in a sense, risking everything politically on this issue, but I say to them in all honesty that I do not want to be the Prime Minister to whom people point the finger in history and say, "You knew perfectly well that those two threats were there, and you didn't do anything about it. In the end, you took the easy way out. You said, 'No, let's park it a little. Let's leave it—let's wait and see how it goes.'" We know that these threats are there and we have got to deal with them. I think that, in the end, in situations such as this the British people always ultimately respond, because they have a common sense and a faith that sees them through.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): Following on from that point, and in relation to the Prime Minister's conversations with other world leaders, can he tell us whether a shared and growing concern exists that, if the United Nations does not reform from the 1945 model to face the very threats that he has just talked about, there is an acute danger that it will end up looking like the League of Nations instead of the United Nations?

The Prime Minister: That is absolutely right, which is why we must exhibit firmness of purpose now.

Tony Baldry (Banbury): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), what specific discussions are taking place with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other UN agencies in terms of the international community's response to the humanitarian consequences of conflict with Iraq?

The Prime Minister: Detailed discussions on the issue between allies and the UN are going on, as last Thursday's debate in the House indicated. We are well aware that we must have a humanitarian plan that is every bit as viable and well worked out as a military plan.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the UN estimates that between 142,000 and 206,000 Iraqis died as a direct consequence of the Gulf war. How does he square his answer on humanitarian issues with the Pentagon's declared intention to use up to 10 times the firepower that was used 12 years ago?

The Prime Minister: First, in respect of speculation on military plans, it is important that we debate those plans when they are fully developed, rather than press reports of them. Secondly, I assure my hon. Friend that if military action begins, we will make every possible effort to minimise any civilian casualties, as we managed to do in Kosovo and Afghanistan. We will be able to do that to a greater extent in Iraq.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): If the Prime Minister accepts that the situation in the middle east is one of the prime causes of terrorism in the world today, will he explain, clearly and concisely, how a war with Iraq will fight terrorism and help the middle east process that he is currently pursuing?

The Prime Minister: I have given the reasons for the action that we are taking in respect of Iraq. It is important that we make every effort to push forward the middle east peace process, which is what we are going to do. But we cannot say, as it were, that we will do one, but not the other; we must do both. If we believe that there is a threat in respect of Iraq, surely we are obliged to deal with it. We have tried to do so through the UN process and, if we can do that, it will be far better. As for the middle east peace process, we must make what progress we can—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry; hon. Members must forgive me for a moment. We are trying to make progress on the middle east peace process, but that progress should not absolve us from the duty and the need to tackle also the issue of Iraq.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I wholly welcome the Prime Minister's efforts to persuade President Bush to seek a second resolution in the UN. Would not it be deeply regrettable if the United States—

a founder member of the UN—did anything to undermine the authority of the UN? Would not it have profound implications for the long-term peace and security of the world if the United States took international law into its own hands?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is precisely for that reason that UN resolution 1441 was passed. There are two parts to that deal. The first is that we take the UN route. The second is that if there is a breach of the UN resolution, we act. If we fail to act when there is a breach, it will undermine the UN itself.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The Prime Minister has indicated that, beyond Iraq, there may be a need to confront weapons of mass destruction in other states, such as North Korea and others. Given that potential longer-term commitment for our military, possibly extended peacekeeping operations and the need for home defence, what review have the Government made of our current defence budget, of personnel levels in the armed forces and of defence procurement?

The Prime Minister: I should not say that I am suggesting that we need take military action in respect of every country where there is a problem with weapons of mass destruction, but our belief as to what our military will need and our defence expenditure must certainly take account of the new situation that we face. That is one reason why, over the next few years, we have, for the first time, a real-terms increase in defence spending.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): Will the Prime Minister please confirm that he will support military action against Iraq only if the UN weapons inspectors certify that there is a continuing material breach of UN resolution 1441?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly the position that I have outlined. If the inspectors continue to certify that Iraq is not co-operating fully, that is a material breach. It is precisely so that the inspectors can make those findings of fact that we put them there. That is why I said, a moment or two ago, that if Saddam had come into compliance with the UN inspectors and they certified that, yes, he was fully complying, the issue would not have arisen.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the only moral justification for war is self-defence and that one cannot invoke self-defence unless one can honestly say that Saddam Hussein is an imminent and grave threat to peace? Does the right hon. Gentleman not understand that a resolution of the Security Council, or even the discovery of weapons of mass destruction, do not of themselves, standing alone, constitute a moral justification for war?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. It is justified to enforce the will of the United Nations. Even if, as he says, there is no immediate threat to this country, I believe that there is undoubtedly a threat to the security of the world arising from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—particularly in circumstances where the UN makes a determination and the world fails to uphold it.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what economic and commercial pressures, especially with regard to oil contracts, President Bush and the rest of his gang are putting on countries represented in the UN Security Council to approve military action against Iraq? Is there no chance at all of a meeting of the General Assembly of the UN to discuss this most serious matter?

The Prime Minister: The answer on pressure is none. The second point is that the oil is Iraqi oil; it is owned by the Iraqi people. When people tell me that this is all about oil, I return to the point that I have made on many, many occasions: it is one of the most absurd conspiracy theories that we have to face in relation to this matter. If all that Britain, America or any other country wanted was greater access to Iraqi oil, Saddam Hussein would give us that access tomorrow if we withdrew the sanctions regime and the threat of action. We have to deal with the facts, which are that this is about weapons of mass destruction and that any issues to do with contracts and so on will be for the Iraqi people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Points of Order

4.33 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Can you give me some help? About three weeks ago, I asked a simple factual question of the Home Office to try to ascertain what the No. 10 press office said to the Home Office press office, which led, as it seems, to the acceleration by the immigration and nationality directorate of the deportation of Mr. Peter Foster. I have not received a reply. Can you offer any guidance, Mr. Speaker, on what could be done to get a reply to a question that is three weeks old and could have been answered in 20 minutes?

Mr. Speaker: My suggestion is that perhaps the right hon. Gentleman should ring the Minister's office. Failing that, there is also the Public Administration Committee, which could look into the matter.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. When the House changed its hours recently, we were told that it would not close down in the evenings when we had people coming in for meetings. On 22 January, I chaired a very large anti-war meeting in the Grand Committee Room, with overspill into room W1 and the Jubilee Room. A few minutes before 9 pm, I received several messages from security staff saying that we had to end the meeting at 9 pm. After 9 pm, the pressure increased and because I did not want to take up my concerns with members of staff, who were obviously acting under instructions, I closed the meeting. I have written to the Serjeant at Arms to express my concern, but will you take the matter up for us? Today, on "Woman's Hour" a Member—to whom I have written—categorically denied that we were kicked out of the room, but we were. MPs were at the meeting, as well as about 200 other people. Will you take the matter up on our behalf?

Mr. Speaker: I received this complaint from an hon. Gentleman, and I looked into the matter. The fact of the matter is that, before the change in hours, 9 o'clock was the limit for having visitors in any of our Committee Rooms. In other words, the hon. Lady had extra hours, so she was not thrown out; she was over time.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Have the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State responsible for local government made any request to you to come to the House and make a statement about the total debacle that occurred—not only in London, but across the whole country—owing to a minuscule fall of snow? Many of my constituents, for example, took hours to travel the very small distance from central London to Hampstead, simply because of a total breakdown in public transport and the inability of traffic to move on the roads. Has such a request been made; or will you, on our behalf, urge someone to come and make such a statement?

Mr. Speaker: I have looked into that matter, perhaps because I have a selfish interest: I was held up at Heathrow airport. I can tell the hon. Lady that I understand that Ministers are investigating the matter. I can also report that it is snowing in Glasgow and there is no problem at all.

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I ask for your guidance in relation to the previous statement? It now looks increasingly clear that the Bush Administration intend to find a pretext to declare war on Iraq within the next month. As you know, the House has not had an opportunity to debate and vote on the substantive issue of whether we should support such a war. In view of the huge humanitarian consequences that would follow, can you advise us on how we might have an opportunity to vote on whether we would support going down a path that would abandon the pursuit of al-Qaeda simply to become it?

Mr. Speaker: Ministers will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has had to say.

Orders of the Day

European Parliament (Representation) Bill

Not amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 2

DUTY TO CONSULT

'Before making any order or regulations under Part 2, the Lord Chancellor shall consult with, and shall have regard for the views expressed by, the Chief Minister and the House of Assembly of Gibraltar, and representatives of political parties established in Gibraltar which he expects to seek registration under section 11(3).'—*[Mr. Heath.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.37 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments:

No. 24, in clause 9, page 5, line 16 leave out 'the Governor and' and insert—

'the Government of Gibraltar and in particular'.

No. 26, in clause 11, page 5, line 34, at end insert—

'but only after he has consulted with the Government of Gibraltar and in particular the Chief Minister as to which matters it is proposed to legislate by order and which by Ordinance of the House of Assembly in Gibraltar'.

No. 27, in page 5, line 37, leave out subsection (3).

No. 28, in page 6, line 11, leave out subsection (4).

No. 32, in clause 16, page 8, line 22, after 'Chancellor', insert—

'subject to the provisions of section 25(3A)'.

No. 33, in page 9, line 13, after 'Commission', insert—

'and the Government of Gibraltar and the Chief Minister in particular'.

No. 34, in clause 17, page 9, line 24, leave out—

'or any provision of the law of Gibraltar'

and insert—

'but subject to the provisions of section 25(3A).'.

No. 41, in clause 22, page 11, line 16, leave out subsection (3).

No. 30, in clause 25, page 12, line 6, after 'Chancellor', insert—

'after consultation with the Government of Gibraltar and the Chief Minister in particular in pursuance of section 25(3A).'.

No. 29, in page 12, line 7, at end insert—

'(3A) Where under Part 2 of this Act legislation is enacted or may be enacted by order that legislation shall not come into effect until the Lord Chancellor has consulted with the Government and Chief Minister of Gibraltar in particular as to whether it would be more appropriate (having regard to the Constitution of Gibraltar) for that legislation to be legislated by order or regulation on the one hand or by Ordinance of the House of Assembly in Gibraltar on the other hand.'.

Mr. Heath: It is a pleasure to consider the Bill on the Floor of the House, because we largely support it. Having said that, as was evidenced in Committee, there are some strange anomalies in its drafting, and new clause 2 deals with one: the neo-colonialist attitude of the Lord Chancellor's Department in framing the Bill.

It should be obvious to us all that, in seeking to implement a change in Gibraltar's electoral arrangements that has implications for Gibraltar's legal and financial processes and that could require sums to be paid from the Consolidated Fund for Gibraltar, there should be adequate scope for consulting the people of Gibraltar. Sadly, the Bill includes only one requirement for direct consultation with Gibraltar: under clause 9, the Electoral Commission must consult the Governor and the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, although there are subsequent occasions on which the Lord Chancellor will be required to consult the Electoral Commission. That is curious in a number of ways.

First, it is particularly curious that the Governor should be identified as a person representing the interests of the people of Gibraltar. That stands the constitution on its head. The Governor is a representative of the Crown in Gibraltar. It could be argued that the Government are consulting themselves; at the very least, they are consulting the representative of the Head of State. It might be argued that they are being required to consult a representative of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as the FCO puts forward the recommendation for the appointment of the Governor of Gibraltar.

The Chief Minister, of course, is a different matter, as he more than adequately represents the interests of Gibraltar. But in a matter that requires changes to electoral rules that will apply not just to the Chief Minister's party but to other parties represented in Gibraltar, it is anomalous to consult only the representative of one party, however distinguished that person might be. It is anomalous to have an unelected Lord Chancellor consulting an unelected Governor of Gibraltar to consider the appropriate arrangements for electing Gibraltar's representatives in the European Parliament. I do not think that I am alone in finding that a curious state of affairs.

We have a newly appointed Governor of Gibraltar, Sir Francis Richards, whom I have every reason to suppose will be an exceptional Governor. As his experience is as director of GCHQ, he might be said to be very good at listening. Even with those credentials, he cannot properly represent the views of the people of Gibraltar, or at least he cannot do as good a job as would those elected by the people of Gibraltar—not just the Chief Minister but the Members of the House of Assembly and the representatives of the political parties that it is expected will be registered by virtue of the Bill, should it be enacted.

My amendment therefore places a modest requirement on the Government. It does not seek to challenge the position of the Lord Chancellor in taking forward the legislation, although we certainly could challenge it. Indeed, we had a debate in Committee that could have been subtitled, "Why is the Lord Chancellor?", to which there is no adequate response. The new clause simply specifies that the Lord Chancellor "shall consult with, and"—here is a constitutional innovation—

"shall have regard for the views expressed by, the Chief Minister and the House of Assembly of Gibraltar, and representatives of political parties established in Gibraltar which he expects to seek registration under section 11(3)",

[Mr. Heath]

and that that consultation should take place before making any order or regulations under part 2.

Clearly, the mind of the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) has been working in a very similar way, as the raft of amendments that he has tabled would require much the same degree of consultation. To give the Minister her due, she undertook in Committee to re-examine the position of the Governor, and, on reflection, she perhaps shared our view that that piece of drafting was slightly anomalous. However, she has not tabled an amendment to address that at this stage, which is why we must pursue our proposals. Other than by assurance, she was not prepared to tell us that the consultations with the people of Gibraltar, via their political parties and the House of Assembly, would be as comprehensive as some of us feel would be appropriate. In particular, it is extraordinary that the House of Assembly should not be consulted as a matter of course before an order is put before this House. That is even more extraordinary given that the later stages of the Bill, and particularly the financial provisions in part 3, allow for

"expenditure to be paid out of money provided by Parliament or to be met by Gibraltar",

and

"for sums to be charged on and paid out of the Consolidated Fund or charged on and paid out of the Consolidated Fund of Gibraltar".

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The hon. Gentleman is developing an extremely persuasive line of argument. Given that the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), is an acknowledged and proud democrat but that the Lord Chancellor manifestly and probably equally proudly is not, does the hon. Gentleman think that the lacuna in the Bill as it stands is an error of omission or of commission?

4.45 pm

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that observation. It may have been apparent from my words that I share his view about the precise position of the Lord Chancellor. I applaud to the hilt what I believe to be the Parliamentary Secretary's position with regard to the matters that we shall debate tomorrow and that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would rightly rule out of order were we to discuss them today.

We discussed in Committee whether there was a mechanism by which we could place important electoral matters back into the hands of an elected Minister answerable to this House—namely, the hon. Lady—rather into the hands of an unelected Minister who appears to be accountable to no one except perhaps the person who appointed him and who wishes to clone that form of representation for the other place in future.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I apologise for missing the first two minutes of my hon. Friend's speech.

Further to the intervention of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), does my hon. Friend agree that it would be useful if the Government accepted two more arguments? The first picks up on the frustration of Northern Ireland colleagues who often find that orders that they cannot amend are implemented over their heads. If we want to avoid further antagonising the House of Assembly and the people of Gibraltar, the new clause would provide a way of doing that.

Secondly, the past year has not been a glorious one for relations between the United Kingdom Government and the Government of Gibraltar. The new clause would be a way of putting together an honest listening dialogue rather than the dialogue of the deaf that appears to the Government's approach when it comes to their listening to voices from Gibraltar in the past 12 months.

Mr. Heath: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend says.

I return to the point with which I opened my brief contribution. The Government's present position suggests a neo-colonialism that ill becomes them. One can almost see the pith helmet on the head of those who seek to introduce these proposals.

Tony Cunningham (Workington): The words "neo-colonial" or "colonial" were used several times in Committee. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that most of Britain's colonies were different from Gibraltar in that they all wanted independence from the United Kingdom? It is clear from what has happened over the past 12 months that Gibraltar wants to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Heath: Indeed it does. Gibraltar is proud of that distinction. However, it feels that it had won a degree of self-determination when the Gibraltar constitution order was signed in 1969. It felt that the House of Assembly was an important part of its constitutional arrangements and not something that could be ignored when a Government introduced a Bill such as this. I still believe that the Government wish to be fair to Gibraltar and I do not doubt the Minister's intentions. I accept her assurances that the government of Gibraltar in the wider sense, including the House of Assembly and those who speak on behalf of the people of Gibraltar, will be consulted. However, such an assurance does not appear in the Bill. It should, and my new clause would establish the principle.

Mr. Andrew Rosindell (Romford): Surely the point is that the territory of Gibraltar is not an equal part of the United Kingdom. It is a self-governing British overseas territory and therefore has no vote in deciding the Government of this country, so it is utterly wrong that it should not be consulted fully in all these decisions.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman knows that I concur entirely. That is why I tabled the new clause and the hon. Member for Stone tabled amendments. I hope that the Minister will explain what possible exception the Minister might take to a duty to consult the House of Assembly. It would be right and proper for her to accept the new clause.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Excuse my slight croakiness, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I am afraid that I

had flu over the weekend. I will, no doubt, survive, but perhaps I should take the opportunity to save my voice a little this afternoon.

I agree in general with new clause 2 for the reasons outlined by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). As I said repeatedly in Committee, consultation is essential to the process to ensure that the people of Gibraltar are not treated in an imperialistic and colonialist fashion. It is, to say the least, extremely surprising that the provisions were not included in the first place. The Government did not seem to understand the sensitivities that that omission would arouse in Gibraltar. I am not suggesting that no discussions have been held between Ministers and the Chief Minister since the Committee stage began, but they have not been translated into amendments.

There is a slight problem with new clause 2. It could be said that it goes a little further than is strictly necessary, but I would not make an issue of that. Without any doubt, however, proper consultation with the Chief Minister and the House of Assembly is essential, as I repeatedly said in Committee. I am glad that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome and I agree on that. Furthermore, I asked what consultation means. The manner in which the Bill was introduced is a good example of a serious lack of consultation as I shall define it. The Government of Gibraltar did not, so far as I know, see a copy of the Bill until it was introduced. A lot of feathers have been ruffled because of the lack of good manners in terms of the discussions that could have taken place.

I tabled an amendment that would have obliged the Government to have due regard to the views expressed and to give reasons for their decisions; the Minister suggested that that would be inappropriate. Without going through all the case law, it is clear from the best authority on the subject that, where there is a duty to consult, the courts have laid down the criteria for proper consultation. The consultation must be undertaken when the proposal is at a formative stage. We cannot say that that has happened. Case law also shows that sufficient reasons must be given for the proposal to enable an informed response to be given. Adequate time must be given for the response to the proposals. The product of consultation must be conscientiously taken into account when the ultimate decision is made. We have not got to the point of ultimate decision because the Bill is still going through its stages, but I ask the Minister to bear my comments in mind.

Tony Cunningham: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that both the people and the Government of Gibraltar very much welcome the principle of the Bill?

Mr. Cash: That is precisely why we did not vote against the Bill on Second Reading. It gives the people of Gibraltar a great advantage, but it is our job in Committee and on Report to examine its nuts and bolts and point out areas that could be improved in the House and subsequently in the House of Lords. Where there is a duty to consult, fairness may require disclosure to an interested person of the advice on which the Minister proposes to rely. In a nutshell, will the Minister reassure us that a proper process of consultation, as prescribed by the courts, will be fully implemented?

The Governor's role raises important questions. Clause 9(2) suggests that he should be given a role that exceeds the one ascribed to him under the constitution of Gibraltar. He has no say over elections there, as they are a defined domestic matter under the constitution. It is unacceptable that he should be consulted. We do not expect him to be consulted on Gibraltar's electoral region, which is exclusively a matter for the elected Government of Gibraltar to represent before the Electoral Commission. For reasons that have already been given, we therefore strongly urge the House to accept new clause 2 and amendment No. 29. Amendment No. 29 says that where legislation is passed in relation to the Bill

"or may be enacted by order that legislation shall not come into effect until the Lord Chancellor has consulted with the Government and Chief Minister . . . in particular as to whether it would be more appropriate (having regard to the Constitution of Gibraltar) for that legislation to be legislated by order or regulation on the one hand or by Ordinance of the House of Assembly in Gibraltar on the other hand."

We agree that consultation is necessary, and I trust that the House shares my belief that the nature of the exercise requires compatible electoral laws for the components of the new combined region, assuming that it is made up, for example, of the south-west and Gibraltar. Although the amendment that I tabled in Committee was not selected, I suggested that the words "and Gibraltar" should be added to the relevant list. However, that does not explain how we are to achieve the right balance between what is more properly legislated for in the House of Assembly and the extensive ordinances, order-making process and regulations set out in the Bill.

I refer the House to the full range of clause 11, which states:

"The Lord Chancellor may by order make such provision as he considers necessary or expedient in consequence of, or in connection with, the inclusion of Gibraltar in an electoral region for the purposes of European Parliamentary elections."

It is difficult to think of a broader provision than that. The clause goes on to specify certain matters, such as the registration of political parties, control of donations, obligations to persons providing programme services and so on, and it includes various definitions.

5 pm

Clause 12 states that the orders under clauses 10 and 11, which create the combined region and provide those extensive powers, can be made by statutory instrument, and that such orders may make consequential, supplementary and other provisions, and

"may modify, exclude or apply with or without modifications",

and I shall focus on "modify" and "exclude",

"any provision made by or under an Act"—

the Minister has adjusted that slightly by reference to enactment, but I do not think that, for practical purposes, that makes very much difference—

"and any provision of the law of Gibraltar."

That provision must be read against the gamut of provisions in clauses 13 to 17 on electoral registration and voting in Gibraltar, which deal with the nature of the Gibraltar register, the Gibraltar franchise for European parliamentary elections, the entitlement to be

[Mr. Cash]

registered in Gibraltar, a vast range of regulations that can be made in respect of all those matters and the potential exclusion or modification of Gibraltarian law.

To say that that is insulting to the people of Gibraltar would be an understatement. Their constitution already has powers to deal with those matters. We assume that it will be necessary to make certain calibrations and adjustments to be sure that proper weight is given to procedures that will enhance the democratic process.

I have pages and pages of Gibraltarian ordinances—I do not need to go through them—that deal with those very matters. What we need, and the reason I dealt with the amendments in the way that I did—with great respect to my hon. Friend, or rather to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—

Bob Russell (Colchester): He can be a friend.

Mr. Cash: Indeed. When we have a drink together, that is perfectly okay. In fact, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome is the Member of Parliament for the area from which my parents-in-law and my wife came, so I have a special interest in watching what he is up to.

The idea of consultation, expressed in the terms in which the hon. Gentleman's amendment is couched, does not go far enough. I seek to draw in all the provisions to ensure that a proper decision is taken as a result of consultation, which is the object of amendment No. 29. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should consult, as he proposes, but I believe that we should take the process a little further. I think he would agree that it is important that the consultation process should focus on where the legislation dealing with such sensitive matters should be passed. Should it be done in the House of Assembly, as it currently is, or should it be done here? I know that the Government of Gibraltar will be sensitive to these questions, in that they want to have proper consultation. Equally, they feel aggrieved because they were not brought into the process of discussions about this matter at an earlier stage.

Perhaps we could have a clear assurance from the Minister on the role of the Governor. In Committee she went further than the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome suggested; I think that she really said that it was not appropriate for the Governor to have the powers. I know about her democratic credentials, and if she has seen my letter in *The Daily Telegraph* this morning she will realise that, at any rate on this point about democracy and the unelected, we obviously have a certain amount in common.

What is important is to have assurances that the consultation process will mean not only talking to people about these matters, but proper consultation in line with the criteria laid down by the courts, which I have described. Moreover, the question of where the legislation goes through should be calibrated more in favour of Gibraltar, where it can be done efficiently and constitutionally. We need to be sure that we help the Gibraltarians to realise that they have not just been brought in as an afterthought. We know that the Government have not been entirely enthusiastic about the consultation process. They were somewhat driven into it by the Denise Matthews case. We are therefore a little wary about the manner in which the process will continue.

Tony Cunningham: So that I and the House may have some idea of the scale of the problem, perhaps the hon. Gentleman could give us an indication of the amount of correspondence that he has had from the people of Gibraltar about the very important issue of the lack of consultation.

Mr. Cash: I have had the most interesting correspondence. It is not for me to go into detail as to where it has come from. I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is from an extremely good source and that it has great authority. It is also extremely clear. I am delighted to be able to inform the hon. Gentleman that before I entered into these discussions and this correspondence I had, as I think the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome had, noticed the difficulties, discrepancies and lacunae in the process. Some of the points that I made on Second Reading also arose from my own assessment. So we are in the wonderful position of having a conjunction, at least on this side of the House, on these fundamental questions. I suspect that there is also sympathy on the other side of the House, certainly among some of its more distinguished hon. Members, with regard to quite a few of these points.

It is very important that we get the balance right on where the legislation should be passed. The way to deal with the matter is along the lines of my amendment No. 29.

I have already dealt with amendment No. 24. I would, however, add that we wish the new Governor well in this context, because he inherits a situation in which, to say the least, some improvement in personal relations will be very welcome.

Amendment No. 26 seeks to require consultation with the Government of Gibraltar and the Chief Minister under clause 11(1). I tabled amendment No. 28 because difficulties in dealing with precise definitions will need to be dealt with through discussion and in consultation with the powers that be in Gibraltar. Amendment No. 32 is a purely technical amendment. Amendment No. 33 again deals with the need to involve

"the Government of Gibraltar and the Chief Minister in particular"

in consultation with the Electoral Commission.

Importantly, amendment No. 41 seeks to remove clause 22(3) because, in the terms in which the Gibraltar Government will understand things—and, indeed, as I understand this matter—it is inconceivable that the United Kingdom should directly authorise expenditure on Gibraltar's constitutional fund. To say the least, such a measure would be a colonialist step in the wrong direction. It is only the legislature of Gibraltar that should give such authorisation. I remain astonished that the Minister has not yet come to terms with the fact that that is a matter of grave constitutional importance to Gibraltar's Government. I am also astonished that the Government have not more specifically acknowledged the point that has been made in that regard.

Amendment No. 30 is another technical amendment that ties in with amendment No. 29.

The amendments deal with important matters. I broadly agree with the new clause, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, but I believe that we must go that bit further to get the balance right on where legislation is decided. There must also be a proper consultation process to ensure that the genuine and justifiable sensitivities of the people of Gibraltar and the Chief Minister are fully satisfied.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Obviously, both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties have been representing a sensible view. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department will take on board the fact that there should be consultation with the Chief Minister and the House of Assembly, because [illegible]stion the Governor's independence. We all know that the Governor is independent only on the day when he finishes his job, as he has always rightly been answerable to the Foreign Office, which employs him, and the Foreign Secretary. Unfortunately, I do not think that a Governor has the appropriate independence, and I wonder why we even bother to consult on the basis of such an arrangement.

I recognise my hon. Friend the Minister's new views on the essential fact that we should have elected representation in the House of Lords. In that case, good consideration should surely be given to ensuring that we listen in the same way to the views of the elected representatives of Gibraltar. On that basis, and given her belief in democracy, I hope that she will agree that we should take on board those democratic views and that there should be a way forward. I do not think that that is asking for a lot or that it would affect anything; I merely believe that it would tidy up the situation, as we would be listening only to the democratically expressed views of elected people. That is why such an approach is important for Gibraltar as well.

The stuffy old argument is always made about colonial masters. If we want to be cool Britannia and portray a new image, it would be right to show the people of Gibraltar that we respect their views and will listen to them alone. The Foreign Office should not influence what should be viewed only in terms of democracy.

5.15 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): I support the amendments tabled in my name and those of my hon. Friends. The amendments are important because they would give the people of Gibraltar reassurance that their views were being taken seriously and that the Government would not try to railroad through any measures.

That reassurance is especially important after last week's events, when the Prime Minister of Spain provided useful support to our Prime Minister on the issue of Iraq. Those in the diplomatic community to whom I have spoken since the joint letter was signed have made it clear that they think that Spain might exact a price from the Government for that support. Whether that is true or not, we must recognise that freedom and electoral rights in Gibraltar can be protected only by eternal vigilance in this House. One means of demonstrating our eternal vigilance on behalf of the people of Gibraltar would be to support the amendments. They are reasonable, they would tighten up the language and they would provide better consultation rights for the Minister, the Government and the Assembly of Gibraltar. For those reasons, I strongly support the amendments.

Mr. Rosindell: I also support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) and others. I am astounded that we are even debating the point. How can it be, after so many discussions over so many weeks, that we are still questioning whether the people and the elected Government of Gibraltar—the House of Assembly and the Chief Minister—should be consulted? Of course those people should be given the right to comment and have their views considered on this legislation and on other matters affecting their future.

For whatever reason, the Government continue to appear arrogant towards the people of Gibraltar. It is desperately sad that the people of the Rock, who are so loyal to this country, should be treated so shabbily by our Government. For the sake of the people of that overseas territory, I hope that the Minister will tell us clearly why the Government appear to object to giving the right of proper consultation to the democratically elected Government of Gibraltar on the matters that we are discussing. Many thousands of people on the Rock will be watching this debate and will be greatly concerned that, once again, the British Government are failing in their duty to consult British people on an issue of such importance. I hope that the Minister will answer that point clearly, so that all those watching in Gibraltar will understand why the Government have taken the view that they have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) mentioned the Prime Minister of Spain and his co-operation with our Prime Minister during this difficult time of international tension, and the fact that Spain and this country are working together on the issue of possible conflict in the middle east. I remind the Minister that we have depended on Gibraltar at difficult times in our history and we may well depend on the co-operation of the people of Gibraltar again in the weeks ahead. Surely it is time that we showed them the same respect and loyalty that they have shown us over so many years.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Yvette Cooper): Hon. Members have tabled a series of amendments reflecting concerns that were discussed extensively in Committee, where I made it clear that I am sympathetic to many of their underlying principles. I undertook to look further at many of the issues, and we are giving detailed consideration to the tabling of amendments in the other place. I said before the Bill left Committee that it would not be possible to table detailed amendments on Report owing to the amount of time required by the parliamentary draftsmen and the need to ensure that the Government of Gibraltar are consulted.

Bob Russell: Will the Minister explain why those basic points of principle were not included in the Bill in the first place?

Yvette Cooper: They were. The point of the Bill is to enfranchise the people of Gibraltar for the European

[Yvette Cooper]

parliamentary elections. The timetable to which we are all operating is based on the need to meet the deadline of the 2004 elections. Considerable consultation with the Government of Gibraltar has taken place over a long period, and the principles behind the Bill were set out to them some time ago. We are keen to consider further points that they have made, and it would be completely incorrect to say that we have not consulted the Government of Gibraltar. We have done so, and we shall, as we must, continue to do so. Indeed, that is why the final amendments were not tabled on Report.

Hon. Members may have seen the letter that I said that I would send to them in response to some of the points that they raised in Committee. If not, it should be waiting outside on the board for them. I apologise for its lateness.

Mr. Cash: I have had a brief word with the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), and neither of us has received that letter. That does not bode well for the consultation process, does it?

Yvette Cooper: To be honest, I cannot see that it has any bearing on the consultation process. I informed the hon. Gentleman that there is a letter for him, which may be on the board as we speak, because I thought that it would be courteous to do so. I apologise for the timing, but I thought that it was important to make every effort to ensure that he received it today.

Broadly speaking, the amendments are premature or refer to things that are already taking place. For example, many aspects of the Bill are being discussed with the Government of Gibraltar. I have indicated my sympathy with the point about the reference to the Governor rather than to the House of Assembly, and we are giving that serious consideration in drafting our amendments.

Mr. Ruffley: Will the Parliamentary Secretary give us the time scale for consideration by Ministers? We have not got much time.

Yvette Cooper: As I said at the end of our Committee proceedings, we intend to table amendments in the other place. I also said that we did not want to table amendments about which we had not yet managed to consult the Government of Gibraltar. That would clearly go against the spirit of the amendments that we are discussing.

Hon. Members have raised the Chief Minister's view that the Bill should refer to the Government of Gibraltar rather than to the Governor and the Chief Minister. As I said, we have undertaken to tackle that anxiety if we can.

Amendment No. 41 deals with the Bill's impact on the consolidated fund of Gibraltar, which the Government of Gibraltar raised directly with our officials only last week. It is a complex issue because of the financial arrangements. Further discussions will take place with the Government of Gibraltar about such money matters.

In the light of my remarks, I ask hon. Members to withdraw the motion. I assure hon. Members that we want to consult people in Gibraltar about the detail of the measure.

Mr. Hoyle: I take on board my hon. Friend's comments that there is a great opportunity to incorporate our views in another place. I am trying to be as hopeful as possible. Can I take it from her words that genuine consideration will take place and that the Bill can include those views? That is important. She rightly pointed out that we have listened to hon. Members of all parties but that we must consider timing and the need to consult the people of Gibraltar, which is a priority. I welcome that and I hope that other hon. Members take account of it. I welcome my hon. Friend's assurance, but can she firm it up a little?

Yvette Cooper: I cannot guarantee being able to fulfil all the amendments' intentions, but I shall examine all the issues that the Government of Gibraltar raised. For example, they wrote to us with a long list of points in the past week. They include: matters to do with the Governor; the amount that can be achieved through parallel Gibraltar legislation; specific wording, such as references to the Clerk of the House of Assembly and the Supreme Court of Gibraltar. Some of the points are complicated and require much discussion and consideration. We have already undertaken work to try to implement others.

The Government of Gibraltar suggested that clause 14 did not need to be part of the Bill and that it could be effected through local legislation. We do not accept that because we cannot make the necessary changes to make the elections happen without using United Kingdom legislation. Some changes are therefore possible but others are not.

Tony Cunningham: Will my hon. Friend reaffirm that the priority is ensuring that the people of Gibraltar have the opportunity of voting in the European Parliament elections in 2004?

Yvette Cooper: Indeed. The purpose of the Bill was to fit the 2004 timetable so that the people of Gibraltar could have the vote.

Some of the points that the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) raised will be considered as part of other amendments. For example, the hon. Gentleman referred to enactment. Other points were slightly more wide ranging. He referred to his letter in *The Daily Telegraph*, which I read rapidly after his invitation to do so. Much as I would love to agree with him, I fear that he will be disappointed because I have never endorsed his views on the House of Lords. I believe that it needs to be reformed, and there is a series of ways in which we can, and should, make it more accountable, including, for example, reflecting the regions and the use of indirect elections. But I see that you are raising your eyebrows at me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I shall not go any further with that important discussion about our need to increase accountability.

I therefore ask the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) to withdraw the motion, and to leave the consideration of the detailed amendments on these issues to another place.

5.30 pm

Mr. Heath: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I say that, if the hon. Lady's pager message was "Vote imminent", it was probably accurate? I have listened with great care to what she has said, and I am grateful to her for explaining that she is at least considering these issues. Having said that, however, the argument for the late incorporation of amendments in another place, where we do not have the opportunity to debate them fully, is an argument of expediency. We have had years since the Denise Matthews case in which to make these changes to the franchise for Gibraltar. The matter could have been on the agenda for detailed discussion at any time during those years, but all the time the Government have resisted any such change. Now, however, we are being asked to push through the legislation as a matter of urgency, simply because it suits the Government so to do, and those of us who have been committed to the enfranchisement of the people of Gibraltar have only a limited opportunity to make the points that we believe are important. The people who feel that way are, of course, to be found on either side of the Chamber today; indeed, we have heard valuable contributions from the hon. Members for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), and for Romford (Mr. Rosindell).

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) and I seem to have found a happy conjunction on many parts of the Bill, possibly to the astonishment of both our parties. I have looked again at the amendments that stand in his name, most of which I find myself in agreement with. As he pointed out, amendment No. 29, in particular, takes matters a little further than my new clause 2 in dealing with the constitutional differentiation between the United Kingdom and Gibraltar in implementing the orders. He may, therefore, wish to press that amendment to a vote, and, if he does, I may well advise my colleagues to support him.

I decline the opportunity to withdraw the motion, because I believe that the most important thing is to send a clear message to another place and to the Lord Chancellor that the present provisions in the Bill simply will not do, and that we need to make explicit the need to consult the people of Gibraltar properly. I seek the advice of the House on the matter.

Mr. Cash *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I think that we have finished that debate now.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 177, Noes 288.

Division No. 71] **[5:33 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ancram, rh Michael
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clarke, rh Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Forth, rh Eric
Francois, Mark
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael

Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Richard Younger-Ross and Tom Brake

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, rh John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*

Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Nick Ainger and Joan Ryan

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 2

Electoral Commission Recommendations

Mr. Cash: I beg to move amendment No. 21, in page 2, line 23 [Clause 2], leave out

'any change or anticipated change under Community law in'

and insert

'ARTICLE 2 of Protocol A.Protocol annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaties establishing the European Communities as respects'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 22, in page 3, line 20 [Clause 4], leave out

'a change under Community law in'

and insert

'ARTICLE 2 of Protocol A.Protocol annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaties establishing the European Communities as respects'.

Mr. Cash: I should begin by handing to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) a letter that I have just received that was addressed to me, but which is actually for him. The degrees of consultation are becoming more and more ridiculous, but having said that, I have now been able to read what the Minister had to say, and it does take us a little further.

The amendments raise extremely important points that we traversed in Committee, but on which we did not reach a conclusion.

Amendment No. 21 deals with a strange provision in the Bill, which has lurking within it some difficult issues of constitutional law. The amendment relates to clause 2, which empowers the Lord Chancellor by notice to

"require the Electoral Commission to make a recommendation to him as to the distribution between the electoral regions of—

(a) a total number of MEPs specified in the notice; or

(b) if the notice specifies more than one total number of MEPs, each of the total numbers so specified.

We then come to the specific difficulty, which is as follows:

"The power to give such a notice is exercisable with a view to the implementation of any change or anticipated change under Community law in the total number of MEPs to be elected for the United Kingdom."

I propose that we leave out the words

"any change or anticipated change under Community law"

and insert specific provisions relating to the treaty of Nice, which—unenthusiastic as I am about its provisions—I accept is a part of the law of the UK, including the protocol. In Committee, I asked why the House should be expected, under an order-making power, to enable such a notice to be given with a view not only to a change of community law, but to an anticipated change.

As I said in Committee, the Bill is based on a hypothesis; we do not know how the referendums in the accession states will work out. Therefore, we have no way of knowing exactly how many MEPs will be drawn into the process. In Poland, where there are 50 seats, there is strong resistance to going further into the integration process. When Poland hears about the horrors of the convention on the European constitution—I dare say that that will be described to the country graphically during the referendum process—there will be a greater determination not to go along with it.

The impact of the protocol on the UK will be to reduce the number of our MEPs, which currently stands at 87, to 72. That arises under article 2 of the protocol, which, for the purposes of the European Communities Act 1972, is to be regarded as a treaty. A peculiar wording has been chosen, which—because of the words "community law"—cannot be confined simply to the protocol, and may include any other proposal that might be brought in by legislative instrument; perhaps by the Commission.

The explanatory notes suggest that the European Commission shall inform the UK Parliament as to the number of Members that we would be expected to implement. Frankly, I cannot understand why the words have been chosen, unless it is to give as much ambit as possible to the Government to enable them to calibrate the system in a way that suits them at a given time. But that is not the way we legislate in this country.

Tony Cunningham: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if the Bill goes through, we will have 72 British MEPs in 2004? If Poland, or any of the other applicant countries, does not agree on entry in a referendum and does not join, all that will happen is that we will get additional seats. We are bound to get 72 and, regardless of what happens in the future, we will get more than 72 seats if a country does not come in.

Mr. Cash: Even if that were the case, that is not the way in which we should legislate. The Bill's reference to any "anticipated change" in Community law is far too general. Under the heading "Matters of Principle", with respect to delegated legislation, there is an authoritative statement on constitutional law:

"There is a clear threat to parliamentary government if power is delegated to legislate on matters of general policy or if so wide a discretion is conferred that it is impossible to be sure what limit the legislature intended to impose."

There is no way in which it can be established under article 2—and paragraph 3 of that article in particular—what the numbers will be. Therefore, it is inappropriate and wrong to legislate in this fashion, particularly when there is an option, which is to spell out in the amendment what is done under the protocol.

I am not saying that, irrespective of my concern about the Nice treaty as a whole, I will take the gravest exception to the proposal, to the point at which I say

[Mr. Cash]

that we will not allow the enlargement process to continue. I have made that clear in Committee. However, I do not believe that the Government should set a unique precedent—nobody has given me any indication that this has been done before—by extending their ability, by an order-making power, to say that, in anticipation of a change in European Union law, they will bring in an order to do this, that or the other. However, that would be within the remit of the sovereignty of the UK Parliament, because it would involve an Act of our Parliament that we could adjust if we so wished. In the context we are discussing, we could not simply adjust the measure.

As I have told the Minister several times, under that protocol, if a different number results from the referendum process—because some countries did not participate—the Council will adopt a decision "to that effect". That means, first, that the Council will have the broadest possible powers in respect of drawing up Community law as a whole, with all the instruments at its disposal, such as the power of regulation and the Commission powers and so on; and, secondly, that the decision will, in effect, already have been taken.

6 pm

The protocol determines the basis for prescribing the total number of members. It notes that if the total number of members referred to in paragraph 2, which gives the UK allocation as 72, is less than 732, a pro-rata correction will be applied—as the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) has just pointed out—to the number of representatives to be elected in each member state, so that the total number is as close as possible to 732, but that such a correction should not lead to the number of representatives to be elected in each member state being higher than that provided for in article 190. That is where I would ask the hon. Gentleman to reconsider his point.

The position appears to be that there cannot be a higher number, but I am more concerned about the principle that lies behind the provision. A pre-emptive decision will have been taken under a protocol which is binding on us under section 2 of the European Communities Act 1972 because, as I have already pointed out, a protocol is to be regarded as a treaty for these purposes.

A further problem for the Government is that to take such a wide power is both inconsistent with normal constitutional principles and, in the context of EC law, would create a precedent that could be applied to any order-making power by using those magic words. That would thus obviate some of the difficulties that the Government have already experienced in getting certain elements of European legislation through the House.

Section 2 of the 1972 Act strongly suggests that we should give serious consideration to revising the arrangements. Subsection (2) authorises the making of Orders in Council and ministerial regulations to implement

"Community obligations of the United Kingdom".

It enables rights under Community treaties to be exercised

"for the purpose of dealing with matters arising out of or related to any such obligation or rights".

That refers not to Community law, but to Community obligations, yet there can be no obligation at this stage because we do not know the outcome of the referendums. There can be only a hypothesis, so there can be no obligation. Furthermore, the use of the words "Community law" does not dovetail with the wording in section 2 of the 1972 Act.

Section 12 of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002 consolidates section 6 of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978. Incidentally, in the case of Prince, serious doubts were raised as to the vires of that provision as a matter of constitutional law. Section 12 deals with treaty ratification and states:

"No treaty which provides for any increase in the powers of the European Parliament is to be ratified by the United Kingdom unless it has been approved by an Act of Parliament . . . In this section"—

which dovetails with section (2) of the 1972 Act—

"treaty' includes any international agreement, and . . . any protocol"—

of the kind set out in the Nice treaty—

"annex to a treaty or international agreement."

We have already observed, however, that under the protocol the Council has already decreed, in advance of the referendums, that it shall adopt a decision "to that effect". As that is part of a protocol that is defined for the purposes of section (2) as a treaty and as it certainly provides for an increase in the powers of the European Parliament—which is what the measure is all about—it should not be ratified by the United Kingdom unless it has been approved by an Act of Parliament. The 2002 Act does not provide that it should be by order of the unelected Lord High Chancellor on instructions from the unelected European Commission.

I put some of those points of principle to the Minister, but received no satisfactory reply. However, the points are important; they raise questions about the construction of a Bill that gives order-making powers to the EC under some future Community law that has not yet been devised, but which is postulated as already in effect. The powers are similar to the Henry VIII procedure for modifying Acts of Parliament, which so many of us find objectionable, but which at least we can control. However, we cannot control Community law, so that raises questions about the sovereignty of Parliament.

The Government are going down an extremely difficult and dangerous path. They may be driven by convenience or expediency, but I do not believe for one minute that the people of this country contemplated that such principles would ever be proposed. They will certainly not be acceptable.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): But are not the Government being entirely logical? Are they not saying, "We have absolutely no influence over the matter; we shall be told what to do by the European Commission in future; we are useless at negotiating and we shall be unable to control it; so why give a toss about Parliament either"?

Mr. Cash: Indeed. That is very much the tenor of my article in *The Daily Telegraph* today on House of Lords

reform. The issue relates to democracy. I said much the same in a debate on scrutiny and accountability in Westminster Hall last week. This stuff comes up over and over again. It is about our legal and practical co-operation with Europe. However, if we have order-making powers whose effect is to make presumptions about their operation in practice, and which run against the principles adumbrated by the courts, we have a process that I have called "Wolsey's revenge". That Lord High Chancellor dared to challenge the king but managed to escape by dying just in time. None the less, we now have a new Lord High Chancellor, who comes along and tells Parliament, "We will legislate, using this order-making power and my unelected authority, to drive through the provisions on future Community law." That is offensive to the constitutional principles on which our legislative process is founded.

Mr. Redwood: Surely the moral of my hon. Friend's excellent tale is that Wolsey was a Euro-enthusiast, and he was, of course, replaced by Britain's first and greatest Eurosceptic, Thomas Cromwell. Is not there hope for us all if we can build on that model?

Mr. Cash: There is indeed, but I would also point out to my right hon. Friend that the fate of Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell is not one that I would want visited on anyone.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): I wonder whether our common religious position would not make us both very wary of being too supportive of Thomas Cromwell, whose history in such matters was thoroughly disgraceful.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We have heard enough history; perhaps we can return to the present day.

Mr. Cash: Indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker; otherwise we shall all be hanged, drawn and quartered—not on your instructions, I am sure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that is not one of the powers of the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Cash: I wish to refer to the problem that arises in respect of regulations made under those provisions. Again, under section 2 of the 1972 Act, regulations can be introduced by a designated Minister for the purpose of implementing Community obligations. However, schedule 2 to that Act says that regulations may not be used for a number of purposes, one of which is taxation; another is a provision having retrospective effect. If the issue has already been decided, there is an "Alice in Wonderland", Lewis Carroll quality to the problem.

Tony Cunningham: I often feel that I am in an "Alice in Wonderland" situation when the hon. Gentleman is speaking.

Mr. Cash: Well, as I said on another occasion, words mean what we choose them to mean; the question is:

"which is to be master—that's all."

The masters are undoubtedly those who are pulling the strings to get such an order through. They are instrumental in ensuring that the provision, which has already been determined, states that the Council will adopt a decision to that effect and that it will be implemented. However, the provision could well turn out to be retrospective.

We know that the provision is based on a hypothesis; we do not know which referendums will be successful, and to get their ducks in a row or to get the pieces of the jigsaw into the right pattern, the Government may have to make adjustments by order that could well infringe the principles of schedule 2 to the 1972 Act by making a provision that has retrospective effect. There is a further restriction under schedule 2 to the 1972 Act, which refers to a power-delegating legislative authority. Again, that provision could well fall foul of those arrangements.

6.15 pm

We are considering a Bill, and I am very conscious of the fact that the votes are against us. The Minister has indicated during our proceedings that there is nothing much that I can do about such things anyway because, after all, they are Community obligations—she uses the phrase "Community law" in the Bill—and therefore I will have to put up with them. However, I can tell her that I will not put up with them. We in Parliament should not simply have it dished out to us that this is the way in which we legislate as a matter of principle. Serious questions lie at the heart of this debate.

Again, as recently as 2001, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was involved in the case of Orange, the mobile phone company. The court said that although the power to make Community subordinate legislation had been widely construed, the Government must clearly indicate what primary legislation is being repealed or amended when that procedure is invoked. Perhaps we will find ourselves in difficulty about that as well.

I cannot prejudge what a court would say in that context, but I can give the general principles on which such things are determined and construed. For example, the European Court of Justice has asserted that it has supremacy over our legislation. I can say that, without a shadow of a doubt, that is not the case. Indeed, many authorities—Lord Denning and Lord McCarthy—can be cited, and Lord Bridge said that all this was based on the voluntary agreement that we entered into in 1972. Well, it may have been voluntary in 1972, but if we were to introduce legislation the effect of which was inconsistent with section 2 of the 1972 Act, there would certainly be a conflict between what the European Court of Justice said and what was implemented under the 1972 Act, which stated that we must obey the rulings of that Court.

I shall not demur from that view in so far as I believe in the rule of law, but I will not accept the idea that, for all time, we are bound by the acquis communautaire and we cannot legislate on our own terms if we wish to do so. The provision raises those questions of principle, and they have not been properly examined, so I should be interested to see how the argument develops.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): As my hon. Friend knows, I served on the Committee that considered the Bill. During the debates in Committee, he said:

[Angela Watkinson]

"The courts can strike down legislation for a lack of certainty."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 9 January 2003; c. 46.]

He went on to say that it is not satisfactory to legislate on the basis of hypothesis or anticipated change. Will he say to which courts he was referring in that comment? Is it in the powers of our own courts to strike down such legislation; or are they subservient to the European courts?

Mr. Cash: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Such things could be dealt with initially by our own courts but then referred, via the House of Lords, to the European Court of Justice. Alternatively, the House of Lords could adjudicate on its own terms in implementing the jurisprudence, which has tended to evolve, whereby the House of Lords tends to agree with what the European Court has ruled. That is a matter for Parliament, and a great deal of judicial activism is going on in that business. I say unequivocally that I regard the question of certainty as something for the United Kingdom courts to determine, but I cannot stop the appeals process because, as I have said, I subscribe to the rule of law.

I am concerned about the political and constitutional consequences of such things, which are even coming to bear on the Prime Minister in relation to article 3 of the European convention on human rights, where it is unambiguously the case—as Lord Hoffmann said in the case of Simms and O'Brien in 1999—that the British Parliament can legislate in a manner inconsistent with the convention provided that it does so expressly and unambiguously. I believe that that doctrine continues in relation to the 1972 Act, although I am well aware that that is not accepted by those in the European Court of Justice.

Lady Hermon (North Down): I do not find it helpful to confuse the jurisprudence of the European convention on human rights with that of the European Court of Human Rights. The hon. Gentleman will know perfectly well that the supremacy of Community law is paramount. Can he cite one case—just one—in which a British court has not given supremacy to Community law?

Mr. Cash: What I can do is to indicate, as I did earlier, that the McCarthy decision, for example, clearly ran counter to some of the subsequent decisions. According to the authorities that I have at my disposal, there is no doubt at all that the issue has not been resolved, despite the statements by Sir William Wade and others that there has been a revolution in these questions. I can sum that up by reference to the authority's conclusion in the chapter on the United Kingdom and the European Union, which says that, although constitutional dogma has been shaken, the problem of sovereignty has not been adequately resolved, but it is unlikely that everyone would agree now with the view expressed in 1972 that the ultimate supremacy of Parliament will not be affected, and it will not be affected because it cannot be affected. Crucially, that is because it emanates from the 1972 Act. The authority also states that only time will tell whether that is a problem of any practical significance and, if so, whether closer political union at Community level can be built on such foundations. That raises the issue of extrapolation of ideas, the extension of the European Court, and the issue of European integration, the convention and the constitution, which is coming down the track like a runaway train.

Although that is a specific example, the reality is that it shows in embryonic form the nature of the problem. In response to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), case law indicates that the supremacy of Community law is not a given. Whether it is open to us to obviate the difficulties by addressing the manner in which the European Communities Act 1972 is devised, however, is a question of political will and of constitutional issues, without prejudice to the fact that, generally, through judicial activism, there has been an increasing tendency for our courts to agree to the emanations from the European Court of Justice. We are reaching breaking point, however, and some would say that we have gone past it.

Lady Hermon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking a second intervention from me. The principle of the sovereignty of Community law has been on the statute book, certainly at the European Court of Justice, since 1962 and the famous case of Costa *v.* ENEL. To return to clause 2(2), it states that the power that the Lord Chancellor may exercise is confined to

"any change or anticipated change under Community law in the total number of MEPs".

That is very precise. Given that Community law is supreme, if the number of MEPs changes, does he agree that the UK Parliament and Government must comply with that?

Mr. Cash: I have already given my reasoning on that point with respect to the interaction of the protocol and paragraph (3). A number of serious points arise, and it is not necessary for me to repeat what I have already said. The hon. Lady refers to the question of case law whereas I refer to the constitutional question. A substantial area must be considered very carefully, and I do not think that the natural consequences of going down the route that has been assumed so far can be taken for granted.

With respect to clause 4, which would implement the changes in the number of UK MEPs, the Lord Chancellor would have the power by order to give effect to a change—not an anticipated change but an actual change—under Community law. I take exception to the term "Community law" in that context. For similar reasons as before, I have substituted the wording in the protocol. The Minister will be aware that what I am doing is perhaps somewhat improbable. The Prime Minister once said to me in the Lobby, when I was raising a matter of European law, "I wouldn't have thought that you would have accepted that," but I accept the law as it stands. Whether I think that it is right, fair or can be changed is a separate issue. That is why I am putting the Government to the test. If they are to rely on article 2 of protocol A, to which I refer in my amendment, why not stick to it? It is as simple as that. Why go through the paraphernalia of using the words,

"or anticipated change under Community law"?

I wait to hear what other Members of the House, and in particular the Minister, have to say.

Mr. Heath: I offer my commiserations to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who is struggling manfully with whatever is afflicting him: it cannot be easy to make long speeches with such a problem.

The words "convenience" and "expediency" have been mentioned more than once during our consideration of the Bill. The Government have again phrased the Bill in such a way as to give themselves maximum flexibility to allow for circumstances that they have not yet considered. The problem is that that is not the proper way for Parliament to approach legislation. The Bill creates a power that Parliament might well not want to be exercised without primary legislation. The hon. Member for Stone tabled several amendments on this matter in Committee, with some of which I disagreed because their effect would have been to blow the Bill apart.

There are two considerations: the point at which the Lord Chancellor asks the Electoral Commission to undertake its preliminary work and that at which the Lord Chancellor introduces orders to implement those changes. On the ground of expediency, I was less than happy at the prospect of delaying the start of the preparatory work, as every indication was that that would mean that we could not provide for representation at the 2004 European elections. I was equally unhappy with the contention that the Government would deliberately bring about circumstances in which the UK was under-represented, which is not a likely scenario.

I agree with the hon. Member for Stone that there is a problem with introducing legislation under which any change to the composition of the European Parliament could be enacted through secondary legislation on the say-so of the Lord Chancellor—an unelected Minister, as we have discussed—without the House having the opportunity to debate it as primary legislation. The problem concerns every matter that is introduced as a result of a treaty, but that does not initially require primary legislation. The Government can accept by treaty and through the royal prerogative matters that should properly be the province of the elected House of Commons.

6.30 pm

Although this provision is a minor one in the great scheme of things, it could mean that, after treaty negotiations, the Government could opt for changes in the composition of the European Parliament to be dealt with by secondary rather than by primary legislation. That is not satisfactory. When we questioned the Minister about that in Committee, she first suggested that article 2 of protocol A was insufficient in itself because it did not talk about the Council of Ministers. I have considered that point, but cannot accept that construction. The process is clearly laid out in article 2, and the article cannot be construed in any way that would not allow for that process.

Mr. Redwood: Will the Liberal Democrats join the Conservatives in saying that there must be a referendum on the constitutional changes now unfolding in the European Union, as well as on the euro should the Government ever brave that tricky subject?

Mr. Heath: Mr. Deputy Speaker is looking at me in a way that I take to mean that my embarking on a debate on that subject would be out of order. That debate may therefore have to wait for another day. I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, and my party's position has always been that any major constitutional change should be put to a referendum of the British people. We pressed for one during the debates on the Maastricht treaty. My party has led the field. Without straying from the subject of this debate, I think that I have dealt with the intervention.

The proposal of the hon. Member for Stone deals with the specific treaty requirement that underlies the provenance of the Bill. It is an unexceptional statement, and the Government are clearly relying on the requirement for this change. The process exists and includes provision for pro rata reductions should some of the applicant countries not ratify their membership of the European Union. That may be the case, as there will be a sequence of referendums in many of them, some of which might result in their Parliaments not ratifying the treaty of accession.

That is all inherent in article 2 of protocol A, so I do not understand why this Bill, which is a limited measure that deals with the specific question of the reduction in the number of British MEPs needed to comply with the accession of the applicant countries, should contain a phrase that is any wider than the specific protocol. I think that is what the hon. Gentleman has in mind with his amendment, and I find it difficult to argue against that proposition.

Mr. Cash: I do not invite the hon. Gentleman to go down this route, but I merely make the further point that the use of this formula would mean that huge amounts of legislation could be decided in the Council of Ministers or any other forum. The consequence would be that such forums would simply say, "Let it be done." That would be that.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman sets out the argument of the slippery slope. It is easy to make and, by extrapolation, he extends it to an apocalyptic outcome. I am not sure that I would necessarily go as far as he does, but I accept that the provision of a wide interpretation that allows the Government to avoid the need to return to the House for primary legislation affords them a possibility that should not be afforded to an Executive. It should not be a case of the European Union deciding matters without the House having an opportunity to debate them.

Mr. Cash: The House as a whole has not heard these arguments, so I return to the question of the accession treaty. The Minister said that it would have to be introduced to give effect to the results of the referendums. As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and I agreed in Committee, that treaty would bring the moving picture to the point at which we knew where we were. We could have implemented the measure at that point without all this hypothetical and unconstitutional manoeuvring.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is right. We had such a debate and I tabled an amendment that would have made the treaty of accession a trigger point for implementation. The Government rejected that.

[Mr. Heath]

I have sympathy for the hon. Gentleman's intentions, but I do not go along with all his arguments about the consequences. The measure is much more limited than he suggests. However, as a matter of principle, the House should determine and ratify that which is decided for it by the Executive in their treaty negotiations. I am not sure that a Henry VIII clause could be said to apply to a Cardinal Wolsey figure, but there is an element of such a clause in the provision. I instinctively reject that.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) for drawing the House's attention to the crucial matter of principle that arises from the power that we are now debating in detail. He is right that the principle that the Government seek to establish could have many evil consequences if it were followed more generally in the treatment of European legislation. Cannot even the Minister see that it is a democratic outrage to ask the House to legislate in advance of agreements, deals and decisions elsewhere and to accept whatever takes places and in whatever circumstances without it having the opportunity to reconsider and to introduce the normal primary legislation that we would expect for matters of constitutional and democratic significance?

There used to be a strong principle in the House—the Government have destroyed it along with many other traditions—that any constitutional matter had to be debated at the length that the House chose and on the Floor of the House. We always thought that the constitution was so important that it was right that every Member of Parliament should have free and unfettered access to such a debate and that the debate should carry on for as long as the House saw fit even if it went on for much longer than the Government of the day wanted. We are now told that an important constitutional matter—the style and number of the representatives that we have in the European Parliament—can be determined by an unelected Minister and rammed through in a statutory instrument with very limited debate and no scope for amendment.

The Liberal Democrats' spokesman was typically wimpish when I asked him whether the British people should be entitled to express their view on the clause and the wider principles behind it. All the electorates in the applicant states get a vote and the voters in places such as the Republic of Ireland have a vote on enlargement. The British people do not get a vote and so cannot express their view on this crucial matter. Their Parliament is now invited by a Government with a very big majority to ram through an unsatisfactory Bill with this crucial power at its heart. That will prevent or stifle debate.

Lady Hermon: If it is true that the British public feel so strongly about the European Parliament, will the right hon. Gentleman explain why—with the exception of Northern Ireland where voters come out and vote in any election because they feel passionately about the results—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is taking the argument far outside the bounds of the amendment.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is important to distinguish between the wish to vote in an election and the wish to vote on the constitutional settlement of this country. Many people might want to vote against a widening of the European Parliament and its representation because they are not impressed by it, but they are not given the opportunity to express that view and their Parliament is being asked to accept this unsatisfactory legislation.

My only worry about the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone is the modesty of his amendments. He welcomed the protocol and the intent of the negotiation. I do not think that it was a good deal well done because so much of it was unnecessary for enlargement. The applicant states need free trade, which they seem unable to get from the European Union, but do not need much of what will be forced on them and us. There is a problem with his proposals, but they are much better than the Government's.

Mr. Cash: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, but he might remember that I tabled about 240 amendments to the Nice treaty and such matters were covered in principle at the time. I have said that once something has been done, we can say that we did not like it, but equally we can say that we wish to renegotiate it. I did what I did with a sense of purpose, which was also the case with the Amsterdam and Maastricht treaties, and much of what I said at the time has come about.

Mr. Redwood: I agree entirely and am full of praise for my hon. Friend's energetic work. I was not criticising him but merely remarking—I think that he would agree—that his proposed remedy to the difficulty is modest and partial. There are much bigger sins of commission and omission in the underlying treaty and negotiation that we cannot discuss under the amendment or solve tonight. Despite all that, I urge the House to vote for his amendment. It goes some way to dealing with the problem and certainly highlights for those in the press and public who are interested in such arcane but important matters that there is a big problem. We must stop the Government getting the idea that they can legislate in increasingly general terms and then ram all the important detail through at any date in the future through statutory instruments, which cannot be amended and can be debated only at short length.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if the Government are confident that they can railroad through a facilitating provision that allows them to agree to a reduction in British representation in the European Parliament without proper debate, thereby showing a contempt for the institution, it is scarcely surprising if the British people feel precisely such a contempt themselves?

Mr. Redwood: I agree. According to the enthusiasts for Europe, we have missed the train in Europe, but it has come to my attention during the debate that, not only have we missed it, but it is going to run us down, as my hon. Friends the Members for Stone and for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) remarked.

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Gummer: I am waiting to be called to speak.

Mr. Redwood: I thought that my right hon. Friend wanted to intervene. He will be delighted to know that I am about to finish.

The Bill is a thoroughly bad piece of legislation. The Opposition are right to highlight its deficiencies and propose remedies. I hope that the House will vote for the amendment because it goes a little way to tackle a huge underlying problem as Parliament is invited to undertake a very undemocratic act.

Mr. Gummer: I am concerned lest the pre-judgments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) should mislead the House into mistaking the importance of refusing the Government permission to do what they wish to do. The treaty of Nice is perfectly reasonable. I am pleased about enlargement and happy that the Conservative party is in favour of it, although one might not always think that that is so.

I am determined to make it clear that the most important and valuable thing that we have done since the war is to become part of the European Union. I very much hope that we continue to play a proper part, instead of a semi-detached one, in the building of that association, which is so important for both our peace and prosperity. However, that does not give the Government an excuse to railroad the House. That is the issue. I am afraid that my right hon. and hon. Friends undermine their position by taking an anti-European line. The problem has nothing to do with that; it is about the defence of the House.

6.45 pm

The Solicitor-General and the Under-Secretary are both distinguished in the quality of their independence. They must be just as appalled as I am at how the House's ability to control the Executive is being undermined day after day—usually under the foolish word "modernisation". It may be that the Conservative party is taking longer to replace the Labour party than I should like, but we must remember that one day Labour Members will have to keep the Executive in order themselves. What they have done to the House will rebound on them. That is why the proposal is so damaging.

I wish to be a little sharp with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham. I deeply resent the concept of yet another referendum. This House has the parliamentary role. We must not allow the world out there to believe that we abdicate our duty by holding a referendum every time we have a difficult thing to do. The thing about referendums is that one can never find the people who voted the wrong way afterwards. There is no responsibility—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have indulged the right hon. Gentleman a few moments longer than perhaps I strictly should. We are hearing too much about election turnout and the merits, or otherwise, of the referendum as a constitutional device. We should return to the particular matter under consideration.

Mr. Gummer: I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me enough time to get off my chest something that I have been wishing to say for some time. I much appreciate it. It is very helpful to have such an opportunity.

On the precise issue, I hope that the Government will not take it too hard when those of us who enthusiastically favour our membership of the European Union tell them that it is important not to besmirch our relationships with the rest of Europe by doing things that appear to be less than wholly democratic, parliamentary and defensive of the British tradition of how we do things.

Mr. Redwood: I want to put things straight between us. I am very much of my right hon. Friend's view, as I think he is of mine, that the main affront tonight is the lack of British democracy in how we handle such important matters now and in future. I am sure that we can make strong common cause, both in our remarks and in the Division Lobby, by saying that we must believe in and practise parliamentary democracy in the House. The Bill does the opposite.

Mr. Gummer: I am glad that my right hon. Friend and I are on the same side. From time to time, we find that a great support and pleasure. I think that on this issue we will be as one.

The key issue that I hope that the Government will think through is that it is often proper for European law to override the law of individual countries—otherwise, it would not be possible to have a single market, for example. Even the former Prime Minister, powerful though she was in some of her statements, recognised that we could not agree to something in the single market only to find that French or German law overrode it. It is funny how we are usually more willing to allow our laws to override such things than other people's laws. It is a curious element in our dealings with the rest of Europe. However, there are times when any sensible single market or concept of political co-operation needs European law to override domestic law.

If the public are to accept that, it is important that we do not extend those rights into areas where they are not necessary. The Government do not need to take any more power than they need. Because they are seeking to do more than is strictly necessary, many of us feel endangered. They ought to think seriously about the matter, as they need to tread softy and carefully reassure people who may otherwise be worried. I do not want them to be troubled by some of the more extreme fears expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone, but he also expressed some reasonable fears.

Mr. Cash: My right hon. Friend's reference to extreme fears has brought me to my feet. I am extremely concerned about the democracy of the House, which is why I tabled the amendments. I have been mildly rebuked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) for not going far enough, but what I have done is to stand up for democracy in the

[Mr. Cash]

House and for democracy for other people in Europe; and referendums, which are not disclosed in the provisions, are the means whereby this legislation will affect them—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Apart from a tendency to go down memory lane, the hon. Gentleman is trying to expand his argument too far.

Mr. Gummer: I shall not follow my hon. Friend's example, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was hoping to bring him onside, as I did not want him to feel under too much attack from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham for the form of the amendment. It is perfectly reasonable—it says that we favour the principle, but that the method of implementation is not the best. If the Government are not keen on it, I am sure that they could restrict their powers in a different way. If they did, I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone, in a spirit of friendship, which is in his nature, would accept that. However, if they do not, there is a reasonable feeling across the country that they are trying to pinch a bit of unnecessary extra power, which is par for the course.

Lady Hermon: I shall keep my remarks short this time. If there is a change or an anticipated change under community law in the total number of MEPs, the Lord Chancellor may by notice require the Electoral Commission to make a recommendation. Clause 2(5) says that a recommendation made under clause 2

"must be published by the Electoral Commission and laid before Parliament by the Lord Chancellor".

Does that give the right hon. Gentleman peace of mind and reassurance?

Mr. Gummer: Having been a Member of Parliament for as long as I fear I have been, I know that there are some mechanisms that do not amount to much. If I may say so, that mechanism is one such and does not provide power. However, the mechanism is not the real problem. I cannot understand why the Government want to take an extra step when they could achieve the end that they desire in a way that is acceptable to the whole House.

This is a constitutional debate, but it is not anything like as worrying as is sometimes claimed. We are inclined to treat every issue as if it were the most important one, but with constitutional issues it is better to tread softly than go too far. In the past, people have dealt with such issues by achieving a necessary end in a way that is acceptable to the whole House.

Mr. Bercow: The Government are antipathetic to the amendments because as an Administration they are characterised by ministerial impatience. They do not want to accept them because in future, when they want to act, they do not want to have to listen to views other than their own. The purpose of debate here, however, is not merely to seek to change ministerial minds, but to enable the electorate to be more aware of the arguments and alternative points of view.

Mr. Gummer: As so often, my hon. Friend has put his finger on the problem, and explained why I have tried to draw a distinction between the issue and the European ramifications. It is rare for me to be enthusiastic about being on the same side as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), but on this occasion we are as one. The issue is a constitutional one—it is about seeking to limit Parliament's powers as little as possible to achieve the necessary end. No sensible person would deny that we need to achieve the end envisaged in the Bill, because we want enlargement of the European Union and to be able to meet our obligations in such a union. At the same time, we want to do so by as limited a method as possible. It would be no skin off the Government's nose if they helped everyone to feel that they had tried to get close to 100 per cent. backing on a constitutional matter rather than leaving us divided on something on which we do not need to be divided. The Government can achieve their ends and we can protect the constitutional position, which is the Opposition's duty, and normally one that the Government accept.

Tony Cunningham: The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said that in days gone by constitutional issues could be debated for a long time. I do not want people to get the idea that the Bill has not been debated at tremendous length. In Committee, the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) spoke for about 90 per cent. of the time, but we finished with a free sitting.

Mr. Bercow: That really will not do at all.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Yvette Cooper: We covered these issues quite extensively in Committee, when I gave full answers to many of the points made by the Opposition today. I am pleased that the throat of the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) is holding out, and I commend its endurance.

Mr. Bercow: I greatly admire the hon. Lady, as she knows, and I am sorry to interrupt her at such an early stage in her speech. However, it is exceptionally irritating to be told that the amendments, or at least their purport, have been substantially debated in Committee. I merely put it to her that it is important to bear in mind the fact that the Bill is now on Report. I was not privileged to serve as a Committee member, but I am entitled to hear the arguments, including hers.

Yvette Cooper: We were obviously deeply disappointed not to have enjoyed the company of the hon. Gentleman in Committee—he would have been a joy. I am happy to rehearse again many of the key points, but I question the decision of the hon. Members for Stone (Mr. Cash) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) to make points that they had the chance to make repeatedly in Committee.

Mr. Cash: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman so that he can repeat his point.

Mr. Cash: I am not going to make my point again, but wish to say that the point that I made about section 12

of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002 was an additional point. The points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) are valid—the Bill is a constitutional measure and should have been taken on the Floor of the House.

Yvette Cooper: We have already dealt with many of the substantial points made by the hon. Gentleman, but I am happy to go through them again. As we have made clear throughout, the Bill's purpose is to allow a mechanism for the implementation of the treaty of Nice.

7 pm

The treaty of Nice provides for the reduced number of MEPs that would be in place once all the states had acceded. It also provides for the Council to take decisions on the interim position and to make pro rata adjustments in accordance with the treaty. We should be in no doubt that we can implement the numbers set out in the treaty and the interim arrangements. The problem with the amendment and with attempts to restrict the relevant provisions in the Bill too much is that we might end up being able to implement the precise details set out in the treaty—the bottom-line position, which means that the UK should reduce the number of its MEPs to 72—but not be able confidently to give effect to the Council's decision on the interim position, which is provided for in the treaty, but on which a decision has not yet been taken. There is therefore a danger that we might not be able to implement the provision for 78 MEPs, and we would end up with fewer MEPs than Opposition Members say they want.

Mr. Gummer: Perhaps the hon. Lady can help me. Why is it not possible for her so to arrange things that she could ask Parliament about the matter? Why does she feel we would be excluded if we adopted the arrangement that would be most natural to us? We would set out the two most likely circumstances, and, if things did not turn out like that, the Government would return to Parliament and allow it to make its decision in plenty of time for it to be implemented. There would be no need to hold anything up for that, but at least Parliament would make the decision.

Yvette Cooper: We have ratified the treaty of Nice, which sets out the bottom line. The interim position needs to be achieved by a pro rata adjustment. We have done that. The matter has been debated and has gone through the parliamentary procedures. We have set out the final position and the basis on which the interim position will be decided. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the matter needs to come back before Parliament, which is why it will be dealt with through an order. He seems to be asking for primary legislation in order to implement interim arrangements, the details of which were set out in the treaty of Nice and endorsed by Parliament.

Mr. Gummer: I perfectly understand the hon. Lady's explanation. I merely suggest to her that these issues cause considerable concern and worry, often needlessly. In the circumstances, surely a Government with their ear to the ground and with fingertip control would go the extra mile to give Parliament the opportunity to make the decision, so that it did not feel bypassed.

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman overstates his case. It is clearly right that Parliament should ratify the treaty of Nice. That is exactly what happened. The treaty sets out the process for reducing the number of MEPs to ensure that the states joining the European Union can have representation. It sets out that representation in exact numbers, once all the accession states have joined. It also states clearly that the interim arrangements will need to made on the basis of a pro rata adjustment. That leaves no freedom to manoeuvre in the process that we will have to go through, but it is important that the Council decision is implemented; otherwise, we will not be able to allow other European countries to get their fair representation in time for the 2004 elections. Perhaps that is the agenda of some Opposition Members.

Mr. Redwood: Is there not an easy way out? Why does not the Minister say that the House is right to want to consider the matter once we know the answer? When we know how many Members of the European Parliament need to be elected at the next election, all she has to do is to get the business managers to give her a day or two on the Floor of the House to bring the necessary amendment before us as primary legislation, and all will be well. It is not as though the House has very much to do. It is going home terribly early every night because it does not have enough business, and there are lots of Fridays when it does not sit at all. People outside do not understand why we do not do a decent day's work every day. Why cannot we have some time to do as I suggest?

Yvette Cooper: I am sorry to hear that the right hon. Gentleman is not enjoying his early morning rises in order to get to the House. Astonishingly, he seemed at one point to be accusing the hon. Member for Stone of not being Eurosceptic enough, which seemed to trouble the hon. Gentleman. Opposition Members are simply trying to put hurdles in the way of the accession states ensuring fair representation in the European Parliament: that, in the end, is what all this is about.

We are going through a sensible process. The order will come back before Parliament once the Council decision has been taken.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: In a minute.

It is perfectly sensible that the Council's decision should be implemented to complete the process. We discussed extensively in Committee the fact that future alterations to the number of MEPs must be made in accordance with a treaty or by virtue of a requirement in a treaty. The number of MEPs is set out in a treaty and, under article 5, cannot be changed, except in accordance with a treaty.

Mr. Heath: Will the hon. Lady confirm, however, that, unless the clause is amended, a future treaty that

[Mr. Heath]

included a change in the number of MEPs would be implemented through primary legislation, not secondary legislation?

Yvette Cooper: A future treaty would have to be ratified in this country; that is how we have always handled important treaties.

Mr. Heath: This is a key point. We have no provision for the ratification of a treaty, other than for those matters that require a change in UK law. If a change in UK law was not needed because the matter was to be dealt with through secondary legislation, it would not be ratified by the House or anyone else; it would be made simply on the say-so of Government.

Yvette Cooper: I appreciate that hon. Members are desperate to place hurdles in the way of the reforms that we need to put in place, but—

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: It would be nice to be able to answer one intervention before taking another. I will give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), as it is always a pleasure to hear the points that he makes.

There has been plenty of discussion throughout the Bill's passage through the House. I can testify to the extensive debates that we had in Committee, not only on the final numbers set out in the treaty of Nice, but on the interim arrangements. We have debated the Bill as primary legislation. The order setting out the interim arrangements for the number of MEPs as a result of the Council decision will be subject to the affirmative procedure. We will also have the opportunity to ratify the treaty of accession. There are ample safeguards for Parliament, and we are dealing with such a transitional issue—the number of MEPs, which must be established by a pro rata adjustment. That is not a number that can be plucked out of thin air by the European Commission or the European Council. There is not a wide range of decisions that need to be taken. A narrow decision has to be implemented in respect of the transitional arrangements for when some states accede. It is right that we give those countries the right to representation.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Yvette Cooper: I give way briefly to the hon. Member for Buckingham, if he can remember what he was going to ask.

Mr. Bercow: I can always remember what I was going to ask.

I simply put it to the hon. Lady that it would be wise and gracious for her to accept that in arguing that pushing something through via secondary legislation is different from an alternative to, and is less than, proper ratification, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was absolutely right. The hon. Lady, I am sorry to say, was absolutely wrong.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is mistaking two completely different issues. I have said that the order will go through the affirmative procedure. I have made no comment about the ratification procedure. Hon. Members are putting hurdles in the way.

What is at stake is that other countries should be able to accede to the European Union. We should support that, and we should give them their fair representation. Opposition Members say that they want enlargement, that they want other countries to be able to accede, but they do not want to give them their representation in the European Parliament.

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Yvette Cooper: I shall not give way. We have had considerable debate.

We must give those countries fair representation. That involves reducing the number of MEPs from this country, and also from other countries right across Europe. It is the fair thing to do in order to ensure that countries acceding to the European Union receive their fair representation. I am sorry that Opposition Members choose not to support that.

Mr. Cash: I have only one point to make, which is that the Minister has answered none of the matters raised: zero. She has given absolutely no response. She did not deal with the European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002, and she did not deal with the principal matters raised by many right hon. and hon. Members. In her final remarks, she completely failed to answer the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) and I and others raised, which is implicit in my amendment: what is it that leads the hon. Lady to need to substitute for the precise wording of the protocol the words

"any . . . anticipated change under Community law"?

She has failed miserably to answer those questions.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 176, Noes 287.

Division No. 72] **[7:12 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard

Forth, rh Eric
Francois, Mark
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mains, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Maude, rh Francis
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Hugh Robertson and Mr. Desmond Swayne

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, rh George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*

McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt. Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and Derek Twigg

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Heath: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 2, line 27 page 2, line 27 [Clause 2], leave out subsection (4) and insert—

'(4) In determining what recommendation to make for the distribution of any total number of MEPs, the Electoral Commission must ensure that—

(a) each electoral region (other than Northern Ireland) is allocated at least four MEPs;

(b) Northern Ireland is allocated at least three MEPs; and

(c) the ratio of electors to MEPs is as nearly as possible the same in each electoral region.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment No. 2, in page 2, line 29 [Clause 2], leave out 'and'.

Amendment No. 3, in page 2, line 29 [Clause 2], at end insert—

'(aa) Scotland is allocated at least eight MEPs;

(ab) Wales is allocated at least five MEPs; and;

Amendment No. 4, in page 5, line 5 [Clause 8], leave out 'and Wales'.

Amendment No. 5, in page 5, line 11 [Clause 9], leave out 'and Wales'.

Amendment No. 6, in page 9, line 36 [Clause 19], leave out subsection 2.

Amendment No. 7, in page 10, line 38 [Clause 21], leave out 'and Wales'.

Mr. Heath: The amendment returns us to an issue that we discussed in Committee: the impact of the electoral system for Members of the European Parliament on regions that have a smaller number of MEPs to elect. You will know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that when the original European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999 was introduced we had long and conflicting arguments about the precise way in which the Government's decision to introduce a system of proportional representation for European parliamentary elections was implemented. My colleagues and I took the view—indeed, I believe that I was speaking for my party on the issue at the time—that a closed-list system was not preferable to an open-list one. I think that subsequent events have proved us right. The country has not been persuaded that a system that gives people the opportunity to vote not for individual candidates, but on the basis of a party list, gives them the latitude that they would like to exercise in deciding who represents them.

With a reduction in the total number of MEPs, an issue has come to light regarding the position of parliamentary regions—only one region, the north-east, will be affected by the change in question, as a result of the treaty of Nice—that elect a limited number of MEPs. One of the perverse effects of the electoral system that the former Home Secretary, now the Foreign Secretary, chose to implement is that proportionality reduces markedly when there is a limited number of MEPs to be elected. The north-east elects four MEPs, and it is anticipated that that will reduce to three once the Bill takes effect and the changes to the constitution of the European Parliament are in place. That will result in a very imperfect match between the votes cast for each candidate and the proportionality of the result. That

does not apply in the case of Northern Ireland, which has only three MEPs at present—that will continue under the Bill and my amendment would not change that position—because, uniquely among the regions and countries of the United Kingdom, it has a provision for a single transferable vote system, which is proportional even in small numbers. I fear that I will lose the attention of the House completely if I go into detail about the relative merits of the d'Hondt and the Sainte-Lague methods of calculating arithmetical progressions for the purpose of determining proportionality, and you will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to do so even if tempted or prompted, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, I would point out that the d'Hondt formula exacerbates that problem.

7.30 pm

I speak from a position of disinterest, because my party would not necessarily be the beneficiary of any change of the kind that I propose in amendment No. 1. That may not be the case in the future, given present trends in the opinion polls, but on past political performance in the north-east we would not necessarily benefit. However, as a matter of principle, if we claim to have a system that is proportional across the country, it is both perverse and wrong to introduce an anomaly by design. That is why my amendment would provide a floor, so that each region, with the exception of Northern Ireland, would have at least four MEPs.

Lady Hermon: Given that thousands of people who left Northern Ireland during the appalling troubles that we endured for 30 years have returned since the Belfast agreement, why would the hon. Gentleman's amendment deprive that increased electoral roll of an additional seat at European elections?

Mr. Heath: That is not the intention of the amendment, nor is it what it says. The figure of four for other countries and regions of the United Kingdom and three for Northern Ireland would be the floor. If the Electoral Commission determined that it would be right and proper for Northern Ireland to have an extra MEP, it would not be a problem. I hope that I have allayed the hon. Lady's fears in that respect.

I am trying to achieve at least a broadly proportional system across the country. That would be disturbed if representation in the north-east were reduced to three MEPs, and that would be a retrograde step to which there are alternatives.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): Surely the only way to achieve a more broadly proportional system—the hon. Gentleman's words—would be to distort the system so that the north-east would have fewer voters for every MEP. Is that the correct approach?

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman must know that that happens already. Under the regional system, parity is achieved only in the broadest terms between the number of electors and the number of MEPs in a region. He is right that my amendment would mean a subsequent distortion for the rest of the country, because it would be marginally less represented than it would otherwise be, but it would be a matter of percentage points only, not whole numbers. It would not have a retrograde effect on the rest of the country compared with the effect on the north-east of having a distorted representation under the Government's proposals.

There are other ways of addressing the problem. We could change the voting system across the whole country to extend to other regions the advantages of the single transferable vote system in Northern Ireland. The Government do not accept that proposition.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): Thank goodness.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman says "Thank goodness", but if he talked to people in Northern Ireland he would find that they recommended their system because they find it to be appropriate to their needs. There is a strong argument for extending that system to other parts of the country.

That would be one way of dealing with the anomaly. The other way would be to have flexibility in the boundaries of the English regions so that they could accommodate any changes by extending their areas. Again, the Government are not prepared to accept that. They want the boundaries of the English regions to be set in stone along the lines of the administrative boundaries that were set some time ago by a previous Government. I am not sure that they are right, but that is their view.

Having cut off those alternative ways of dealing with the problem, the only way that is left is through the proposal that I make in amendment No. 1. It would not be a perfect solution. As the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) says, it can operate only with a small detrimental effect on the rest of the country in terms of its representation. I accept that, and I hope that he recognises that it is not the system that I would choose. Nevertheless, it would be one way of addressing an problem that further suggests that the closed list system is not the best way of administering a European parliamentary election.

Angus Robertson (Moray): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate, specifically on amendments Nos. 2 to 7, which are tabled in my name and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Adam Price).

I sincerely hope that the House will have the opportunity to express its views, especially on amendment No. 3, which deals with an issue of great importance to people in Scotland and Wales—namely, that of fair representation in the European Union. Given earlier contributions, to which hon. Members will have listened with close interest, I appreciate that there are issues of concern for people elsewhere, including in certain regions of England. My point has particular relevance to the representation of Scotland and Wales, in that they are nations, not regions. European law recognises representation for member states, but not for nation states that do not have the status of member states. We should remember why it is important that parts of the European Union have a fair and adequate level of representation in the European Parliament. It is fashionable to say that the European Parliament has no powers, so what is the point? However, when one looks

[Angus Robertson]

at the growing role of the European Parliament, irrespective of whether one is a fan, it is clearly important to retain a fair and equitable level of representation – not merely because of the electoral system, but because it is important that a minimum amount of representation be guaranteed for Northern Ireland, which is recognised in the Bill. However, it is not recognised with regard to Scotland or for Wales.

It is clearly important to have a fair and equitable level of representation in the European Parliament, especially when one understands the importance of co-decision—that is, the role that the European Parliament plays in the legislative process, among other things, with regard to the free movement of workers, the establishment of the internal market, research, technological development, education, the environment, consumer protection and the like. Fair and equitable representation in the European Parliament is also important because of the role that it plays in budgets. The Parliament and the Council are the two arms of the budgetary authority, so they share the power of the purse just as they share legislative power. That is why it is important to have fair and equitable representation for Scotland, Wales and everywhere in the European Union.

John Robertson: May I ask the hon. Gentleman about the consistency of his party in trying to increase or maintain its number of MEPs, given that he rightly supports a reduction in the number of MPs in this House?

Angus Robertson: I am delighted to confirm that the policy of the Scottish National party is to repatriate all powers that normal countries have to Scotland and to have no Scottish representation in this House whatsoever, in the same way as there is no representation from the Irish Republic in this House.

John Robertson: As the hon. Gentleman is clearly talking about an independent Scotland, perhaps he could tell me how many seats he thinks that he would have for MEPs in the European Union.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That goes outside the terms of the amendment.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for that clarification, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the level of representation in the European Parliament is germane to the amendment. I will hold to your ruling on that.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): As regards the other European institutions, Wales and Scotland do not have their own independent representation in terms of voting rights at the Council of Ministers and the European Council, nor do they have permanent representation as part of the UK, which is why representation in the European Parliament is so vital to our two countries.

Angus Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Scotland does not have a permanent representative in the Council of Ministers, does not nominate a Commissioner and does not take part directly in any of the key decision-making bodies of the European Union. That is why we need to ensure that we have fair and equitable representation. In response to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson), who asked how many MEPs countries with populations of 5 million get, the list is in the annexe to the treaty of Nice. Those countries, which include Denmark, Slovakia and Finland, will be guaranteed 13 MEPs. Scotland currently has eight, and under the Bill will have its representation reduced to six.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): To return to the consistency of the hon. Gentleman's argument, he is arguing that Scotland should be given representation because it has no direct representation in the Council of Ministers. Is it consistent for him to want the number of Members of this House to be reduced under the changes introduced in the Scotland Act 1998, given that we have a Secretary of State for Scotland doing the job for us in the Cabinet here?

Angus Robertson: I notice that you are shaking your head, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I should be delighted to debate on another occasion the role of the Secretary of State for Scotland, her French lessons and whatever else the hon. Gentleman may wish me to discuss, but I want to get back to the matter at hand—the amendment. [*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not want to hear a secondary, sedentary debate going on. We will please deal with this amendment, and this amendment only.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I should like to conclude by discussing the powers of the European Parliament and why it is important, because of co-decision and its role in budget-making powers, that we have a fair and equitable level of representation. The supervisory powers of the European Parliament and the proposals supported by the UK Government on reforming the European Union show how important it is that one has the maximum amount of representation in the European Parliament. The Bill undermines that right for Scotland and Wales.

7.45 pm

Under plans that the French and German Governments propose and that the United Kingdom Government apparently support, the President of the Commission will be elected by Members of the European Parliament. As somebody who represents a fishing constituency, I stress that it will be inexplicable if Scottish Members of Parliament, from whatever party, vote to decrease Scotland's representation by 25 per cent. That is the effect of the Bill.

Mr. Peter Duncan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Perhaps hon. Members will vote for a fair and equitable reduction in representation throughout the United Kingdom because they accept the legitimacy of being represented as part of the UK. All regions and nations in the UK must accept the pain that will be inflicted to make way for the accession states.

Angus Robertson: I am delighted to hear the attempt at justification by the hon. Member for Galloway and

Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan). As a Unionist, why does he accept the disproportionate reduction of representation in Scotland and Wales? I shall explain the disproportionate nature of the reduction and perhaps he will have the opportunity later to explain the reasons for his support for that.

The problem is compounded because current representation for Scotland is second class in terms of numbers. Scotland has half the representation of other countries of 5 million people. Denmark, which also has a population of 5 million, has 16 members of the European Parliament whereas Scotland has only eight. In political terms, a Scottish voter is worth only half a Dane. That also applies to Wales, which currently has five Members of the European Parliament, whereas the Republic of Ireland, with a population below 4 million, has 15. In political terms, a Scot is worth only half someone from Denmark, and somebody from Wales has only a third of the political clout of a voter in the Republic of Ireland. That is not remotely justifiable.

Adam Price: Does my hon. Friend agree that the other stateless nations of the European Union are currently in a stronger position than Wales and Scotland? The number of Members of the European Parliament in Spain will be reduced, but the autonomous regions have the additional safeguard of co-decision on a united Spanish position at the Council of Ministers. Scotland and Wales do not have that.

Angus Robertson: I draw special attention to the regions in Germany and Austria. They play a strong role in the decision making of their federal governments. That does not happen in the UK. Such decision making is guarded by secrecy and confidentiality under the concordats between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. Different Governments and different parties in the House argue that the European Union should be more transparent, democratic, accountable and should offer greater subsidiarity—the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru support that—but they are happy to maintain secrecy and a lack of transparency for representation within the UK for the European Union.

Mr. George Osborne: The hon. Gentleman claims that under the Bill, a Scottish voter will be worth half a Danish voter. If we accepted the amendment, how would a Scottish voter stand in relation to an English voter?

Angus Robertson: Representation within England is for the people of England to decide. I represent a Scottish constituency and my mandate is therefore to ensure fair and equitable representation for Scotland. The hon. Gentleman makes a strong case for the best possible representation for England and I wholeheartedly support that. However, I will not accede to a measure that will undermine Scotland's already second-rate status in the European Union and condemn it to third-rate representation.

The Bill and the House of Commons explanatory note show how much representation Scotland and Wales will have in future. Page 14 of the research paper explains the position under the 72-seat scenario. That will be the UK's total number of seats after enlargement, which the SNP and Plaid Cymru support. We welcome other small and medium-sized independent countries in the European continent taking their rightful place in the European Union, with all the attendant rights and obligations. However, the research paper explains that Scotland's representation will be reduced from eight to six, and Wales's representation will decrease from five to four. One does not need an "O" grade in arithmetic to calculate that Scotland's reduction from eight to six Members of the European Parliament is a decrease of 25 per cent. The amendment would prevent that.

Wales will experience a 20 per cent. drop in representation in the European Union. I challenge hon. Members in other parties to name one other part of the European Union whose representation will decrease by more. They cannot. Scotland is the nation that will experience the biggest single drop in representation under the changes.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): The hon. Gentleman makes clear Scotland's position if it were separate, not as if it is part of the UK. The UK is represented in the European Parliament, and the Bill provides for equal numbers for the seats in the UK. It would apply to Scotland in the same way as the SNP's agreement on the boundary changes in Scotland would apply to a UK Parliament.

Angus Robertson: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not had time to examine the detailed figures that explain the changes. The reduction from eight to six seats is a reduction of 25 per cent. in representation for Scotland. Spain is next on the list, with a 22 per cent. reduction; Ireland follows with 20 per cent., and Wales also has a 20 per cent. reduction. We have to compare and contrast. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that if Scotland were independent it would have more representatives. Independence in Europe would be the best answer.

Let us consider Luxembourg, which has only 448,000 inhabitants—the same population as Edinburgh, Scotland's capital. Luxembourg is set to have six Members of the European Parliament. Changes in the EU that involve member states also involve guarantees. Degressive proportionality means the smaller the member state, the greater the over-representation. The smallest are therefore looked after best. Scotland is by no means one of the smallest member states. However, a country with a population that is smaller than that of Edinburgh will have the same representation as Scotland.

I therefore stress to the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) that I agree that independence in Europe would give Scotland the best deal. I am glad that a Labour Member of Parliament has pointed that out this evening. However, maintaining the second-class representation is much better than the third-class representation for which the Bill provides.

Mr. Tynan: The hon. Gentleman might have misunderstood the question that I posed earlier. I did not ask whether he believed that an independent Scotland should have more MEPs. Rather, I asked whether he accepted that we are speaking tonight on a United Kingdom basis. On the basis of UK-wide representation in the European Parliament, these

[Mr. Tynan]

measures are being proposed according to equality throughout the UK, and not on the basis of Scotland as an independent state. That does not exist at present and I do not think that it ever will.

Angus Robertson: I do not want to labour this point. I think that everyone in the Chamber understands that, were Scotland an independent member of the European Union, it would have far more MEPs. I would far rather have that. That issue is not on the table this evening—I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. What we have instead is this amendment, which will guarantee that Scotland and Wales do not lose out more. Those Members who vote against it would therefore be voting in favour of Scotland having a disproportionate reduction in its level of representation. It would not only be disproportionate; it would be the biggest decrease in representation in the European Parliament anywhere in Europe.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Surely those in the House who advocate that the present UK constitution protects the role of small nations such as Wales and Scotland must face the fact that the Secretaries of State for Wales and Scotland have failed to protect the position of those countries within the United Kingdom—that is different from the situation in Northern Ireland—and that the situation in Europe as a whole protects the role of small nation states. We need to ensure that the legislation going through the House does the job that the Secretaries of State for Wales and Scotland should have done in the first place.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing that out. That argument has been propounded not only by his good self; it was also propounded by the Labour Government during the 1970s and 1980s, when they argued that it was vital that Scotland and Wales had a level of over-representation. That idea is to be found in the memoirs of the former Taoiseach of Ireland, Garrett Fitzgerald, who pointed out that UK Labour Government Ministers were arguing that Scotland and Wales needed better representation at the time. How things change! Twenty years later, Scottish Labour MPs at Westminster are arguing in favour of Scotland having a disproportionate reduction in representation in the European Parliament.

Mr. Peter Duncan: The hon. Gentleman will recall that the justification for that over-representation in Scotland was the separate legislative programme there. That was the reason for it, and now that that arrangement has gone, we are seeking to remove that disproportionality. He must accept that what we are implementing today is a United Kingdom settlement—the number of MEPs for the United Kingdom—for a regime that is being implemented on the same basis throughout the whole of the UK. He may wish to have an argument about independence, but that is not what we are here for.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but it did not provide much more clarity in terms of the position of the Conservative party or the Scottish Conservative party on the matter. I referred earlier to an argument put forward by a UK Government about Scotland's representation in Europe, not about a devolved Scotland within the UK. I could argue all evening about why Scotland should have 13 Members of the European Parliament, which is what it would get if it were independent, but the amendment is not about that. It is about guaranteeing current levels of representation. That is second best, but it is better than third class.

Mr. Peter Duncan: The hon. Gentleman has expressed his interest in Scottish Conservative policy. I do not want to deviate from discussing the amendment before us, but, for the record, our only proposal is that the UK settlement be implemented on the same basis throughout the whole of the UK, and that only in that way can it be implemented on a fair and equitable basis throughout this United Kingdom—and long may it remain so.

Angus Robertson: I would be delighted to forward the figures to the hon. Gentleman, because he clearly has not seen them. The reduction in the level of representation throughout the UK is neither fair nor equitable. Scotland's reduction is 25 per cent. The reduction of representation in England is less than that. Compared with other parts of Europe, Scotland's representation is miles worse. That is unacceptable, and I would have thought that someone representing a part of Scotland that is suffering because Scotland's case is not being argued effectively in the European Union would have been better off making the case to Ministers that they should not undermine Scotland's representation in Europe.

8 pm

Adam Price: Is not the basis for our argument that Wales and Scotland are nations within the UK and, as such, enjoy a unique constitutional status in all the structures of UK governance? If Members of other parties do not join us in the Lobby tonight, will it not be another case of the big UK parties failing to stand up for the small UK countries?

Angus Robertson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Rosindell *rose—*

Angus Robertson: I shall give way one last time before I finish, and it will be to the hon. Member for Romford (Mr. Rosindell), but I would like to get back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Adam Price) has just made with such great force. Curiously, his argument is supported by the Minister, who said in the last debate on the Bill on the Floor of the House that the reason the Bill had been drafted in this way was that

> "there are different legislative arrangements in Northern Ireland and Scotland for elections and judicial matters."

The Government recognise the need for a differentiated approach for the different nations within the United Kingdom. That is why Northern Ireland's position has been guaranteed to remain at three seats, yet that right to fair and equitable representation has not been extended to Scotland and Wales.

I shall be interested to see how the Liberal Democrats will vote on this matter. The Member who leads for them on this, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, has made some very sensible suggestions today. In the previous debate, he said that the EU

> "has listened to the pleadings of the small countries, which believe that there is an irredeemable minimum number of representatives that they should have so that they are properly represented. That touches on what the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) said when he compared Scotland with other small nations that are member states. We need to recognise the imbalance." —[*Official Report*, 10 December 2002; Vol. 396, c. 180, 197.]

I shall be interested to see how Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrat Members of the Westminster Parliament vote tonight. They have the chance to join SNP and Plaid Cymru colleagues to guarantee at least the current level of representation. We have said that that level is inadequate, but at least it is better than the third-class representation to which the Bill will demote Scotland. Unfortunately, there are no Scottish Liberal Democrats here this evening, but I note that the leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats is present. I do not know whether he is in favour of Wales's representation in the European Parliament being reduced by 20 per cent., but we shall find out in the Lobby later on, when I hope that the amendment will be voted on so that MPs from all parties will be able to make their views known.

Mr. Rosindell: Scotland is, of course, a great nation, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not a nation state? If the logic of his argument were to be applied across the whole of Europe, how large would the European Parliament become? Bavaria, Catalonia and a whole range of regions and countries within nations would, of course, expect greater representation. Where would it end?

Angus Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty campaigner for the rights of self-determination for the people of Gibraltar. I would be the last person to tell anyone anywhere in Europe where they should set the boundaries for their self-determination. That is up to people elsewhere to decide. It is up to the people of Gibraltar to decide how they should be represented, and it is up to people throughout the rest of Europe to decide how they would like to be represented. I would like to ensure that Scotland's representation is not third class, and that it is not demoted by 25 per cent. I look forward to hon. Members being given the chance to vote on this important issue. I mentioned the presence of the Welsh Liberal Democrat Member, so I shall give way to him.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I am honoured to have been mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, who has made the cogent case that I would expect from a member of a party that clearly wishes to separate itself from the rest of the United Kingdom. An earlier intervention implied that members of Plaid Cymru have the same wish. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept, however, that there are different views? Is there not a case for suggesting that those who do not want separation may have a collective responsibility to consider the proportionality that we are discussing and, perhaps, the necessary cost of achieving it?

Angus Robertson: I must confess that I did not understand that. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he wants Wales's representation to be reduced by 20 per cent., or that he is against the idea?

Lembit Öpik: The hon. Gentleman must try to see outside the box. His is not the only point of view in the Chamber.

Some of us are passionate supporters of the interests of Wales in the European environment—but in the context of not separating ourselves from the rest of the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to take the position that he takes, but does he not accept that taking a different position does not necessarily involve betraying the nation of Wales?

Angus Robertson: Much as I would like the amendment to normalise the representation of Scotland and Wales in Europe as normal member states, the amendment will not achieve that. What it will do is guarantee the current level of representation. This is a very easy question: do Members from Scotland and Wales support the current level of representation, or do they not?

Curiously, one argument has not been presented on either side of the House—the argument that it might be in the interests of the Scottish National party or Plaid Cymru for the levels to remain as they are for narrow party-political purposes. *[Interruption.]* I see a lot of head-shaking, but I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hamilton, South for supporting my proposition from a sedentary position. If the level of Scottish representation in the European Parliament is reduced from eight to six, the first MEP to go off the list will be from the Labour party and the second will be a Liberal Democrat. Should that reduction continue, the next will be a Conservative.

John Robertson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Robertson: No. I want to finish my speech.

What the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru propose will not guarantee Scotland and Wales the normal, fair status of member states. It is clear that we cannot resolve the issue this evening. That means, indisputably, that Scotland and Wales will be in an inferior position in terms of MEP numbers. What the House must decide this evening is whether to accept the current level of representation, which our amendment would guarantee, or whether to vote for a 25 per cent. reduction in Scottish representation. I now give the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson) the opportunity to intervene, and tell the House that Scotland will not experience a 25 per cent. reduction in its representation.

John Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is viewing the issue solely from his nationalist standpoint, rather than from a UK-wide standpoint. He has used his platform

[John Robertson]

entirely to promote nationalist politics. This has nothing to do with representation in Europe; it is just party politics.

Angus Robertson: Having given way so many times to so many Members on both sides of the House, I thought I was being fair.

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Robertson: I will deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland first, but then I will give way to—I think—the only Member to whom I have not given way already.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland had the opportunity to deny that Scotland's representation would fall by 25 per cent. Clause 2(4)(b) makes that clear, stating that the Electoral Commission must ensure that

"the ratio of electors to MEPs is as nearly as possible the same as in each electoral region".

That means a uniform reduction in membership from every UK region—from eight to six, according to the House of Commons Library. I do not know about the hon. Gentleman's mathematical abilities, but I can tell him that a reduction from eight to six is a reduction of 25 per cent. When he had the opportunity to deny that, he failed to do so. The fact is that if Members from Scotland, Wales and hopefully elsewhere do not back the amendment, Scotland's representation will fall by 25 per cent. and that of Wales by 20 per cent.

Mr. Challen: Does the hon. Gentleman apply his argument about proportionality to all areas? It seems to me that, according to his logic, the Barnett formula would be eradicated. It is not a question of third-class representation; it is a question of the quality of the representation. In the past Scotland's representation in the UK has been of great quality—delivering, for instance, the Barnett formula.

Angus Robertson: I do not think that the Chair would look too kindly on us if we moved the debate to the subject of the Barnett formula, although I would be delighted to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman some other time.

The hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to deal with a point that was not denied by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland—that Scotland's representation is set to decline by 25 per cent., and that of Wales by 20 per cent. That is not fair or equitable. I urge Members on both sides of the House to vote for fair and equitable representation for Scotland and Wales, and I appeal to Members throughout England to make the strongest case that they can for the areas they represent. That is up to them, however. Members of the SNP and Plaid Cymru have a mandate to represent the best interests of the people of Scotland and Wales, and we will take every opportunity to do so rather than accepting a further reduction of our representation in the European Union.

Yvette Cooper: I cannot quite believe that that speech has finished.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) raised some points that he had raised in Committee. He wanted to raise the minimum threshold for representation in any region except Northern Ireland to four. The Bill's current threshold is three in all regions. I understand what the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve and I have some sympathy with what he said, but I disagree with him ultimately because I think it important for all regions to be treated in the same way.

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): Does the Minister accept that Scotland and Wales are nations, not regions?

Yvette Cooper: I know that the hon. Lady and her party are keen to argue that Scotland and Wales should be treated differently, and should become independent nation states. I disagree. I think it important to treat every region in the UK in the same way.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Will the Minister give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will, on condition that the hon. Gentleman makes a different point.

Mr. Weir: Will the Minister answer the point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson)? Does she accept that Scotland's representation will be cut by 25 per cent. and Wales's by 20 per cent?

8.15 pm

Yvette Cooper: The Electoral Commission has not set out its recommendation as to what the numbers should be. Will the hon. Gentleman let me first respond to the points that were made by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome before I move on to the points that were made by the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson)?

It would be inappropriate to single out Northern Ireland in the Bill so that it received less representation than any other region. I have looked further into the points that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome made about the way in which the votes are counted in Northern Ireland. I do not think that that is sufficient to justify setting a threshold in Northern Ireland that is different from that in other regions. Furthermore, as I set out in Committee, to do so would effectively mean over-representation and under-representation in other regions, which could not be justified.

To deal with whether Scotland and Wales should be uniquely qualified to receive more representation than any English region, that is simply unjustifiable. The nationalist parties are arguing that the votes of people who live in Edinburgh should count for more in the UK's representation in the European Parliament than the votes of people who live in Leeds. As a Yorkshire MP, I do not see how that is remotely justifiable in any way.

Angus Robertson: Will not the Minister confirm that there is an inconsistency in her argument, because the Bill enshrines a specific status for Northern Ireland? Why is it that Northern Ireland should have a specific

status, which I think is fair and equitable, and Scotland and Wales, the other nations within the UK, should not have that same right?

Yvette Cooper: The Bill provides for the minimum threshold for representation in any region to be set at the level of three. That is the right thing to do. Hon. Members are arguing that the votes of those who live in Scotland or Wales should count for more than the votes of those who live in England. I understand that they want independent nation states. I disagree with them on that. I strongly believe that that would not be in the interests of the people of Scotland, Wales, the UK or Europe. If hon. Members accept that, for the purposes of this amendment, they vote as part of the United Kingdom, they have no justification for arguing that the votes of people who live in Cardiff should count for more than those of people who live in Birmingham.

Lembit Öpik: As a matter of record, does the Minister accept that there are particular circumstances in Northern Ireland, quite closely related to the troubles and divisions within the community, that mean that, for practical reasons, it probably is necessary to have a minimum of three MEPs there?

Yvette Cooper: I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman has made, but it is probably right to have a minimum of three MEPs in any region; it is difficult to see how a result could be properly proportionate if the number fell below three in any region.

The nationalist parties need to recognise another issue. They are trying to set this up as an opportunist issue—them versus the rest of England, them versus the rest of the United Kingdom. That is not what this is about. They are arguing to maintain the status quo: to maintain the number of MEPs that they have. A number of states are acceding to the European Union. Everyone has argued across Europe that it is important that they should be given representation in the European Parliament; everyone else accepts that. Everyone accepts that, overall, in order to achieve that, and so that we do not have a massive explosion in the size of European Parliament, all member states should see a reduction in their MEPs as a result—except Scottish National Members, who believe that Scotland should have special treatment within the United Kingdom.

Annabelle Ewing: Does the Minister feel that it is fair that Scotland and Wales should suffer a disproportionate reduction? That has been the crux of the debate.

Yvette Cooper: It is important that the distribution should be fair across the United Kingdom. That is why we have asked the Electoral Commission to come up with a recommendation as to what the distribution should be. The Bill provides for the commission to do that. If hon. Members think that the commission needs to take particular things into account, they should talk to the commission. The commission will make the recommendation about what the fair distribution should be, but the nationalist parties are not arguing for a fair distribution. They are not arguing for the people of Scotland and Wales to be treated fairly alongside everyone else. They are arguing for their votes to count for more. That is unacceptable when we consider people living in the UK as a whole. It is right that people should be fairly represented in the European Parliament. This Bill provides for that fair representation. Their amendments do not.

Mr. Heath: With the leave of the House, we have certainly had a lively debate on this group of amendments. I listened with care to what the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) said over rather a long time in support of his amendments. Seductive though his arguments may be to a casual listener, they depend on one factor only: his interpretation of Scotland and Wales as being member states. They are not member states. The United Kingdom is the member state, of which the nations of Scotland and Wales are a part.

Angus Robertson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on a point of clarification?

Mr. Heath: There is no such thing as a point of clarification in this place. We are not in a debating chamber in a school debate. The hon. Gentleman's position is perfectly proper as the position to be adopted by a nationalist party that wants Scotland to be separate from the United Kingdom. I accept that. I am a little surprised that it is entered into by Plaid Cymru Members. I thought that their position had changed over recent years and that they did not wish to secede from the United Kingdom, but that is a proper position. What they cannot possibly argue is that the words in clause 2(4)(b),

"the ratio of electors to MEPs is as nearly as possible the same in each electoral region"

are unfair to any part of the UK in themselves. The hon. Gentleman is proposing to give an unfair advantage to Scotland and Wales at the expense of the regions of England. As a Somerset MP, I am unable to accept that proposition.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Heath: We have had untold interventions and it is time—

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: All right. Once.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great regard, has missed the point with regard to what the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) was saying. The whole point at issue is that if there is to be a reduction, it should be across the board and fair. The proposed reduction is not going to be across the board and fair, according to the research from the House of Commons Library. It has nothing to do with nation states. It is to do with the number of people in a population. We are saying that we should maintain that representation pro tem, whatever the future of those states.

Mr. Heath: I reciprocate in my regard for the hon. Gentleman. We have worked together over a number of

[Mr. Heath]

years, but he is wrong. It is not possible to interpret the phrase that I read out from the Bill as being unfair to any part of the United Kingdom, other than in the sense that, were Wales and Scotland to be separate member states, they would be treated differently. That is a difference that we shall have to accept, but I ask him to look at the internal logic of his argument because it has some deficiencies.

Lembit Öpik: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Heath: Well, all right.

Lembit Öpik: It does not matter that much.

Mr. Heath: Go on.

Lembit Öpik: I apologise for, rather ironically, annoying my hon. Friend. I wonder whether he, having listened to the interventions from the nationalists, agrees with me about the reality of the debate about their amendments. If one believes in independence for Wales and for Scotland, it is appropriate to change to higher representation for those countries. However, if one believes, as I do, that we are part of the United Kingdom, it is necessary to have fair and equitable distribution. Otherwise, the north-east and the south-west of England could equally argue that, for economic and other reasons, they, too, are special cases for greater representation.

Mr. Heath: If my hon. Friend is going to tender his apologies ironically, I shall accept them quizzically. However, I believe that his point is correct.

On amendment No. 1, I think that the hon. Lady almost accepted the logic of my argument. She agreed that it bears examination, so she has some sympathy with it, but she then went so far as to say that we could not go below the threshold of three, because that would destroy proportionality. I agree, but going below the threshold of four also destroys proportionality, given this ridiculous closed-list system and the d'Hondt arithmetic progression, which the previous Home Secretary chose to adopt for European elections. That is why, to pursue the interests of proportionality and proper representation across the United Kingdom, I must press the amendment to a vote.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 43, Noes 424.

Division No. 73] **[8:26 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Carmichael, Alistair
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Holmes, Paul
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
Öpik, Lembit
Pugh, Dr. John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bob Russell and
Tom Brake

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Arbuthnot, rh James
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barnes, Harry
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cabern, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Cameron, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, rh David
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francois, Mark
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gummer, rh John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, rh Oliver
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Linton, Martin
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Maples, John
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maude, rh Francis
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Ottaway, Richard
Owen, Albert
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Redwood, rh John
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Selous, Andrew
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Sheridan, Jim
Simmonds, Mark
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Squire, Rachel
Stanley, rh Sir John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Tredinnick, David
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walter, Robert
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David

Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Dan Norris and
Mr. Jim Murphy

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: No.3, in page 2, line 29, at end insert—

'(aa) Scotland is allocated at least eight MEPs;

(ab) Wales is allocated at least five MEPs; and'.—*[Mr. Angus Robertson.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 10, Noes 453.

Division No. 74] **[8:40 pm**

AYES

Ewing, Annabelle
Hermon, Lady
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Page, Richard
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Weir, Michael
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Simon Thomas and
Pete Wishart

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Arbuthnot, rh James
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barnes, Harry
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, rh David
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francois, Mark
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gummer, rh John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*

Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, rh Oliver
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Linton, Martin
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Maples, John
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Opik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Redwood, rh John
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Selous, Andrew
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Sheridan, Jim
Simmonds, Mark
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Squire, Rachel
Stanley, rh Sir John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dan *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thurso, John
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Tredinnick, David
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Dan Norris and
Mr. Jim Murphy

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 3

SECTION 2: MEANING OF "ELECTOR"

Yvette Cooper: I beg to move amendment No. 8, in page 3, line 10, at end insert—

'( ) persons who are registered but have not attained the age of 18 are to be counted as electors;'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment No. 20.

Yvette Cooper: I shall be brief on these amendments. The Electoral Commission pointed out to us that the Bill was ambiguous about whether people who were registered but had not yet attained the age of 18—16 and

[Yvette Cooper]

17-year-olds who were on the register—should be counted as electors for the purposes of its work on the redistribution of MEPs. The amendments are intended to clarify the position. The attainers, as the electoral administrators call them, should be included on the register with their dates of birth. So that the Electoral Commission does not have to go through the electoral register and exclude or include people according to their dates of birth, the amendment includes all of them for the purposes of the commission's calculation. It will therefore simplify the commission's work. I hope that the House will agree that it is a relatively straightforward amendment that should be accepted.

Lady Hermon: The Minister will be aware that, under the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, new identifiers were introduced last year, so that there is no automatic registration of those aged 16, 17 or 18. They have to complete a registration form. Will the Minister ensure that negotiations take place with her counterparts in the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that that provision is brought to their attention?

Yvette Cooper: I will ensure that there is no discrepancy and that all in Northern Ireland are included in the provision.

Mr. Cash: I have only one point to make. Is the Minister satisfied that the word "registered" means lawfully registered in this context? Does the word "lawfully" need to be included, because it is theoretically possible for a person to be registered but not lawfully so?

Yvette Cooper: The amendment will allow the Electoral Commission to make its calculation. It is unlikely to be able to distinguish between those who are lawfully registered and those who are not. The hon. Gentleman is concerned that a category of people are not lawfully registered and suggesting that they should be excluded. If the Electoral Commission discovers that people are unlawfully registered, it will clearly remove them from the register. It could become a vicious circle, so the amendment will ensure that the commission can make a very simple calculation. The amendment should not be controversial or difficult.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 4

ORDERS IMPLEMENTING CHANGES IN THE NUMBER OF UNITED KINGDOM MEPS

Yvette Cooper: I beg to move amendment No. 9, in page 3, line 31, leave out 'supplementary, incidental'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 10.

Amendment No. 23, in page 3, line 33, leave out 'any Act)' and insert—

'such enactments only as are germane to the European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002 and this Act)'.

Government amendments Nos. 11 to 16.

Amendment No. 37, in clause 17, page 9, line 26, leave out from 'regulations' to end of line 29 and add—

'may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament'.

Government amendments Nos. 17 to 19.

Yvette Cooper: We have only a few minutes available, but this large group of amendments is made up mostly of technical Government amendments.

Amendments Nos. 9 and 18 will remove the power to make "supplementary and incidental" amendments that appears in clause 4(3). We considered the points that were made in Committee about limiting the scope of the powers to those that were precisely needed. All the other Government amendments clarify and refine the powers to make subordinate legislation, so that it is clear what we can and cannot do. In particular, they will enable the electoral process to work satisfactorily in Gibraltar.

Government amendment No. 11 restricts the power in clause 11(6) so that it is clear that it cannot override any provisions on the face of Bill. In Committee, we discussed the scope of that subsection to ensure that it was restricted by what was on the face of the Bill. It is not restricted by what is in other regulations.

Amendment No. 23 is hard to accept because it uses difficult language such as the world "germane". I do not know what the legal interpretation of "germane" would be, so the amendment would create a legal difficulty.

Amendment No. 37 would require all subordinate legislation to be made only by affirmative resolution procedures. We discussed extensively in Committee the fact that some matters are suitable for the negative resolution procedure and that others are suitable for the affirmative resolution procedure. Clearly we will consider the views of the Committee in the Lords, but we have set out our views on the appropriateness of the way in which the resolutions should be treated, and that is based on how electoral law tends to be treated under the negative and affirmative resolution procedures.

The Government amendments are relatively technical. I hope that the House will agree to them.

Amendment agreed to.

It being Nine o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Orders [29 October and 10 December], put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of proceedings to be concluded at that hour.*

Remaining Government amendments agreed to.

Order for Third Reading read.

9 pm

Yvette Cooper: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank those hon. Members who contributed to the debate and those who participated in Committee. We have had an in-depth and generally constructive debate on the issues included in this important Bill, which allows us both to meet our treaty agreements to enable additional states to participate fully in European Union democracy and to give Gibraltar a voice in European elections.

Part 1 enables the UK to move a step closer to fulfilling our obligations under the treaty of Nice as part of the preparations for enlargement of the European

Union. As other states join the EU, they clearly need fair representation in its institutions, and that includes the European Parliament. It is right that they should have fair representation there and the treaty of Nice sets out provisions to enable that to happen. To ensure that the European Parliament does not simply inexorably increase in size, a mechanism was agreed in the treaty of Nice by which the number of MEPs across all European countries can be reduced. Parliament ratified the treaty last year and the Bill implements the obligations that it places on us. The Bill establishes the mechanism by which the number of UK MEPs can be altered to allow space in the European Parliament for the new accession states.

It is right that the redistribution should be based, as far as possible, on equality of representation and a minimum threshold of three MEPs per region. It is right, too, that the Electoral Commission should be the appropriate body to carry out the necessary calculations and make recommendations on redistribution. It is essential that we start work on that as soon as possible so that we can implement the first tranche of changes in time for the 2004 European Parliament elections. The European Commission has considerable work to do before it makes its recommendation on the distribution of MEPs. That will be included in an order that will be placed before the House under the affirmative resolution procedure and pass through the House then.

Part 2 enables the people of Gibraltar to vote in European parliamentary elections as of 2004. That means that their interests will be directly represented in the European Parliament for the first time. We have discussed extensively the need to consult the Government of Gibraltar on the Bill's details. As I set out today and in Committee, we are still in discussion with them and intend to table amendments in another place to give effect to some of the issues that they have raised, although the discussions have been going on for a considerable time. As hon. Members will be aware, officials had a meeting with the Chief Minister of Gibraltar and his colleagues before Christmas to discuss such matters. We have recently received further points from the Government of Gibraltar, which I have shared with hon. Members who served on Committee. We are looking at the matter in more detail with parliamentary counsel and hope to table further amendments.

Secondary legislation is also required to put into practice the more detailed amendments to electoral law. Important issues about the franchise were dealt with in the Bill, and more detailed amendments on donations to political parties and so on will be dealt with in regulations under the Bill. It is important that powers in part 2 are restricted to those that give the people of Gibraltar representation in the European Parliament and ensure that the combined region is established under the recommendation of the Electoral Commission. We should set that in train as rapidly as possible to meet the tight time scale imposed by the 2004 elections.

We have had extensive debates about bits and pieces of issues surrounding the Bill. I hope that its fundamental principles are supported by Members on both sides of the House and members of all political parties, as they deal with enlargement of the European Union, ensuring that new member states get fair representation in the European Parliament, fairness of representation and democracy, and the enfranchisement of the people of Gibraltar by giving them the vote in the European Parliament. I hope that Members on both sides will sign up to those principles, so that we can all support Third Reading.

9.7 pm

Mr. Heath: We have made it clear from the outset that we support the Bill for two reasons. First, we believe passionately in the enlargement of the European Union. Appropriate administrative structures, including the restructuring of the European Parliament in line with the protocols of the treaty of Nice, must be in place if that is to happen. Secondly, we have believed passionately for a long time that Gibraltar should be enfranchised. The Government were extraordinarily remiss in not dealing with the outcome of the Denise Matthews case much earlier in parliamentary proceedings. They dragged their feet far too long about providing representation for the people of Gibraltar in the European Parliament. At last, that is being rectified.

We explored our differences with the Government extensively in Committee—I congratulate all Members who participate in Committee and on Report—and especially their determination to exceed what is required to make the necessary changes to implement the treaty of Nice or the enfranchisement of Gibraltar. Their intention may not have been malign, but it throws up questions about the right of hon. Members to a locus in future proceedings, the extensive powers granted to the Lord Chancellor—an unelected member of the Government—and other matters that were not necessary to achieve the desired outcome.

I have already raised some of those problems, and the Minister has promised to look at them, for which I am grateful. On others, she has suggested that she may be willing to table amendments in another place; again, we look forward to that. It is regrettable that insufficient thought was given earlier to such amendments, and that the Commons—the elected House—therefore lacked an opportunity to debate them properly. However, I look forward to their being introduced in another place.

There is a glaring lacuna in the Bill in the lack of arrangements to consult the people of Gibraltar via the House of Assembly and the political parties there. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) has rightly spoken several times about the neocolonial aspects of the Bill. There is an arrogant disregard for the people of Gibraltar in many ways in the terms of the Bill as drafted. I do not accuse the hon. Lady of that, but that is the only way in which the Bill can be read, and assuredly that is the way in which it will be read in Gibraltar. To assume that the Consolidated Fund of Gibraltar can be drawn upon by edict of the Lord Chancellor setting out an order in Westminster is arrogant and should not be acceptable to this Government or any other.

There are some important issues to be discussed in the other place. I hope that we have pointed the way through the views that we have expressed during the passage of the Bill, and likewise the hon. Member for Stone, with whom I agree more often than is convenient for him or me to admit to our parties. I hope that we have gone some way to illuminating some of the Bill's

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deficiencies while maintaining our assertion that it is right that the changes be put into law. I hope that the Bill will receive fair passage in another place and, equally, that it will be amended to take account of the constitutional issues that we have properly raised.

9.11 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I welcome the Bill, first, because I feel moved by each increment in our legislation to facilitate the enlargement of the European Union. When I made my maiden speech in the House 10 years ago, I spoke about the need for Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and other states of central Europe to be brought into the European family through NATO and EU membership. A number of hon. Members spoke about that, but many thought that it was a long way off, and some distinguished people—even members of the present Government—thought it was too hasty and too ambitious, and might offend the Russian Federation and others. I welcome the fact that, by passing the Bill tonight, we are in part facilitating the wonderful enlargement that will take place in a year and a half.

Secondly, I welcome the fact that the redistribution of seats for the European Parliament bears some relation to parity of treatment throughout the United Kingdom. One of the factors that disfigure our democracy is that the electoral arrangements for Westminster, as distinct from the European parliamentary arrangements that we are putting in place tonight, result in some very large geographical constituencies with very small electorates. A hallmark of a parliamentary democracy is that votes count equally. Many other jurisdictions, both in the European Union and around the world, ensure that elected legislators represent the same number of electors. To some extent, the Bill brings us closer to that. I welcome that, and wish that we could replicate it in elections to this place. At present, our democracy is diminished by the fact that we have some very small electorates and some big ones, and disparity between the nations of the United Kingdom.

Thirdly, the European Parliament is very large and will become larger to take account of the increased membership of the EU. Member states should ensure that MEPs keep to the competency of the EU. Over the years since 1979, when direct elections to the European Parliament began, MEPs on all sides have trespassed on matters that are not within the competency of their Parliament. They have often related to matters that are within the jurisdiction of this place.

When they are discussing issues with their opposite numbers, the Government should try to ensure that there is some discipline with regard to what is their business and what is ours. There should be a clear division.

My hon. Friend the Minister referred to the fact that part 2 provides for the enfranchisement of the people of Gibraltar in European elections. She kept my attention when she said that she hoped that all hon. Members would support it. For 10 years, I have been going on about this matter, so I take some satisfaction tonight from what has been done. I have not concluded many things in my decade here, but this is perhaps the end of a chapter.

Soon after Labour came to office I asked my right hon. Friend the then Home Secretary, now Foreign Secretary, whether the Government would enfranchise the people of Gibraltar for European elections. His answer was that it could not and would not be done. The implication, both by him at that time and subsequently in the Foreign Affairs Committee, when we asked members of the Government when they would do it, was not only that it could not and would not be done, but that I was stupid even to suggest it.

There are lessons to be learned about this place and the role of Government—of people sitting on the Treasury Bench. I asked my right hon. Friend in a similar epoch whether he would introduce legislation to allow people ordained in the Roman Catholic ministry to stand for Parliament. His reply, which appeared in *Hansard*, was "Certainly not". But when the Labour party chose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make various points, but we are now talking about what is in the Bill.

Andrew Mackinlay: If I may have just five seconds to conclude on this point, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is that Ministers do not listen to hon. Members. If they did, they could avoid some of the embarrassment of introducing legislation screaming and kicking.

Lady Hermon: May I say, in fairness to the hon. Gentleman's Government, that one of the best things they did was to bring home the European convention on human rights and make it part and parcel of our domestic law. The people of Gibraltar have been enfranchised in the European Parliament elections by dint of the fact that article 3 of the convention's first protocol guarantees people the choice of legislature—the European Parliament. Therefore, that is a good thing for the hon. Gentleman to commend his Government upon.

Andrew Mackinlay: I should hate anybody who might be hanging on my words to assume that I have anything other than great enthusiasm for sustaining this Labour Government. They have delivered a great deal. The hon. Lady is correct: in particular, they have delivered on this legislation. An elector of Gibraltar took the British Government—I am ashamed to say that it was the Labour Government—screaming and kicking through the courts. All through that period there were people in the Box and the Home Office who were counselling—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not refer to people who are not within the Chamber.

Andrew Mackinlay: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Certainly, the matter was within the competence of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, not of my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor. My right hon. Friend was giving advice and counsel that it could not be done. That was coupled with political considerations advanced by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as arguments for urging that it must not be done.

I deeply regret the fact that the British Government had to introduce the Bill because the courts ordered them to do so, rather than their saying, "It is a matter of rights and of enfranchising people." That is a great tragedy.

I do not know whether the electorate, or the Almighty, will allow me to stay here for another decade, but I am calling now for us to have a Member of Parliament for Gibraltar. I shall be told, "It can't be done. Don't be so silly", but some things are irresistible; some things come about. Eventually, the Electoral Commission and the consultative process will put Gibraltar in one of the English or Welsh regions. Political parties and individual candidates will then rewrite history. They will say that there was never a day when they were not championing the case for the enfranchisement of the people of Gibraltar. Whether they come from the left, the right or the centre, whether they are Labour, Conservative or Liberal and whichever region they represent, I hope that they will be able to specify when they said that they believed that the people of Gibraltar should be enfranchised. I also hope that the people of Gibraltar will ask them where they stand on extending the people's franchise to their Parliament, which is this Parliament. That will be the big test.

I hope that the Minister will reflect during her career, which I hope will be very extensive and reach Cabinet level, that there are occasions when those on the Treasury Bench would be much more prudent to listen to Members of Parliament and concede the justified claims—they are justified by any democratic norms or tests—that those who are disfranchised should be enfranchised. If they did so, this place would be much more relevant and we would have much more concord in Parliament and in our party.

Mr. Rosindell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Of course, some of us would prefer it if he and the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) reached the Cabinet. None the less, does he agree that it is insulting to the people of Gibraltar that the name of the region of which it is to be a part will not include its name? Does he agree that it should be included and that Gibraltar should be recognised in terms not only of votes, but of the name of the constituency in which it will be represented?

Andrew Mackinlay: I will not use the term "insulting", but I despair of the arrogance of the people who draft such legislation. Quite apart from courtesy, logic tells us that the title should include Gibraltar's name. Why are people so stubborn? I hope that the situation will be altered in another place. We can be sure that all the candidates—Labour, Conservative, Liberal and others—will be saying, "I think that it is outrageous; Parliament should have made the change." However, apart from the hon. Members who are now exercised about the matter, not many people are clamouring for such change. Such matters represent the way in which history can be rewritten. That is why I get so frustrated when a Labour Government do not reflect or do what is obvious and ultimately inevitable. They will come to make such a change and they will say that it was their idea all along.

There are many lessons to be learned, but I rejoice in the fact that I have got two wins tonight. The first is the extension of the European Union to include these wonderful countries that were denied freedom and democracy for so long. For some of them, entry into the European Union will be the conclusion of world war two and will represent the crossing of the final frontier. Secondly, we have had to acknowledge our rights and obligations in respect of the people of Gibraltar, but we need to do more.

9.22 pm

Mr. Hoyle: We all welcome the enfranchisement of the people of Gibraltar and the fact that they have been allowed the vote, which they should have had by right. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) said, it is a tragedy that we had to go to the European Court of Human Rights to ensure that they got it. However, that need has now been recognised and we have rectified the situation, so some good is coming out of what is happening. We should be proud of the fact that this House has recognised the rights of the people of Gibraltar.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have rightly said that we should look to the Minister to pass on to her friends and colleagues in the Government the feeling that now we have given the people of Gibraltar the vote for Europe we should give them the vote for Westminster. We must take that on board.

There are a couple of other issues on which I look to my hon. Friend the Minister. First, I hope that she will say to her colleagues in another place that we should reduce the right of the Governor in giving his views, and that that right should be passed on to the Assembly in Gibraltar so that we can hear the views of all its political parties. I am sure that she will pass that on.

Secondly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, the constituency title, whether it is north-west, south-west, Wales or Northern Ireland, should be a proper statement of the geographical area that it includes. *[Interruption.]* Somebody asks me whether I would include Chorley in the north-west. Although I recognise that Chorley should come first, I also recognise that we are in the north-west, so its inclusion makes sense in terms of that geographical area. However, I could not say that Gibraltar was in the north-west, so it is common sense that the title should inform us of the geographical area that will be enfranchised as part of the European constituency in question. Obviously, if it related to the south-west it would read, "south-western Gibraltar". I hope that the Minister will speak to her colleagues in another place and persuade them to ensure that that is encompassed in the title, because that would right some of the wrongs. Let us not lose sight of the importance of direct elections from Gibraltar to this House in Westminster.

9.25 pm

Mr. Cash: I apologise again for the sound of my voice, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I am afraid that there is nothing much I can do about it. I hope that it will recover now that we have reached the end of the Bill's proceedings in this House.

The Bill was thoroughly and extensively considered in Committee and we have had an interesting debate this afternoon. Conservative Members support the main principles that lie behind the Bill, which is why we did

[Mr. Cash]

not vote against it on Second Reading. We particularly support the entitlement of Gibraltarians to vote in European elections: it is all about democracy.

It is not to the Government's credit, however, that they were pushed and shoved by the Denise Matthews case into agreeing that they would have to legislate. In fact, "agreeing" is the wrong word—they were driven into it. That represents one of the less agreeable aspects of the drafting of the Bill and the relative lack of consultation that accompanied it—hence the amendments that we, and the Liberal Democrats, have tabled. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and I found during the Committee's proceedings that we had achieved a certain symmetry, which was not based in any way on advance discussions, but occurred spontaneously on the basis that we share a clear understanding of the thresholds of acceptability that, in many respects, has not been matched by the Government.

The prime question in relation to part 1 concerns the extravagant powers that are thereby taken, which I have covered in detail. They are fundamentally unconstitutional, excessive, unclear and inappropriate. Important as the Bill may be, it does not compare with some of the other European Bills with which I have been associated. That raises an important issue of principle. I still do not understand why the Minister could not accept my earlier amendment. She did not explain that. No doubt, if it is thought fit, the matter can be pursued in another place.

The question of Gibraltar is immensely important. I pay tribute to the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Mr. Caruana, as would all hon. Members, with the possible exception of some Ministers. He has shown tenacity and punched above his weight—not in a literal sense. It is difficult to conduct such a constitutional battle with Spain breathing down one's neck and the prospect—I do not want to sound cynical—that given the Prime Minister's extremely close relationship with Mr. Aznar, especially in relation to Iraq, he may find it at least tempting to consider what will happen further down the line when the European constitution goes through. I am deeply worried that the redrawing of boundaries and the boundless territorial ambitions of the European Union could unravel some parts of the Bill.

I have always supported enlargement, but there is a world of difference between that and plunging people into an acquis communautaire, which has inherent grave economic and democratic problems. There is a vast democratic deficit in the European Union, and the Bill's construction demonstrates that. Some accession states may regret the fact that they joined under terms that they were blackmailed into accepting. The élite do not believe that that is true, but I think that the people do. If they do not now, they will discover it in due course.

Notwithstanding all that, we have an obligation to facilitate the rule of law. We therefore have no option. However, I say in parenthesis that I hope that the whole European Union will be renegotiated. I oppose the constitution as a matter of principle, unlike the Government, who support it.

The Government have adopted a colonialist, imperialistic attitude to the Bill, especially to part 2, which applies to Gibraltar. For an unelected Lord Chancellor to take such a line on part 1 smacks of the divine right of kings.

We have an extraordinary conjunction of circumstances. We are keen for the people of Gibraltar to be enfranchised and we will therefore not oppose Third Reading. We have made some severe criticisms, but I hope that we have also been constructive. I thank all members of the Committee and those who participated in today's debate.

9.32 pm

Yvette Cooper: With the leave of the House, I shall reply to the debate. I hope that the tone of Third Reading reflects the broad support for the fundamental principles of the Bill. I believe that all hon. Members should support the accession of states to the European Union, their fair representation in the European Parliament and enfranchising the people of Gibraltar.

My hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) and for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) raised a series of important issues about the constitutional status of Gibraltar. I pay tribute to their work and their arguments in support of enfranchising the people of Gibraltar in the European parliamentary elections. I appreciate that both my hon. Friends feel passionately about that; they have argued for it for many years. I am glad of their support in introducing the Bill.

My hon. Friends raised several wider issues about Gibraltar's constitutional status that are not within the Bill's scope and purpose. They acknowledged that and I shall therefore resist the temptation to get involved in the broader constitutional debate about Gibraltar's status. They appreciate that it is a complex matter that has much history attached to it.

The hon. Members for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for Stone (Mr. Cash) expressed anxieties about the nature of some of the powers in the Bill. They overstated the case for the sake of making political points. They have ignored many of the safeguards that we have set out in some detail, not only in today's debate but in Committee. We have always made it clear that various things needed to be done through secondary legislation, partly because there are details of electoral law—much of it already contained in secondary legislation—that need to be amended.

Mr. Hoyle: Allowing for what has been said so far, what would happen under the Bill if another overseas territory were to suggest that it, too, wished to be enfranchised with the European vote? How would its case be considered? What would happen to its application?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important point, but every case is clearly different, and has different issues attached to it. As I understand it, the judgment in the case of Matthews *v.* the United Kingdom found that the European Parliament had the characteristics of a legislature for the purposes of

Gibraltar. For that reason, the European convention on human rights applied, with regard to the right to free and fair elections. It is important, however, to define what the relevant legislature is, for the purposes of each individual territory.

Andrew Mackinlay: I would like to address the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle). Gibraltar had a unique case because it is the only British overseas territory within the European Union. The others are not—perhaps they should be, but they are not—so this case was unique.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to say that the important issue with regard to the Matthews judgment was the relationship between Gibraltar and the European Union and, in particular, between Gibraltar and the European Parliament. That is why it is right that it should be involved in elections to that Parliament. Other overseas territories would obviously have to be regarded in a different way according to their own constitutional positions.

This is a sensible and proportionate Bill that seeks to ensure the enfranchisement of the accession states and of Gibraltar. We need to do this in time for the 2004 elections. There is still a considerable amount of work to do if we are to put all the details in place in time for those elections, but I hope that we in the House of Commons will wish the Bill well and support its Third Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6)(Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Audit and Accountability (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 19th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Kemp.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6)(Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 7th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Kemp.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6)(Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 7th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Kemp.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9)(European Standing Committees),

MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF FINANCIAL PENALTIES

That this House takes note of European Union Documents Nos. 11079/02 and 14664/02 draft Framework Decision on mutual recognition of financial penalties; and supports the Government's efforts to secure agreement to this Framework Decision.—*[Mr. Kemp.]*

Question agreed to.

NHS Hospitals (Worcestershire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kemp.]*

9.39 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise worries about NHS hospital services in Worcestershire. My one great regret is that, as an Independent Member, I must do so from the Opposition Benches. Unlike you, Mr. Speaker, I cannot sit in the middle of the Chamber and address it as one who can agree with the Government when he thinks they are right and with the Opposition when he thinks that they are right.

I have made it clear that I support the Government's provision of extra money for the NHS, and that I support some of their reforms—certainly those relating to devolution. I have grave fears, however. For instance, strategic health authorities only like to pass good news to the Department of Health. I want to tell the Minister—whom I am very glad to see—how things look from the patient's point of view, not just in Wyre Forest but in other parts of Worcestershire.

Having read one of the local papers tonight, I must make it clear that I, along with others who agree with me, am not attacking staff. They are working as hard as they can to make an appallingly difficult situation work. Those who introduce changes in the NHS are working with doctors and nurses whose first commitment is to the patient. Whatever tools they are given, they will try to make those tools effective.

I have not raised this subject because of my own health service agenda, or a particular political party's health service agenda. I have done so purely and simply because a recently published annual audit letter issued a staggering condemnation of hospital management—not hospital staff. The vice-chairman of the Redditch and Bromsgrove community health council—I am delighted to see that the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) is present—said of that letter:

"The report is the most appalling I've ever read—it's shocking. It's not just the finance, they have to get the running of the hospital right."

That condemnation does not come from Wyre Forest.

The criticism is fairly wide-ranging. First there is the financial aspect. The acute hospital trust managed to break even last year with the use of some capital and forecast that it could do the same this year, but it is heading for a £5 million overspend, a large amount of which is due to agency nurses. This year's forecast overspend is £7.2 million.

The management knew about that. A written answer from the Minister dated 30 October stated that the cost of agency nurses to the health authority was £3.3 million in 2000–01, £4.3 million in 2001–02 and £4.3 million up to September last year. The management well recognised the scale of the problem with agency nurses, but they have been completely unable to control it.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Is not one of the most shocking indictments in the audit letter the £1.87 million in the account which no one had anticipated, including those who signed up for contracts?

Dr. Taylor: I am coming to that.

Let me continue with the criticisms. The next concerns medical manpower management. To my horror, I read that even in 2003 no consultants have job plans to which they and the management have signed up. Before I retired, which is several years ago now, I had a job plan. Those were suggested by the Government years and years ago.

Another staggering thing is that Worcestershire has the highest medical staffing to work load levels of all acute trusts in England. Why? It is not because the county's surgeons are lazy and not working. I have the figures to prove the work load.

The number of surgical finished consultant episodes in 1999–2000 was 44,896. In 2001–02, it was 30,783, a reduction of one third. Why was that? It was because there was a reduction in staffed beds and in theatre availability, and that comes back to the loss of services and staff following the downgrading of Kidderminster.

There are other criticisms: the purchasing consortium is not working; management of waiting lists leaves a lot to be desired; and the supplies function and the medicines management function have been criticised. One could go on, but the next crucial criticism is the need to improve communication to staff.

For a long time, we have heard stories not that we are alarming and undermining staff but that staff are terrified of speaking out because of intimidation and threats from management. At last we have proof of that. I quote from one of the local papers on 28 December last year:

"A senior nurse at Worcestershire Royal Hospital claims lives are being put at risk because of staff shortages.

The nurse said mistakes were regularly being made because they were working in what she described as 'intolerable conditions'.

The experienced member of staff did not want to be named because, she said, nurses have been threatened with dismissal if they approached the Press.

But she said morale among nurses was currently at an all-time low and many were considering quitting the profession."

The next criticism relates to the private finance initiative that the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) mentioned. I was staggered to read that the payment for the new PFI in Worcester is increasing annually by £1.87 million. That has to run for another 29 years. At last, we have an admission that there was supposed to be a £3 million saving annually from bed cuts. We claimed that the PFI meant bed cuts for ages. It was always denied but we have it in black and white from the district auditor.

There is another criticism. Staff have been telling us that the design is awful, the corridors are too narrow, and the ability to observe patients in the wards is not adequate. The district auditor says that the layout of the new hospital requires additional staffing.

The annual audit letter condemns the management. It vindicates in passing all the work that Professor Allyson Pollock and her colleagues at University College, London have done on the PFI, particularly the report on the Worcestershire PFI entitled, "Deficits Before Patients", which was so denigrated and castigated by the health authority and the NHS executive in Birmingham at the time.

Other sources of criticism other than the annual audit letter are general practitioners. From all parts of the county, GPs are complaining. Red alerts are frequent.

It is amazing that, to make it sound better, the hospital trust has suddenly redesignated red alerts as yellow two alerts, which strikes me as an interesting sort of wheeze. I have a quote from an Evesham GP:

"They cut off the flesh, then the bone, and they're now down to the marrow."

The sad thing about all this is that it was foreseen. In November 1997, a great number of GPs and consultants—including not only those from Wyre Forest—described the hospital review as follows:

"Although it is a clinical review, it is driven by costs. But"—

on meeting the health authority—

"they had no costs to give us. There was a strong feeling of no confidence because the plans are unworkable.

The lack of beds will mean overspill going to hospitals in Birmingham or elsewhere".

That is the end of my criticisms. I want now to be positive, and to try to suggest what can be done, because I am here not for any personal political gain, but to try to help the people of the whole of Worcestershire. First, I have a plea. Please do not cut beds: either the few remaining beds at Kidderminster, or those in the community hospitals. They perform a vital service, relieving the pressure on acute beds and allowing the acute service to discharge patients that little bit quicker.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): I am delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman say that. There is considerable concern in Evesham, expressed this week in the *Evesham Journal*, about the consequence of the primary care trust deficit for beds in the community hospitals in Evesham, and, indeed, in Pershore. I hope that he will emphasise the point that community hospitals have a huge contribution to make in relieving the very real problems that exist at Worcestershire royal infirmary.

Dr. Taylor: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which underlines my comments about the importance of intermediate care beds.

In addition to my plea for the Government not to cut beds, I want to emphasise the fact that we must have new management. Doctors and nurses are continually praised in the letters that I get. The annual audit letter points out that the current management has failed, and that it has had two years to work at it since the trusts merged. There have been two votes of no confidence in the management by large majorities of consultants—a point that allows me to digress for a few moments on the relationships between doctors and managers throughout the health service. Ministers in the Department of Health have played down this point, which I have mentioned before. However, a *British Medical Journal* leader of 18 January described the tension between doctors and managers in these terms:

"The tension may reflect real and important differences in the way that doctors and managers see their roles and responsibilities, which means that important issues, such as accountability, the use of guidelines, targets, and finance are approached in quite different ways."

Because the problem is so real, at the end of March the *British Medical Journal* and the *Health Service Journal* will publish issues completely devoted to it.

I have another suggestion. We welcome the diagnostic and treatment centre that will be provided at Kidderminster, because that, too, will ease the load on the acute hospital. We also welcome the proposal for an orthopaedic centre, which will help even more by taking patients not only from Worcestershire, but from other parts of the west midlands. Whatever else is developed at Kidderminster will ease the situation in the whole county, and nurses will come to staff it. We have already seen, through the very welcome renal unit that was developed at Kidderminster—thanks greatly to the Government and to the Department of Health—that nurses have flocked back to staff that unit. So if we develop the diagnostic and treatment centre and the orthopaedic centre, nurses will come back, which will ease the agency nurse problem for the whole county, and ease the load on the acute hospitals.

The final point is that the Department of Health is about to produce a document on configuring hospital services. I will hypothesise, and express hope, about what it may include. I believe that it will recognise that big is not always necessarily the best, and that local services are absolutely vital. Local emergency centres are being tried in places such as Penzance and Bishop Auckland to take the strain off the larger hospitals, while keeping services local. Something like that is needed in Wyre Forest and Worcestershire to take the pressure off other services in the county.

The reasons for that are incontrovertible, and I shall give some specific examples. Not so long ago, an ambulance went to the house of a man with diabetes whose wife could not rouse him because his sugar level had gone too low. The ambulance men could not rouse him so, purely and simply for an injection of glucose into a vein, they had to take him 20 miles. That is ridiculous.

Minor fractures that cannot be coped with in the minor injuries unit clutter up the accident and emergency department at Worcester. I had a letter this morning concerning an 87-year-old lady who had collapsed in church. Her 88-year-old friend went with her on the ambulance to Worcester, where she was sorted out. There were no beds and that lady could not be admitted, so they were told to go home. There were no arrangements made for them and they had to make their own way home.

I am appealing for a change in management, no bed closures, an acceleration of the diagnostic and treatment centre and a look at the advantages of starting a local emergency centre for Wyre Forest to benefit the whole county.

9.57 pm

Mr. Michael Foster (Worcester): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this welcome—and perhaps unexpected—opportunity to speak about NHS hospitals in Worcestershire. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) on bringing to the House the subject of the importance of NHS care in our county.

On Friday evening, I took it upon myself to do a spot check on the Worcestershire Royal hospital. I went to the reception in the main foyer and asked to see the duty manager, at which point I was taken around the wards that I wanted to see. I saw for myself, at first hand, some of the issues that had been making the headlines in the local papers. I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that there was one manager with me and that I was left to talk to staff and patients perfectly freely. They gave me their

[Mr. Michael Foster]

personal views of the position of the hospital, which seem to have made the headlines in a local paper this evening.

The hon. Gentleman said that he aimed no criticism at nurses and doctors who are working so hard in the hospital; neither do I, and I did not infer that the hon. Gentleman did. In my press release, I said:

"I know these comments are not directed at nursing staff, but they feel it."

That is the point that I should like to reinforce to the hon. Gentleman. When criticisms are made of the hospital, they affect nursing staff on the front line. Those are the words of the nurses to whom I spoke on Friday; they are not my words. When we debate the future of health care in our county, we should be careful not to give the impression that our health service is not doing the best it can for patients. If we are going to have a go at management—as seems to be the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's case—we must do so on specific grounds and not in a general way that can be interpreted by friends, neighbours and those who work outside the hospital as something of which the nurses and doctors should be ashamed.

When I was talking to patients, it was clear that they had the utmost regard for the nurses and doctors at the hospital and for the work that they are doing—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

Mr. Foster: Patients go out of their way to praise the cleanliness of the new hospital. I mention that because my mother was a nurse and she has a thing about the cleanliness of hospitals "in her day", as she would describe it. I spoke to a patient whose wife was also a former nurse and she had the same bee in her bonnet: cleanliness really counted for something. That patient had to occupy a bed at the Royal Worcestershire although he was actually waiting for a bed at the Queen Elizabeth hospital, Birmingham, so that he could receive the next stage of his treatment. That should not be taken as criticism of Worcestershire's ability to cope, but of the wider health economy of the region.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest made some valid points about management and, on Friday, I shall take up with the chairman, Mr. O'Riordan, the issues about gagging staff. That is a serious point and it should be addressed by the hospital. However, when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State opened the new private finance initiative hospital, he held a meeting with staff behind closed doors and I suspect that they said exactly what they felt. I am sure that none of them would have been threatened by the management for speaking to the Secretary of State about their concerns.

In relation to the district auditor's letter and the financial position of the acute trust, the projected overspend of about £6 million is worrying. However, the problem will not be relieved by a 20 per cent. cut in health spending, nor by refusing to back increases in taxation to pay for resources for the health service. I take the hon. Gentleman's point, however: agency costs were much higher than budgeted. I think he said that they were £7.5 million higher than expected, so they could be responsible for the £6 million deficit.

However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would like to congratulate the trust on taking seriously the points raised about agency costs. It has negotiated a 10 per cent. reduction in agency fees with the British Nursing Association, which I am sure that he welcomes. My concern is that the extra resources going to the health service are giving a green light to ripping off the NHS, which should be deplored by everybody.

The hon. Gentleman should also congratulate the trust on using NHS Professionals—an initiative that has freed up more people to undertake agency work. A local NHS Professionals manager has been appointed to oversee and promote the use of more temporary staff from that agency. What would happen to patient care at the hospital if budget limitations meant that agency nurses could not be used? Awful though it is to have an increased deficit due to the use of agency care, there is no real alternative for NHS hospitals unless permanent, trained nursing staff are in place. Getting the full complement of staff to service the hospital so that it can work at full capacity must be the aim for all of us.

The reason the hospital cannot recruit enough staff is that it cannot draw on a big enough pool: not enough people were trained 10 years ago to fill our current vacancies. However, I applaud the hospital for the efforts that it is making to recruit extra staff.

The hospital trust has sent me a briefing note, detailing the number of vacancies that it hopes to fill in the near future. The hon. Gentleman did not mention it in his contribution, but I am sure that he would welcome the fact that 30 international nurses commenced their adaptation programme in the week beginning 20 January this year, that 31 student nurses who qualified at University college, Worcester in March have expressed an interest in working in the trust, that 24 nurses from India will be joining the trust in the spring, that 10 nurses have been recruited locally since December 2002, and that 41 student nurses have already applied for jobs in the trust from the August school.

The trust launched a new recruitment campaign in the local media in December. That campaign has continued into the new year. By 17 January, the trust was processing 123 application forms submitted because of those advertisements. That welcome initiative by the trust should be applauded but, unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman did not mention it in his contribution. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) says that that is not enough. I accept that it is not enough. I can say with all integrity that we want more, but I will not say, "We want more, but vote for less cash to pay for the services." That is a matter of integrity. I will stand up and tell it straight. The hon. Lady may not like to have a reputation for being straight on this issue, but I shall certainly conduct myself with integrity.

Mr. Luff: The hon. Gentleman says that he is going to be straight with the House, but I regret the party

political note that he has injected into the debate. This matter should be above party politics. He knows that there is not a single shred of truth in the accusation that he made several minutes ago that the Conservative party would cut expenditure on the health service by 20 per cent. That is integrity!

Mr. Foster: I recall a comment from the Opposition Treasury Front-Bench spokesman, who said that the Conservative party was conducting a root-and-branch review, with a view to making a 20 per cent. cut in expenditure in all Departments. I cannot remember saying in my contribution that the Conservatives planned a 20 per cent. cut; I merely pointed out that a 20 per cent. in spending would not help. The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) may have a guilty conscience about that, but it is not for me to worry about it.

I applaud the local hospital trust on its ability to try to be creative in recruiting nursing staff. I welcome the new crèche that was opened last year in Worcester.

Miss Kirkbride: It is about time.

Mr. Foster: I fully appreciate that it is about time.

Miss Kirkbride: What about the Alex?

Mr. Foster: I have good news for the hon. Lady: work is under way for a new crèche at the Alexandra hospital, and a new multi-faith centre is almost complete, as is the refurbishment of the accident and emergency department and the ear, nose and throat and fracture clinics.

There will always be a call for more resources for our health service, whether in community hospitals, which the hon. Member for Wyre Forest mentioned, or in acute ones. I understand that a number of beds are being used in the acute hospital by patients who should be served in the community. That has been an ongoing issue with social services. I am pleased that things are moving in the right direction, and community hospitals have a big role to play in that respect. Although I support the call to protect the Eveshams, Pershores and the Malverns of this world—the NHS hospitals in Worcestershire—I always have to point out to colleagues in the House that, somehow, the means has to be found to pay for those hospitals.

I shall meet the chairman of the trust on Friday. I will also meet the community health council later that day. I shall take on board the comments that have been made to me by the patients and the staff of the hospital. I am concerned about some capacity issues. I have publicly expressed a concern that the Aconbury wing at Newtown hospital in Worcester would be threatened somehow. That capacity is needed for Worcester and Worcestershire to ensure that that hospital can cope with patient intake. I made that plea to the former chairman, Mr. Harold Musgrove, and I will restate my view that that hospital wing needs to be kept open.

Does the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), agree that the issue of agency nurses is a real concern for the Department? What will be done, especially with regard to the article in *The Sunday Times* yesterday, which pointed out the soaring cost of agency nurses within the national health service?

As I said, it was a surprising pleasure to be able to contribute to the debate. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest on raising the issue on the Floor of the House. He ought, however, to provide a more mixed message when he describes the health service in the county to our local media. He is right to point out the failings: I agree with him and join him in pointing out what those failings are. At times, however, he should also promote the good work that is done in our health service, so that he is seen as balanced in his approach. I will take it on myself to do exactly the same for my constituents and take a balanced approach. I will praise what is good and criticise what is bad, but, most of all, I will continue to vote for more resources for our health service, as the only way that it will get better is through investment and reform.

10.11 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) unexpectedly in this great debate. It is exciting to have a few moments to make a contribution.

Many of the comments of the hon. Member for Worcester were sadly somewhat disingenuous. While we all support the staff of the national health service and their hard work, there is no doubt that a proper Worcestershire Member of Parliament would feel strongly that we get a very unfair share of the national health service cake. Certainly, we get a very unfair share per capita of the national cake, which is demonstrably true, although the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), is saying from a sedentary position that it is not so. I cannot believe that she does not share the experience of my constituents, as we share the same per capita funding. Every constituent of mine who needs a hip operation, a cataract operation or any elective surgery that is common to our national service will, by dint of living in Worcestershire, have to wait for one year, whereas other people, such as those on the Birmingham waiting list, will have a shorter wait. I can only assume that she does not read her post if she does not realise how acute the waiting list problem is in Worcestershire.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): Is it due to money?

Miss Kirkbride: I will not take sedentary interventions. If the Minister of State would like to comment, we will be interested to hear whether she is prepared to stand up for her constituents.

The hon. Member for Worcester also raised the issue of our community hospitals, about which I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) feels strongly—he has several in my constituency, and I have one in mine. The hon. Member for Worcester seemed to say that, if there was not enough money for community hospitals, that was a question of resources. I remind him that those community hospitals existed under a Conservative Government whom he takes no opportunity not to criticise for their spending on the national health service.

[Miss Kirkbride]

He also completely distorts the truth about the spending of a future Conservative Government. Nevertheless, those hospitals existed under a Conservative Government, and we expect them to exist under a Labour Government and their spending should increase, bearing in mind that our national insurance contributions will go up in April by 1 per cent.

We are very worried about the crisis—I stress that it is a crisis—in health service funding in Worcestershire. My NHS trust has a debt of £6 million and rising, and my primary care trust has a debt of £2.5 million. Clearly, the health service management in the region has told them that they must balance the books by the next financial year. The financial crisis in the PCT in the south of Worcestershire amounts to £5 billion of debt, hence the worry about the closure of community hospitals as the only fixed assets that can be sold to meet those debts. Worcestershire has a very serious problem, which manifests itself in a variety of ways.

In my area, whether eye care should be provided on a local basis is a growing problem. It is welcome that, currently—I am sure that the Minister of State agrees, as she is nodding—we have eye care clinics in the Princess of Wales hospital in Bromsgrove and at the Alexandra hospital in Redditch, yet those are under threat and the services are under review. We are very fearful, because of the £7 million debt, that those services will be withdrawn and based in Kidderminster and Worcester alone. However, because of their eye problems and inability to see, those people should not have to travel long distances. They should be able to go to local eye care clinics. However, because of the deficit that the trust is experiencing, they might not come about. *[Interruption.]* The Whip rightly says that I must give the Minister the opportunity to speak, but we are very concerned by the £1.87 million increase in the cost of the private finance initiative contract, as made clear in the latest auditor's report.

When the Minister responds, we would be grateful if he would explain why suddenly, in Worcestershire alone, we now have yellow two alerts instead of red alerts. Will he be kind enough to explain what a yellow alert is and what the difference is between that and a red alert? The GPs in the county are mightily confused.

10.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) on securing a debate on NHS hospitals in Worcestershire. I am sure that all hon. Members are aware of his keen interest in all health issues within and beyond his constituency. The local issues that he raised today have clearly been of great interest to the Worcestershire community.

The hon. Gentleman briefly mentioned good news in Worcestershire, and it is right that I spend a few moments talking about the good things that are happening in the hospitals in Worcestershire. The county is served by three acute hospitals employing 4,500 people who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) pointed out, are overwhelmingly doing a good job. They are managed collectively by the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust.

The largest of those hospitals is the Worcester royal hospital, a newly built PFI hospital that opened in March 2002 at a cost of £95 million. That new hospital brings together services previously scattered between the three sites in Worcestershire, with careful planning placing interacting departments as closely to one another as possible. A good example is the siting of the accident and emergency department next to the critical care unit, radiology and operating theatres. That resulted from the contributions of doctors, nurses and other health care professionals to the planning and consultation process.

When the new hospital opened, it required the transfer of 300 patients to the new hospital, in complete safety, over just two weekends, ending an era of patients being housed in long open wards. Rooms in the new hospital have a maximum of four beds, with a high proportion of single or two-bed rooms. All rooms have en-suite facilities, providing an improvement in patient privacy. That arrangement of rooms gives greater flexibility for ward managers to provide specialised care for patients with similar conditions. Rooms are grouped together in virtual wards managed by a modern matron. The hospital provides vanguard services and local people are rightly proud of that. It incorporates nine operating theatres, a large accident and emergency department and critical care unit, and specialist radiology and scanning facilities.

The hon. Gentleman often raises the subject of Kidderminster hospital and did so again today. It is important to focus on the positive developments there for the benefit of both the staff who work there and the patients who use the facilities.

Kidderminster has received £13 million in investment to develop a state-of-the-art diagnostic and treatment centre and an ambulatory care centre, which is due for completion this autumn. As well as maintaining existing patient services, Kidderminster will have a modern minor injuries unit, a primary care centre, out-patients clinics, operating theatres and treatment rooms with 23-hour recovery facilities. It will also have radiology, including X-ray and computerised tomography scanner, ultrasound equipment and therapy treatments, including physiotherapy, not to mention 20 GP medical beds, rehabilitation and step-down beds, dedicated cancer services, maternity services and a new £600,000 satellite renal dialysis unit. That is not a hospital in decline.

Dr. Richard Taylor: As always, the Minister emphasises the positive, and I agree about the benefits of a diagnostic and treatment centre, but he does not mention the losses. I know that they happened in the past, but he must realise that people lost every acute bed and a full accident and emergency department. We would rather have what we had than the £16 million—not £13 million—that some of us think is being wasted on a block that is only six years old. He must remember what we have lost.

Mr. Lammy: Money is never wasted if people's health care improves. Health economies change. The hon. Gentleman says that he is concerned about something that happened in the past. As a result of the services and facilities that I have outlined, the people of Kidderminster have a bright future in terms of their

local health economy. I will deal with the number of beds, but I believe that those people are being served properly. I ask him to be careful and considered in the language that he uses.

The Alexandra hospital in Redditch has 340 beds and 20 day-case beds. It has six modern operating theatres. There is a recently completed day unit with two theatres and an endoscopy unit. The accident and emergency department has recently been extended under the national modernisation programme, of which the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), is proud, to improve the services provided. All major specialities and sub-specialities are provided other than cardiac surgery and neurosurgery.

From April this year, the NHS will receive a massive extra financial investment for the modernisation of both NHS facilities and systems of health care. Primary care trust revenue allocations for Worcestershire will rise to £426 million in 2003–04 and reach £510 million by 2005–06. The Government are intent on continuing to put that investment into the Worcestershire health economy over the next three years. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) talks about under-investment. She should go back to the record of the previous Administration because therein lies the problem that the Government are intent on correcting.

Plans for how those finances will be used locally are being developed in partnership across organisations as part of the local delivery plans due for completion by the end of March. Those plans, moving on from the detailed three-year capacity plans completed in November, set the operational planning for the local delivery of the challenging national targets and milestones in the NHS plan.

Miss Kirkbride: I have been listening with interest to the description of our local health services. Although I appreciate many of the Minister's points, he has missed the point of much of this evening's debate. Will he tell us the difference between yellow two alert and red alert?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Lady should know—but may not—that it is for local trusts and strategic health authorities to advise on local issues affecting the capacity of their services.

On the issue of beds, which was raised by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest, there has been no substantial reduction in the number of beds in Worcestershire. It is plain wrong to suggest that that number has gone down. There are approximately 1,400 acute beds and community-based beds available across Worcestershire, compared with 1,387 in 1998-99. The new hospital in Worcester centres all acute services on a single site, thus improving efficiency. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester said, the important issue for health services in Worcestershire is not the number of beds, but the appropriateness of the care delivered to patients.

Mr. Luff: Is the Minister guaranteeing that there will be no reduction in bed numbers in the Worcestershire health economy, either in the primary care trust community hospitals or the Aconbury wing of the Worcestershire royal hospital, which the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) rightly emphasised in his contribution?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman will know that that is a matter for the local strategic health authority and others engaged in providing services in Worcester. As with other parts of the country, it will depend on demographics and pertinent local issues. However, it is wrong to suggest that there has been a reduction in beds, as it is wrong to talk down the NHS in Worcestershire. There are financial issues that the strategic health authorities and others are now dealing with, but there are many good things happening as well.

There is no denying that the Worcestershire health economy has had a troubled past, with significant financial and service concerns over many years since well before 1997. However, it is not fair to characterise the service changes in Worcestershire as financially driven, as the hon. Member for Wyre Forest attempted to do. The aim of "Investing in Excellence", the strategy of the then Worcestershire health authority, was to sustain and improve the quality of health services for patients across the whole of Worcestershire. The decision to remove blue-light A and E services from Kidderminster was a clinical one, based on very real concerns about maintaining high standards of clinical safety within three closely situated A and E departments. Opposition Members have often tried to revisit the decision on blue-light services, but the Government insist that we must concentrate on the future and the many other services that the people of Kidderminster need.

The minor injuries unit at Kidderminster hospital is one of the most successful of its type, and has well-developed protocols with the ambulance trust and other sites to ensure that patients are taken to the right emergency department immediately. A key indicator for emergency care—

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 4 February 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fishing Communities

1. **Angus Robertson** (Moray): What discussions she has held with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on new funding for fishing communities following the European Union decision on quota cuts. [94185]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I have regular discussions with the Chancellor on that and a wide range of other subjects.

Angus Robertson: Has the Secretary of State read the letter that Mr. Jim Cuthbert, the former chief statistician of the Scottish Office, sent this week? He wrote that Scotland was effectively insulated from the beneficial effects of EU structural funding in connection with the fishing crisis. Will the right hon. Lady explain to my fishing constituents and others around the coast why the Spanish fleet can access additional resources from the European Union to build new boats whereas the Scottish Executive cannot access any EU additional funding even to scrap boats?

Mrs. Liddell: Mr. Cuthbert is a more regular correspondent of the hon. Gentleman's than of mine. The Scottish Executive have already received £55 million in funding from the EU to assist in the transformation of the fisheries industry. I draw it to the hon. Gentleman's attention that the Scottish National party's fish recovery plan, which argues against decommissioning, would lead to a reduction in the number of days at sea from 15—negotiated by the Government—to nine. He would not know a fish recovery plan from a fish supper.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): As my right hon. Friend said, a new package was announced on 28 January; I hope that part of it will go to the processing side. The catching side has obviously been emphasised, but processors are important. Will my right hon. Friend commend the work of Aberdeenshire council, Aberdeen city council and Scottish Enterprise Grampian, which are conducting a feasibility study to ensure that any money that goes into processing is well spent? It is crucial that any aid package ensures the future of the fishing industry rather than managing its decline.

Mrs. Liddell: I join my hon. Friend in commending the local authorities that she mentioned. Last Monday, Mr. Robert Milne of the Scottish Fish Merchants Federation invited me to visit the producers in my hon. Friend's constituency and those of other hon. Friends.

I am conscious of the importance of the fish producing industry. We held a detailed discussion on that with the Prime Minister last week. The SNP's fish recovery plan would take £30 million away from the fish producers. Last week, the Prime Minister met representatives of the fishing industry and commissioned a paper from the No. 10 strategic policy unit, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the devolved Administrations to provide a strategy for the next five to 10 years so that the industry in the United Kingdom can have a long-term, sustainable future. The document will give us options for the future. There will be further discussions with the industry and we aim to reach a broad consensus that will inform our further policy and enable us to enter into discussions with other member states and achieve that outcome in Europe.

Mr. Peter Duncan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): What exactly has the Secretary of State done to identify new sources of assistance for Scotland's fishing communities? Does she agree that our fishing communities have been right to highlight a double failure: that of the Scottish Government to target their pathetic package on everyone in need, especially onshore industry, and, most starkly, that of the Scotland Office to stand up to the Treasury and provide genuine assistance to communities in crisis? When will she cease to be Gordon's gopher in Scotland?

Mrs. Liddell: I am delighted to support my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who, in the most recent comprehensive spending review, provided £18 billion to £21 billion in the Scottish block grant. That is a greater sum than was achieved under any Administration the hon. Gentleman supported.

Mr. Duncan: Fishing?

Mrs. Liddell: As I have already pointed out to the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), £55 million of EU funds have been provided for fishing. Last Monday, the Scottish Executive announced a £50 million package. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is belatedly turning into a subsidy junkie. The Government's policy is to secure a sustainable future for the fisheries industry; sloganising will not achieve that.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): The Secretary of State has demonstrated that she is not in command of the subject. Will she answer a specific question? Did the Scottish Executive specifically request additional Treasury resources to fund the fishing strategy plan? What role, if any, did the right hon. Lady play in that request? If it is right to fund a recovery strategy after the

foot and mouth epidemic to the tune of more than £1 billion of extra resources, why is there not a penny piece of additional money for the fishing communities?

Mrs. Liddell: Labour Members now have a new game whenever we see SNP Members: we try to work out which one is a snake and which one is an assassin, in the words of Mrs. MacDonald. The Government have this year made available to the Scottish Executive £18 billion in the block grant; £55 million is already available through European Union funds. The Scottish Executive, unlike the Scottish National party, have the resources available to fund a £50 million package, and I commend to the hon. Gentleman his party's own fishery recovery plan, which endorses that £50 million package.

Health and Safety Executive

2. **Jim Sheridan** (West Renfrewshire): What steps she is taking to promote the activities of the Health and Safety Executive in Scotland. [94186]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Anne McGuire): I hosted an informal discussion yesterday on how best to deliver in Scotland the targets laid down under the revitalising health and safety programme. The Scotland Office will shortly write to employers, trade unions and other bodies about tackling violence at work.

Jim Sheridan: My hon. Friend will be aware that the number of reported accidents in the workplace in Scotland is, unfortunately, above the national average. Will she give the House a commitment that when she next meets representatives of the Health and Safety Executive she will emphasise the Government's determination to track down unscrupulous employers who pay scant regard to health and safety in the workplace, especially in industries such as the construction industry, where most of the accidents take place?

Mrs. McGuire: The Health and Safety Executive is well aware of some of the difficulties in the construction industry, and has targeted a priority programme on that sector. The Government are keen to ensure that we reach the targets that we identified under the revitalising health and safety programme, which will cut the rate of deaths and major injuries by 10 per cent., reduce the rate of work-related ill health by 20 per cent. and cut working days lost due to health and safety failure by 30 per cent. My hon. Friend is right, however, to highlight some of the difficulties in the construction industry, and I hope that I can reassure him that those who are employed in that industry will be subject to the same vigorous scrutiny under health and safety legislation as anyone else in Scotland.

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): The Minister will be aware of the massive rise in employers' liability insurance premiums this year, and of the consequence for many small businesses. Given that the work of the Health and Safety Executive is critical in reducing death and injury in the workplace—and thereby reducing these costs—what are the Government doing to assist that aim, and to help those small businesses?

Mrs. McGuire: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Department for Work and Pensions is consulting on employers' liability insurance, about which there is genuine concern. The Chancellor highlighted the issue in his pre-Budget report in November. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that part of the discussions that we held yesterday with the Health and Safety Executive and other stakeholders in health and safety included talks with a representative from the insurers' organisations, and there was an exchange of views on this issue. The DWP consultation is key to the way forward on employers' liability insurance.

Mr. Frank Roy (Motherwell and Wishaw): The Minister will be aware that the Health and Safety Executive has a huge role to play in steel fabrication and shipbuilding. Indeed, the thousands of jobs recently announced in shipbuilding in Scotland will be most welcome and will no doubt keep the HSE very busy. How does the Minister think that it would be kept busy if the shipbuilding industry only had to build tartan dinghies and tartan rowing boats in an independent Scotland, divorced from the United Kingdom, withdrawn from NATO and led by John Swinney—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The policies of another party have nothing to do with the Minister.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): What will be the relationship between the Health and Safety Executive in Scotland and the new rail accident investigation branch that is being set up under the Railways and Transport Safety Bill, which is in Committee today?

Mrs. McGuire: The Health and Safety Executive obviously has an overarching health and safety role in Scotland, and discussions with the new regime that will be established under the railways legislation are ongoing. *[Interruption.]* I assure the hon. Lady that the Scotland Office has regular meetings and proactive discussions with the Health and Safety Executive, and it ill behoves Opposition Front Benchers to denigrate such discussions on health and safety issues in Scotland.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): Is it not both worrying and mysterious that the number of accidents in Scotland is higher than in England? Will my hon. Friend ask the Health and Safety Executive to set up a specific inquiry to try to find out the reasons for that? Will she also ask it to report on how many firms in Scotland have appointed health and safety officers, as they ought to be doing, to ensure that the appalling level of accidents is reduced?

Mrs. McGuire: My right hon. Friend is correct to say that some areas have a worse health and safety record. That may have something to do with the as yet unproved assertion that we may have a more macho culture when it comes to health and safety. As I have said, however, a campaign is continuing with the Health and Safety Executive. Companies have been clearly targeted as having to identify health and safety officers. The safe

Scotland initiative and the new helplines to assist Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises with health and safety issues are part of the continuing campaign to raise the profile and change the culture.

Scotland Office

3. **Pete Wishart** (North Tayside): When she will announce the proposed staffing arrangements of the Scotland Office for the coming year. [94187]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): Details of the Department's staffing will be contained in the Scotland Office departmental report, which will be published in the spring.

Pete Wishart: I thank the right hon. Lady for that non-answer. Can she even begin to justify and explain the near-doubling of Scotland Office staff since devolution, despite the fact that the Scottish Parliament does most of the work previously done by the Scottish Office? The right hon. Lady will know that the Constitutional Committee of the House of Lords could find no explanation for the inflated staff numbers. Indeed, it found that the Scotland Office employs twice as many staff as the Wales Office.

At the last Scottish Question Time, the right hon. Lady boasted to me—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think the Secretary of State has got the gist.

Mrs. Liddell: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman's surprise at receiving my answer to his inquiry as to when I would announce the proposed staff levels. I have said that I will announce them in the spring.

The hon. Gentleman is woefully ill informed. The Scotland Office did not exist before devolution; it was established in 1999. Its staff levels were established as a result of a Treasury review undertaken in 1999, and announced to the Scottish Grand Committee in July of that year.

We all know where the hon. Gentleman is coming from: he wants to separate Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom. This Government have provided devolution settlements for both Scotland and Wales. The hon. Gentleman asked about the Wales Office. An independent review of its staffing concluded that it has too few staff, and requires more.

Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman—in his onerous role as Chief Whip of a party of five—that Sir William Kerr Fraser, former permanent secretary at the old Scottish Office, is amazed that 80 civil servants can cover the Scotland Office's range of responsibilities.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Institute of Directors in Scotland, the Confederation of British Industry in Scotland and the Scottish Trades Union Congress all support the current arrangements vis-à-vis the Scotland Office? Does she agree that those who argue for change are arguing against the interests of the people of Scotland?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The robust support received from the business and trade union community in Scotland is a sign that they understand and appreciate the devolution settlement much more than the separatists on the Opposition Benches.

Let me tell the hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) that the relationship we have been able to build up with the business community has been to Scotland's advantage, and that only a party opposed to the best interests of Scotland would want to reduce Scotland's voice in Government.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): What discussions did the right hon. Lady and her current staff have with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister before the Deputy Prime Minister announced that he would activate powers relating to pay and conditions in Scotland during the firefighters' dispute?

Mrs. Liddell: My office is in constant contact with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. In relation to the firefighters' dispute, my office is represented on the civil contingencies committee by me and by officials. What is more, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister communicated with the Scottish Executive before the Deputy Prime Minister's statement in the House last week.

These issues are a red herring. The real issue is securing a swift resolution of the dispute—and that can be achieved only through a negotiated settlement.

Mrs. Lait *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Lady asks another question, let me remind her that the main question is about staffing arrangements in the Scotland Office. Her first question was, in fact, out of order.

Mrs. Lait: I hope that this question will be in order, because I want to ask the right hon. Lady whether her new, increased staff, when they are appointed, will be able to help her to fulfil her real role as Secretary of State for Scotland—that of representing the views of the Scottish people to the Cabinet? She was clearly unable to perform that role during the recent fishing crisis and in regard to compensation for those suffering from hepatitis C; and I am sure Jack McConnell was delighted to know that he was consulted early when he learned of the proposal from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on Monday evening. Or will the right hon. Lady, with her new staff, simply continue to have regular discussions and meetings and achieve nothing?

Mrs. Liddell: I am delighted that the hon. Lady gives me an opportunity to point out that the complement of the Scotland Office is 121, and that our total establishment is 130. I was privileged to be at Scotstoun last Thursday and to be party to the announcement of two aircraft carriers, which will completely revive the fortunes of the Clyde and of Rosyth. My office was heavily involved in all the preliminary discussions, and it will continue to be so.

I should draw the hon. Lady's attention—she obviously does not keep in close contact with these matters—to the remarks of Hamish Morrison of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association, who has

commended the Government's actions in respect of the fishing industry's current difficulties. The Scottish Office ceased to exist in 1999, and the Scotland Office has been part of these discussions throughout. That is why we are moving forward with settlements on all counts that are to the benefit of the people of Scotland, along with devolution, which the hon. Lady opposed.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Is my right hon. Friend certain that she has allocated enough staffing resources within the Scotland Office to conduct its consultations, especially the excellent consultation currently under way on whether Scottish shop workers should enjoy the same legal protection as shop workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland? If she has allocated enough staffing resources to carry out that excellent consultation, will she now encourage as many people as possible to submit their responses before the deadline on 14 March?

Mrs. Liddell: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, and I wish him well in his private Member's Bill, which is due to come before the House on Friday. My office has been heavily involved in promoting the consultation, to which there have been a number of responses. My office will be proud to work with my hon. Friend to ensure that Scottish shop workers and betting shop workers are no longer discriminated against, and are able to observe Sunday as they see fit.

Whisky Industry

4. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland): If she will make a statement on the future of the Scottish whisky industry. [94188]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I have every confidence that the Scotch whisky industry will continue to make a vital contribution to the Scottish and UK economies as a wealth creator and export earner.

The Scotch Whisky Association's recent study on the impact of the production of Scotch whisky, which I launched with the association a couple of weeks ago, also concentrated on the production of gin and vodka in Scotland. It highlighted the fact that the industry provides some 9,500 direct jobs in Scotland.

On the wider contribution to the Scottish economy, it is estimated that a total of 43,000 jobs in Scotland are supported by the industry, 7,000 of which are in the more rural areas, including, I believe, the hon. Gentleman's constituency, where an excellent whisky is produced.

Mr. Carmichael: I hesitate to contradict the right hon. Lady, but Highland Park and Scapa are not just excellent; they are in fact the best.

The report to which the right hon. Lady referred suggested that a cut in duty would lead to increased export sales, which might increase the Treasury's take. Will she argue that case with the Chancellor of the Exchequer between now and Budget day, to ensure that the Scotch whisky industry, which provides many jobs in vulnerable rural areas, gets the same treatment as the beer and wine industries?

Mrs. Liddell: From my point of view, Inverhouse, from Airdrie, is streets ahead of anything else that is produced.

It is true that the industry always argues for reductions in taxation, as, indeed, do most industries. However, the Government have delivered five successive duty freezes, which the industry has welcomed. The current duty on spirits is more than 30 per cent. lower in real terms than it was 20 years ago, which is largely due to the duty freezes of the past five Budgets. The price of a bottle of spirits is now 73p lower than it would otherwise have been. The Scotch Whisky Association will be making representations to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The hon. Gentleman may be aware that I have established a series of seminars with key industry figures across Scotland as part of the pre-Budget report, to allow a specific chain of representation on all matters Scottish—not just the Scottish whisky industry.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the vote of confidence that the Chancellor gave the industry by not introducing excise duty strip stamps, which secured jobs in bottling plants that could otherwise have been put out of business such as Kyndal in Grangemouth? At the time, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor spoke of the great loss to the Treasury as a result of fraud in the whisky industry. What action has been taken to combat that fraud?

Mrs. Liddell: I pay tribute to all right hon. and hon. Members who joined the campaign on strip stamping. Indeed, my own office was heavily involved. When my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that he would not proceed with strip stamps he made it clear that the industry would be consulted on finding methods of reducing the volume of fraudulent and duplicitous products. That is a useful way forward, and one that the industry has widely welcomed.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

The Advocate-General for Scotland was asked—

Human Rights

15. **Mr. Alan Reid** (Argyll and Bute): What human rights issues she has dealt with since 7 January. [94181]

16. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland): What human rights issues she has considered since 7 January. [94182]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): Since 7 January, 32 human rights issues have been intimated to me, all relating to criminal matters. They dealt with a wide variety of topics, including undue delay in criminal proceedings; refusal to release prisoners on life licence; the definition of the offences of shameless indecency and false accusation; the availability of essential witnesses for trial; and the use of CCTV evidence.

Mr. Reid: On 16 January, some of my constituents were almost deprived of their ultimate human right—the right to life—when disembarking from a Caledonian McBrayne catamaran at Dunoon pier. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is conducting an investigation, but will the Advocate-General advise Transport Ministers that a public inquiry must be held, so that the events leading up to that near tragic incident can be fully and publicly examined and passengers be given the right to cross-examine witnesses?

The Advocate-General: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's concern for his constituents, who were obviously caused great distress. I am sure that he understands that policy responsibility for such matters does not lie with me. UK Ministers are always concerned about such incidents, so I am sure that they will pay attention to the matter.

Mr. Carmichael: The hon. and learned Lady will recall that, on 26 November 2002, she told me that she could see no human rights issues arising from the appointment of commissioners to the Northern Lighthouse Board. I respectfully invite the Advocate-General to reconsider that position, and remind her that it is a principle of natural justice that no one should be a judge in their own cause—or, as we say in Orkney, nemo judex in sua causa. Every sheriff principal in Scotland is a member of the lighthouse board. What confidence can a party to an action against the board in a sheriff court have that justice can be seen to be done?

The Advocate-General: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is extremely concerned about the lighthouse board scheme. Nevertheless, membership policy is not a matter for me. There is a simple solution, I am sure that many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents share his concern, so they should raise the matter as a devolution issue. In that event, I will certainly take on board the issue that he has raised. If I consider that there is merit in such a representation, I will intervene.

Devolution

17. **Annabelle Ewing** (Perth): What devolution issues have been raised in the last month under the Scotland Act 1998. [94183]

The Advocate-General: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I gave some moments ago to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mr. Reid).

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the Advocate-General for that very brief answer. A devolution issue that arose recently concerned proposals to pay compensation to hepatitis C sufferers in Scotland. Will the Advocate-General clarify her role? Will she argue for the rights of the Scots Parliament to pay that compensation, or will she sign up to a Westminster clawback through the Westminster system?

The Advocate-General: I am more than happy to clarify my role. The matter might come to me, as Advocate-General, in a variety of ways. If it comes to me as a formal request for my opinion as a Law Officer, I would advise with the UK Law Officers, the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General—either or both, as appropriate. However, the hon. Lady will recall that the convention is that I would not advise her whether I had given advice, nor about the content of that advice. The matter could also become a devolution issue if a formal challenge were mounted once the matter was resolved. That would be intimated to me, and I would undertake my usual role in relation to that.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Child Abduction

19. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What progress is being made in securing cross-border co-operation to prevent child abduction. [95364]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Ms Rosie Winterton): To prevent child abduction, we need a robust system to ensure the return of abducted children so that people know that abduction will not succeed. The 1980 Hague convention works well and we are building on it with the European Union regulation on parental responsibility. That will mean that, if a child who normally lives in the UK is abducted to another EU state, the decision about where the child should continue to live could be heard in the UK court, rather than in the court of the country to which the child had been abducted.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply, and for the interest she has shown in the matter. Does she agree that raising awareness of the issue is very important in preventing child abduction? What help is her Department giving organisations such as reunite, which works on individual cases but has also done a lot of work in trying to get international agreements on handling the issue?

Ms Winterton: My hon. Friend is right to point out that raising awareness of child abduction is an important part of prevention. We work with the police, the ports, immigration authorities and the airlines to raise awareness among security staff and others to ensure that they are aware of police guidelines. My hon. Friend is right to say that the work of reunite is central to the matter. My Department funds that organisation to the extent of £100,000 and has also given £80,000 for a campaign specifically designed to raise awareness. I am

extremely glad to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the invaluable work that reunite does for parents and children.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): In connection with raising awareness, may I draw the Minister's attention to an organisation called PACT—Parents and Abducted Children Together—with which I have recently become associated? It was set up by Lady Meyer, the wife of our ambassador in Washington, and it makes the point that, of the 546 children abducted last year, some 40 per cent. were abducted by their parents. That is a very serious matter, as the Minister has said. Will she stand ready to meet PACT representatives to discuss how awareness can be raised and what can be done about a problem that is becoming increasingly serious?

Ms Winterton: I have had a number of meetings with Lady Meyer, and I have assured her that my officials will keep in very close touch about PACT's work, which I agree is extremely important. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we take the matter very seriously. The work of organisations such as reunite and PACT is extremely helpful in raising awareness. We shall continue our work through the Hague convention and the special commission to ensure that best practice is followed everywhere, so that these tragedies can be prevented in the future.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Minister will be aware of the conference at which tribute was paid to the work of reunite, and I welcome her interest in the group. Is she really satisfied, however, that cross-border controls by the police, especially at airports, are adequate to deal with the movement of children in such circumstances?

Ms Winterton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and for paying tribute to the work of reunite. He is right to say that we constantly need to ensure that there is best practice everywhere, especially at ports. That is why we have been working to raise awareness so that we are all aware of the procedures that should be followed, and so that we can tell parents who fear the abduction of their child that they can take appropriate steps through the courts before an abduction takes place. We are constantly considering how to ensure that the child abduction prevention pack for use in various cases, including by parents, is as up to date and accurate as possible.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The Minister rightly refers to awareness as regards vulnerable cases. Does she yet have evidence that the new Council regulation, which is intended to complement the Hague convention, will ensure the prompt return of children to their country of habitual residence? Will it reverse the numerous cases, such as that of Lady Meyer, which involve German jurisdiction?

Ms Winterton: First, under the new regulation, the case of Lady Meyer would have been heard in a UK court. Lady Meyer would have had the right to come back to the UK for a hearing about the residence of her children. Secondly, in recent years, we have been working closely with the German authorities and judiciary and they have reduced the number of judges who deal with such cases from about 600 to 24. That is important in ensuring that the cases are dealt with effectively. The figures show that, over the past five years, the child was returned in about 10 cases and there was only one refusal, so there has been an improvement in co-operation.

Salisbury Magistrates Court

20. **Mr. Robert Key** (Salisbury): When the Lord Chancellor will announce his decision on the future of Salisbury magistrates court. [95365]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Yvette Cooper): In the next month, we expect to announce which major capital projects will begin next year.

Mr. Key: That is very tantalising. May I congratulate the Minister on the strong working relationship between her Department, its officials and the Wiltshire magistrates court committee?

Can the hon. Lady confirm that she does not dissent from the decision of the local magistrates court committee that Salisbury is the right place for the magistrates court? Does she understand that the lack of a decision causes great damage to public perceptions of local justice? It is more than two years since we expected a decision on the courthouse. The situation is also unfair to the accused, who have to be bussed around Wiltshire to find a courthouse that meets the modern conditions necessary for magistrates courts.

Yvette Cooper: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about court facilities in Salisbury and I agree that the Salisbury courthouse is not satisfactory. As he will be aware, there are proposals to build a new courthouse which will, for the first time, bring together magistrates, Crown and county courts. The proposal to draw all those different court facilities together is excellent. We have given the Salisbury project extensive consideration. As I have informed the hon. Gentleman privately, it was not felt appropriate to take forward private finance initiative funding given the size and nature of the project, so we are now considering it in the context of the Department's capital projects. I can assure him that the Department take the matter extremely seriously and that the Salisbury project is certainly one of those that are being given the most important consideration at present.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is not the prolonged delay in Salisbury a symptom of the stasis approaching paralysis in decision making in the Lord Chancellor's Department, caused by the conflict between exhortation and resource allocation and the impending unnecessary centralisation under the Courts Bill? Is it not the case that people in Wiltshire will be amazed that while they have to wait for the Lord Chancellor to make a decision on that essential project,

he has time to make ex cathedra statements about things that do not concern him and negotiate a £2 million pension scheme for himself?

Yvette Cooper: What a lot of nonsense. The hon. Gentleman is usually worthy of rather better questions than that, which he knows is rather ridiculous. The interesting issue with the Salisbury proposal is that it is about drawing together the different kinds of courts. That is exactly what a unified administration is about. It is about being able to bring together Crown and county courts and magistrates court facilities in a single building where possible, and in a single organisation. That has huge benefits for people who use the courts right across the country.

EU Accession States

21. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): What support the Lord Chancellor's Department is offering to strengthen human rights and encourage the judicial system in EU accession states. [95366]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Yvette Cooper): The Lord Chancellor's Department is involved in a series of different projects with the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Malta, Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania and Estonia. We regard providing assistance to the European Union accession states to help improve their judicial systems and strengthen human rights as an important part of our international relations work.

Mr. Connarty: I thank the Minister for that reply. As a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, I have visited most of those accession states and had discussions about the plight of the Roma people, many of whom are still living in conditions that would not be acceptable in Victorian Britain. That is one of the reasons why the Body Shop gave its human rights award to the Roma people of Sofia in Bulgaria to try to get them rights to basic housing. An elected Romanian politician told me, "You can solve the problem of the Roma people—when we come into Europe, we will send them to you." Is the Minister worried that some politicians in those countries think that that is the solution to the problem?

Yvette Cooper: I know that my hon. Friend has been very active in that area and has a lot of expertise in the issue. I can assure him that the United Kingdom Government take very seriously issues involving discrimination against minorities and are active in a series of projects with regard to the Roma people. I will write to him on his specific points to let him know about the extensive work that is being done to support the Roma people and to prevent discrimination not just in Bulgaria but across eastern Europe.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Although the Department's work to help new democracies is important and extremely valuable, is it not a bit difficult for us to preach to new democracies about the separation of the legislature and the judiciary while we continue to use our second Chamber as a supreme court of law, rather than having a separate supreme court? Is it not also difficult to preach the adherence to international conventions while the Prime Minister drops hints about not remaining in the European convention on human rights?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his role on the Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department, which is also strongly welcomed by our Department.

The constitutional arrangements in Parliament and in Britain are extremely complex. In fact, the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform recognised the complex issues involving the judiciary and said that they were worthy of a separate report. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the Government have always strongly supported the ECHR. In fact, this Government incorporated the ECHR into the Human Rights Act 1998. We will continue to support it, unlike the Conservative party, which has said that it wants to withdraw effectively and unilaterally from the ECHR.

Office for the Supervision of Solicitors

22. **Andy Burnham** (Leigh): What recent assessment the Lord Chancellor's Department has made of the effectiveness of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. [95367]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Ms Rosie Winterton): My Department receives monthly statistics from the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors, which details the progress that is being made with regard to the handling of complaints. We are not satisfied that the OSS is currently working as effectively as it should. There is some evidence of improvement, and we continue to work closely with the OSS to ensure that it continues to move towards acceptable standards overall.

Andy Burnham: I thank the Minister for that reply, and I agree in part, as my casework suggests that self-regulation is not working. Many of my constituents have been left disappointed by what they see as a weak and bureaucratic system. Does my hon. Friend agree that in the law, perhaps more than any other area, we need a tough and effective voice for the consumer? Will she consider opening discussions with the Law Society about toughening up the OSS and, in particular, whether it needs to have greater fine-making powers?

Ms Winterton: My hon. Friend is right to express concern, which, as I said, is shared by the Lord Chancellor and my Department. We want an arrangement under which self-regulation can work and that is why we are anxious to make sure that we incorporate as many proposals as possible to make sure that it does. We have seen some improvement as a result and we are expecting a further progress report from the legal services ombudsman in March. Until then, we will continue to monitor the situation closely, and we expect the OSS's efforts to be sustained and increased.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I agree with the hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) that the OSS is simply failing many of our constituents who have already been failed by receiving poor-quality advice.

They experience excessive delays in getting any kind of decision from the OSS, which, in many cases, turns out to be a toothless tiger. The time for talking to the OSS and reviewing its performance is over. Let us have some action and a regulator who can take action on our constituents' behalf.

Ms Winterton: As I have said, my Department is concerned about this matter. I hope that the hon. Gentleman would agree that the ideal situation would be one in which self-regulation works. I can only reiterate that we are keeping a very close eye on the matter, and we are not unaware of the comments that have been made. We are expecting further reports in March. Obviously, if there is not an improvement, different action will be taken.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

House of Lords Reform

29. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): To ask the President of the Council if he will make a statement on his plans to respond to the votes of the House on proposals to reform the House of Lords. [95354]

The President of the Council (Mr. Robin Cook): It will be for the Joint Committee to consider how it can take forward detailed proposals for reform of the second Chamber in the light of the votes of both Houses. In the meantime, it would be most unwise to announce a response to votes that have yet to take place but will shortly be upon us.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the President of the Council, whose principled defiance of the Prime Minister is to be applauded. If we vote for a substantially elected second Chamber, and the other place, acting as judge and jury in its own cause, votes for the alternative of a fully appointed second Chamber, what remit will the right hon. Gentleman give to the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform, and how does he intend to fulfil the Labour party's election manifesto commitment to complete Lords reform within the lifetime of this Parliament?

Mr. Cook: I know well enough that it is always wise to sniff any offers of compliments from the Opposition carefully before swallowing them. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is not an act of defiance but a free vote on the Government Benches and, I very much hope, a free vote on the Conservative Benches, too. On the question of what happens after tonight, the crucial issue is whether we can develop a clear, coherent, commanding lead in this Chamber for one of the options for reform. There is no need for any fresh remit for the Joint Committee. The House and the other place set up that Joint Committee with the remit to finish its job, and the report before us today is only an interim one. It will continue its job without any further revision to its remit.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): If there is a disagreement between the two Houses, does that not draw attention to the fact that an important option has been excluded by the Joint Committee for consideration in this House and the other place, namely, indirect elections? Would it not be sensible for that option to be in the frame so that Members can have the opportunity to vote on it in future?

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that I agree with my hon. Friend about that being excluded in the options before the House. I have argued on a number of occasions that there is a case for an indirect component to those who go into the second Chamber with a democratic mandate, but they would, of course, be elected. I urge those of my hon. Friends who are attracted to indirect election to make sure that they therefore support one of the elected options. Those who are indirectly elected would not be appointed, and a vote for an appointed Chamber would exclude indirect election, not assist it.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May I urge the President of the Council to make another attempt to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)? The right hon. Gentleman must surely have given some thought to the way in which he sees this matter moving forward to fulfil the pledge that was given in his party's manifesto. He must have given some thought to the way in which he expects the Joint Committee to react, to whether primacy should be given to a vote in this House or to a vote in another place, and to how the matter will therefore be resolved. The right hon. Gentleman cannot duck behind the statement, "I don't know what's going to happen. I've no idea what the Joint Committee's going to say. I can't envisage the outcome of this matter. We're drifting with absolutely no idea of where we're going." If the right hon. Gentleman is saying that, he is a lesser man than I thought he was.

Mr. Cook: I cannot predict what will happen between 5 and 7 o'clock this evening. If I were to tell the House now what the results will be between 5 and 7 o'clock, I doubt whether the House would respect me for anticipating what it was about to decide on a free vote.

I am very much committed to the idea that this House should seize what is a unique and historic opportunity to make clear its preference for a reformed second Chamber. I very much hope that in the votes we will get a substantial majority and a mandate for reform. As Leader of the House, I will seek to do all that I can to ensure that the will of the House is carried through.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in view of all the mixed messages that are coming out on how to deal with the House of Lords, the second Chamber, there has been a resurgence in the past few weeks, principally on the Labour Benches, in the call for the abolition of the House of Lords, in line with the 1976 resolution at conference, which I think my right hon. Friend supported in those halcyon days? Will he add his weight to that? It would resolve the problem and everybody would go home happy. Finally, do not

talk to me about manifesto commitments on this issue; otherwise I will say, "Top-up fees and foundation hospitals."

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is in excellent robust form today. I fully understand that a large number of hon. Members have put their names to an amendment and I hope that it will be possible for that amendment to be tested in the House in the course of today's proceedings. However, if that amendment is not carried, I would urge all colleagues who may prefer abolition to express their own view on a second-best option on how to have a reformed second Chamber.

I say to my hon. Friend that we should bear in mind that the last time that we went to the country with a commitment to abolish the second Chamber was in 1983. I do not recollect that we got a mandate from the public for it.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am not asking the President of the Council to predict the outcome of the votes this evening, even on the abolitionists' amendment. However, will he assure the House that, after the votes this evening, he will give careful consideration to what guidance should be given to the Joint Committee? As a member of the Joint Committee, I am sure that my colleagues would welcome that. For example, does the right hon. Gentleman think that we should give the same relative weight to the vote of a hereditary peer—however he or she has voted—who clearly will not be part of a reformed House of Lords, as everybody seems to agree? What weight should be given to the votes of those life peers who, having left this place and gone up the Corridor, no longer believe in democracy?

Mr. Cook: Reading the debates of the other place, I was rather struck at the number of our former colleagues who have gone there and who now appear to have discovered that being a professional politician is something rather suspect. I rather wonder how they would describe their years in this place, if not as professional politicians.

For me, the crucial issue is whether this House can express a clear view. If this House can express a clear view, we will, of course, have a basis on which we can enter into negotiations in which the view of this House may prevail. However, first of all, we need to ensure that this House expresses a clear and commanding view.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

E-democracy

30. **Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): What measures he intends to take to implement the recommendations of the Information Committee report on e-democracy. [95355]

Sir Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): The Commission has accepted the advice of the Finance and Services Committee on the priorities for implementing the Committee's recommendations on matters that fall to the Commission. Work is already under way on a number of those issues and the Finance and Services Committee will monitor progress.

It may be of interest to the House to be reminded that one of the main objectives of the strategic plan for House administration is to improve public understanding and knowledge of the House and to increase accessibility to it. I think that the Information Committee's report certainly helps in that.

Margaret Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that reply. He will be aware that the excellent report by the Information Committee suggests that we use technology to engage electronically with citizens to ensure that the usually unheard voices are heard in this place and to enable individual MPs to engage in e-participation. Will he consider whether moneys could be set aside for such experiments, not just to enable us to use technology in pre-legislative scrutiny, but to enable individual MPs to participate in pilot schemes to ensure that we can use e-consultation to engage citizens and to reconnect them to politics in this place?

Sir Archy Kirkwood: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for that suggestion. Her advocacy of information and communications technology in this place is admirable and I encourage her to continue in her attempts to get the House facilities improved in that way. Certainly, the Liaison Committee is looking at ways of promoting online consultations for those Select Committees that want to go in that direction. Any specific plans that she has for engaging individual Members in online consultations would be considered positively.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): May I ask the hon. Gentleman how he expects the growing campaign, led so effectively by the Back Bencher of the year, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), for the wider public to be involved in the consultation process on draft legislation to take effect? Is it not high time that we were doing much more in that respect?

Sir Archy Kirkwood: It is possible that we should be putting more facilities in place for online consultations. As the Information Committee realised at recommendation (p), a good deal needs to be done to set up an online consultation. It needs someone to act as a moderator and those who participate need to be led clearly into an understanding of what they will get out of it. It also requires hon. Members who contribute to the online process to put in quite a bit of time. All those things need to be carefully worked out to ensure that the consultation process is successful for those who participate in it. We are actively pursuing, in every way we can, the promotion of such consultations for those hon. Members and Select Committee that wish to pursue them.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

House of Lords Reform

31. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): To ask the President of the Council what steps he is taking to reduce the size of the House of Lords. [95356]

The President of the Council (Mr. Robin Cook): In the recent debate on the report of the Joint Committee, a number of Members expressed concern that the recommendation of the Joint Committee for a second Chamber of 600 was too big. I hope the Joint Committee will listen to those concerns before bringing forward detailed proposals.

Helen Jackson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Joint Committee has ducked the main issue? The fact is that there are far too many people at the other end of this building trying to form a serious revising Chamber, and they are there until the day they die. Will he ensure that when his proposals for a serious second Chamber are made in conjunction with the Joint Committee, that Chamber will be no more than 200 in size?

Mr. Cook: I agree very much with the concern expressed by my hon. Friend. In my speech to the House two weeks ago, I expressed my concern at proposals for a second Chamber that would be as large as the House of Commons. No second Chamber anywhere else in the world is as large as our second Chamber. As for the number of Members, only five second Chambers in the democratic world have more than 200 Members. All the others are smaller.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that no other Chamber, first or second, anywhere in the world is more cost-effective and has more expertise at its disposal?

Mr. Cook: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was about to describe the House of Commons as such and of course, as Leader of the House of Commons, I would totally concur that it is pre-eminent in that regard, as in others. On the cost of a second Chamber, he raises an important and relevant point. If we want a cost-effective second Chamber, we need a small second Chamber.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Congestion Charge

32. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will provide pay point facilities for hon. Members to make congestion charge payments on the parliamentary estate. [95357]

Sir Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): Following my reply to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir Brian Mawhinney) on 27 January, I am pleased to say that a congestion charge pay point will be installed by Transport for London next to the cash machines on the ground floor.

Michael Fabricant: That is reassuring for people like myself who are not telephonically challenged and will use a cell phone to send SMS messages to pay congestion charges, and of course for Ministers who are exempt and can swan around central London to their heart's content without paying any congestion charge. However, for all others, will the facility be ready by 17 February?

Sir Archy Kirkwood: All efforts are being bent to that end. I cannot guarantee that, but we are doing the best that we can to have the pay point installed as soon as Transport for London can manage it. On who is liable to pay the charges, I remind the House that your guidance through the Fees Office, Mr. Speaker, is that Members will not be able to use public funds through their incidental office expenses for such a purpose. What happens to Ministers is mercifully nothing whatever to do with me.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Statements

33. **Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): To ask the President of the Council what plans the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons has to recommend the introduction of hon. Members' statements along the line of those in the Canadian Parliament. [95358]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): None.

Paul Flynn: Does not the fact that Members have an opportunity to raise matters of urgent importance only in business questions and as points of order, many of which are bogus, prove that we need some system such as that in the Canadian Parliament, whereby for a quarter of an hour every day Members have a minute each to raise such points? If the system works splendidly in the Canadian Parliament, why can we not have it here?

Mr. Bradshaw: My hon. Friend is perfectly entitled to make such representations to the Modernisation Committee. Back Benchers have good opportunities in this place to make their views known. I am not sure that, given that this place is supposed to be about scrutinising Ministers and getting them to respond, allowing a simple statement to be made or printed in *Hansard* is necessarily the best way of improving Back-Bench engagement.

Points of Order

12.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Has it been brought to your attention that, in a lead letter to *The Times* this morning, a statement from a Member of the other place—a Liberal Democrat spokesman, no less—says:

"The House of Commons has never been less important since the death of Henry VII and probably not since the death of Henry III"?

Some of us may think that that is rather near the bone. Is that possibly because we are spending the rest of the day wittering away about the House of Lords, which could have been done at any time in the past 100 years, rather than discussing a motorway without exit to war?

I draw your attention in particular to the answer given yesterday to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) by the Prime Minister, who said:

"If there is a conflict and Saddam's regime is removed, it is important to give absolute assurances and undertakings to the people of Iraq that we shall deal with any humanitarian consequences."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 28.]

The second item on the World Service this morning was that the international agencies would refuse to give any aid whatever in the event of a war brought about by America and Britain. In those circumstances, ought not that to take precedence over a discussion on the House of Lords?

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that I had better answer the Father of the House's question first, because it was so long I shall forget what he asked.

I do not know about anyone down the Corridor. All I would say is that that noble Lord is entitled to his opinion. If that is his opinion, he is misinformed. The hon. Gentleman is raising through a point of order matters that are really for debate, not for the Chair—and he knows that. That is the best thing that I can say to him.

Mr. Kaufman: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Can you explain why my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has become so desperate that he quoted a Liberal Democrat peer as some kind of biblical reference?

Mr. Speaker: I will not get into that territory.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As a result of last week's breakdown of the General Affairs Council in Brussels, I tabled several urgent questions to both the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary about the possible arrival on these shores of Robert Mugabe. Several of my questions referred to last Thursday's EU ambassadors' meeting to which the buck was passed. Bearing in mind the urgency of the matter—the sanctions regime expires on 18 February—could you provide me with some advice on how I get my answers from the Foreign Office and the Home Office before it is too late?

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Lady was not in the Chamber yesterday when a similar matter was raised. She should get on to the Minister concerned; get on the phone and ask him why those questions are not being answered. That is the first thing to do.

Angus Robertson (Moray): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I have given previous notice to your office of a matter concerning last night's debate on the European Parliament (Representation) Bill. In that debate, I spoke in favour of amendments Nos. 2 to 7. The debate on those amendments should have been reported in column 82 of today's *Hansard*, but there is no record whatever of it having taken place. Similarly, there is no record of the House having divided on those amendments. Will you confirm that the debate in which those amendments were discussed did not take place in camera, nor was the vote secret? In your experience, can you remember *Hansard* not reporting a complete debate on an amendment before the House—or, indeed, a vote? What efforts can hon. Members make to ensure that we, our constituents and the media can see, read and hear what goes on in the House through the medium of *Hansard*, and can understand which Members voted in favour of an unprecedented cut in Scottish representation in the European Parliament?

Mr. Speaker: I think that I can help the hon. Gentleman, who gave me prior notice of the matter. I have looked into it and can tell him that it was a printer's omission, which happens. *Hansard* will be reprinted with every word that he uttered. I am sure that his constituents will await that copy of *Hansard* with bated breath.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I cannot tell you how reassuring that answer is. I understand from Sky News that the Prime Minister is now rushing hotfoot from Le Touquet, hopefully with a flea in his ear, to vote in the Divisions this evening. Is there any procedural means by which we could delay our votes, as it would be tragic if he did not arrive in time?

Mr. Speaker: All that I can say is that the Prime Minister is like any other hon. Member and has equal opportunities to vote. No special consideration is given to anyone.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): Further to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), Mr. Speaker. Could *Hansard* make sure that all the interventions that put his contribution into its true perspective are included as well?

Mr. Speaker: I assure the hon. Gentleman that his words will be there also.

Sex Discrimination in Private Clubs

12.38 pm

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the prevention of sex discrimination in relation to membership of, or the benefits, facilities and services afforded by, clubs and other private associations.

The Bill seeks to bring private clubs with 25 members or more within the coverage of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The purpose of the Bill is to make unlawful the unequal treatment of male and female members, associates and guests of mixed-sex private clubs with 25 or more members. It mirrors a similar provision in the Race Relations Act 1976.

If it is already illegal to discriminate against people in private clubs on the grounds of race, should it not also be illegal to do so on the grounds of gender or disability? The Bill will not outlaw single-sex clubs. Provisions will be included that make the unequal treatment of male and female guests in single-sex clubs unlawful at functions to which both sexes are invited.

I am stepping on well-trodden ground. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) has been here before me, as has Lord Faulkner of Worcester, whose Bill, which was given qualified support by the Government, made some progress in the other place in the last Session—some progress, but not enough, which is why the Bill is returning to the House under the ten-minute rule. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for North Dorset and his wife, and their tenacity on the issue. So appalled, I gather, was the hon. Gentleman at the treatment of his wife at the hands of the Carlton club that he gave the club six months to change its ways, or threatened to resign. True to his word, he did resign, I understand, and I congratulate him on taking that principled stance against the Carlton club.

In considering the scope of the Bill, I thought about covering both sex and disability discrimination in relation to the membership of private clubs. However, I was gazumped—in a positive way—on 22 January by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, when he announced that the Government would publish a draft disability Bill this year. The Bill will cover membership of large clubs under the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Government said that they would consult widely on how and when the practical changes involved would take effect. I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House will welcome the measure and the difference that it will make to people with disabilities.

I have met my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, and I am much encouraged that the draft disability Bill later this year will level the playing field for people with disabilities. Accordingly, I changed my own Bill to focus on improving the application of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 to private clubs.

Many private clubs that have both men and women as members continue to restrict access to some or all facilities to one sex. The hon. Member for North Dorset was right to point out in his speech to the House that the biggest villains of the piece are usually golf clubs. Some golf clubs still restrict playing times for women members, making it difficult for women to play during peak hours at weekends. That is a result of the rather prehistoric attitude that women do not work, so they can play during the week, freeing up the course for male members at the weekends.

According to a survey conducted by *Golf World* in 2001, more than two thirds of the clubs surveyed were operating under rules that discriminate against the 140,000 regular women golfers. Half of the clubs that took part in the survey admitted that men and women are charged different fees for full membership, and that the hours that women can play golf in those clubs are restricted.

The Bill applies not just to sport and leisure clubs, but to all private clubs, including Conservative Associations, and to old-fashioned Labour clubs as well. The Club and Institute Union, which represents almost 2,700 working men's clubs in Britain, reports that some 60 per cent. of affiliated mixed-sex clubs still deny female members full rights. The CIU's constitution does not permit pass cards to be issued to women members. The cards are a means of identification, allowing a member of one CIU club to visit another club and enjoy, as a guest, almost the same level of membership as they hold in their own club. While the CIU has tried on five separate occasions to abolish that rule, it has yet to achieve the two-thirds majority necessary to do so. I hope that the Bill will help it along the way. The concern is that such outdated attitudes are leading to members deserting many of those clubs.

On the voyage of discovery that is the research stage of a ten-minute Bill, I came across a wealth of evidence on the lack of support for women in clubs. One example came from a letter from Kelly Bussey, who wrote:

"The other night while at the club myself and my mother were asked to leave the room because a meeting was to take place. I found this to be very demeaning and humiliating considering that we are regular patrons of the club and they have no problem taking our money at the bar. Apparently we could not even stay in the room in silence to finish our drink. Are the club breaking the law?"

I am afraid that it is not breaking the law—not yet, anyway.

The petty restrictions placed on women can be degrading. Other examples include being forbidden to use a club's main staircase, enter through the main entrance or order a drink at the bar. Those are just some of the indignities that women face in clubs from day to day. Such treatment, whether of a member or a guest of a private club, sends out the message that discrimination is okay in 2003.

The outlook is not all doom and gloom. I am pleased that the Department for Work and Pensions appears to be listening to me and to other Back Benchers when we call for earlier legislation on behalf of people with disabilities, but more than 50 per cent. of our population are women.

I am aware of the argument that clubs' rights should be outside the law because they are private. However, those arguments hark back to a different era. They no longer reflect the views of most clubs, and they do not offer a legitimate excuse for continuing to permit the unequal and often demeaning treatment that women receive. The Bill would be a positive step towards offering women the respect and equality of opportunity that they should expect as a right in a modern Britain. To continue to deny women those rights is to agree that discrimination on grounds of sex is still legitimate.

Given that in 1976, the House passed the Race Relations Act, which did not accept that discrimination on grounds of race was acceptable in private clubs, why are we still struggling almost 30 years later to achieve the same rights for women? It is time to put that right.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Parmjit Dhanda, Mr. Robert Walter, Jim Knight, John Robertson, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr. David Drew, Mr. Chris Mole, Ms Candy Atherton, Mr. Richard Allan, Mrs. Annette L. Brooke, Joan Ruddock and Mr. Simon Thomas.

Sex Discrimination in Private Clubs

Mr. Dhanda accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for the prevention of sex discrimination in relation to membership of, or the benefits, facilities and services afforded by, clubs and other private association: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March, and to be printed [Bill 53].

House of Lords Reform

Mr. Speaker: I have a statement relating to the main business. In the debate on House of Lords reform, I have selected the amendment to the motion for option No. 1, in the name of the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth).

For the benefit of the House, I will now set out the procedure to be followed at the end of the debate this afternoon. Under the Order of the House of 30 January, at five o'clock, I shall first put the Question on the amendment to the motion for option No. 1, followed by the main Question. Thereafter, the Questions will be put successively on each of the remaining six options.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As one who is very glad that you have selected that amendment, I wonder whether you could possibly help those of us who are in a slightly difficult position. If the motion that I favour is not approved, I would rather vote for a unicameral House. Having talked to hon. Members in all parts of the House, I believe that a number of them share the view that, if their own particular preference is not selected, they would rather go unicameral. Would it be possible, therefore, to have that vote at the end of the proceedings, rather than the beginning?

Mr. Speaker: That option is at the beginning, not the end.

12.51 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): I beg to move,

That this House approves Option 1 (fully appointed) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).

I am conscious of the rich irony that that is the motion for an all-appointed second Chamber.

The other week, I found myself listening to a radio discussion on "Waiting for Godot". I believe that it was celebrating the 40th anniversary of the first production of the play. I was struck by the fact that there is a real possibility that we could drift into House of Lords reform becoming our parliamentary equivalent of "Waiting for Godot", as it never arrives and some have become rather doubtful whether it even exists, but we sit around talking about it year after year. The first attempt to achieve reform of the second Chamber was made in 1911. In our case, this particular performance has been going on for much more than 40 years; it has lasted almost a century. Tonight, the House has an opportunity to bring down the curtain on what has been the longest political indecision in our history. It can make a conclusion and, I hope, a bold decision for a democratic second Chamber that belongs to this Chamber.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) *rose—*

Mr. Cook: If I may, I should like to continue a little longer, as I have only just got into my stride.

The decisions tonight will take place on a free vote. It is to the Government's credit that they have said that this is a parliamentary matter that should be decided by

[Mr. Cook]

Parliament on a free vote, not a whipped vote. I have been rather struck in the past few days by the fact that the media have found it difficult to find the language to report this process. It has been particularly difficult for some of those in the media who have for years been urging Members of Parliament to be more independent and less dragooned. If we are to have a free vote, we should not be concerned that there will be differences of views. On the contrary, we should celebrate the fact that the free vote is allowing us to express differences of views, rather than deplore it.

Mr. Hogg: As one who supports the right hon. Gentleman on this matter, may I ask him whether he can tell the House that, even if the second Chamber itself votes against a House that is elected either wholly in or in part, the Government will introduce legislation to reflect the will of this House?

Mr. Cook: We had an extended exchange on exactly that point only half an hour ago during oral questions. As I told the House then, it would be most unwise of me to anticipate at this particular point the votes made in either Chamber in four or five hours' time. As I said on that occasion—I am fortunate that there is now a rather larger audience to hear my plea—what is crucial is that the Commons come to one clear, single and commanding view on the way forward. If we can secure that in the Commons at five o'clock, as Leader of the House I shall certainly seek to do all that I can to ensure that that option is carried through.

It has famously been observed that there is a range of views on what the reform should be. My personal view is that, if we are serious about reform, we should have a largely or wholly elected second Chamber. In the modern world, legitimacy is conferred by democracy. That is why we committed ourselves in our manifesto to a second Chamber that is more representative and democratic. I do not see how it can be a democratic second Chamber if it is also an election-free zone.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Will he clarify whether his interpretation of election includes indirect election from regional assemblies or other such bodies?

Mr. Cook: It is the case that a number of countries in Europe have found a way of assembling a democratic second Chamber through indirect elections. That is the case in France, Germany and the Netherlands. I fully respect the fact that a number of hon. Members in the Chamber would want indirect election to be at least part of the way in which a second Chamber could receive a democratic mandate. Personally, I am not unsympathetic to that perspective.

We all need to be clear about our terminology. If colleagues wish to have an indirectly elected Chamber or a partly indirectly elected Chamber, they are opting for an elected Chamber and should vote tonight for one of the elected options. If they vote for an appointed Chamber, they will be ruling out elections, whether direct or indirect.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland) *rose—*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I shall give way on this occasion, but I remind the House that a very large number of hon. Members wish to speak and that there is a limit to the number of occasions on which I can give way.

John Robertson: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. As somebody who wanted to vote for a directly elected Chamber, I have great difficulty in voting for a Chamber that is elected on the basis of a list system and not a first-past-the-post system.

Mr. Cook: There is nothing in the options that specified the precise method of election, but if we want to avoid friction between the two Chambers, it is important that the second Chamber is not elected on exactly the same basis and most certainly not with the same constituencies as the lower Chamber.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I must make some progress with my speech.

I said that we had committed ourselves in our manifesto to a democratic second Chamber. On previous occasions, my party has been even more explicit in saying that we want an elected second Chamber. Indeed, in the Plant report of 1993, we observed that

"an elected second chamber is Labour's ultimate aspiration".

The Plant committee had a truly distinguished membership. Among those who were members of the committee in 1993 are four members of the present Cabinet, including the Chief Whip. Lord Plant himself made an eloquent plea for a democratic Chamber in the debate in the other place. He said that

"political power and authority in a free society can be legitimately exercised only with the consent of those over whom power is exercised."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 643, c. 788.]

That consent can be obtained only by free and open elections—a principle that is powerfully entrenched in the attitudes of our country.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am most grateful to the Leader of the House for giving way. Is not the nub of the point Lord Plant's reference to power? The Prime Minister believes that the second Chamber should be a revising Chamber without the power to revoke. Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that it should be a revoking Chamber or a revising one? If he takes the latter view, how will he get the right number of people with the right expertise to stand for election?

Mr. Cook: Of course it must not be a revoking Chamber. The one point on which we are all agreed—indeed, I apprehend that even the second Chamber is agreed on this—is that the House of Commons should retain its pre-eminence. I shall turn later to how we can secure that, although I would welcome it if those in the House of Lords who said in their speeches that the

Commons should remain pre-eminent had not sometimes indicated in the tone of those speeches that they thought themselves superior.

I was making the point that the attitude to democratic elections is powerfully entrenched in public opinion. When we consulted on the White Paper on the House of Lords a year ago, 89 per cent. of those who responded favoured a majority-elected House. A year later, the latest opinion poll shows that 83 per cent. support a majority-elected House. The public have not wavered in their support for a democratic solution and nor should we.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): How is it intended to gauge opinion in this House if there is to be no separate vote to enable those of us who wish to support an indirectly elected Chamber to do so? If we simply vote for an elected Chamber, it will not be possible to distinguish those who are voting for direct elections from those who are voting for indirect elections. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is a major flaw in today's procedure?

Mr. Cook: The procedure that I am following is the procedure on which the House embarked when we appointed the Joint Committee and invited it to recommend options to us, and I shall put those options before the House tonight. It would have been quite wrong of me to tamper with those options. After the votes, the Joint Committee will consider detailed proposals on the basis of the opinions expressed by both Houses. It is entirely open to my hon. Friend, or to any other hon. Member, to lobby the Joint Committee to ensure that it understands that many of those who voted for an elected option may have wished the democratic mandate to be fulfilled through indirect election. I say to her, however, that if she votes for an all-appointed House, that is what she is likely to get from the Joint Committee or from any other source.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I will, because I know of my hon. Friend's great interest in this matter. Then, if I may, I will continue my speech.

Mr. Clelland: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if appointment—a word that I do not particularly like—came about through regional authorities or devolved assemblies appointing members, and they arrived at their appointees by way of indirect election, that would be entirely in line with our manifesto, because it would be a reformed and more democratic process?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is describing not a process of appointment but a process of indirect election. The key test is that if indirect election is to be democratic, it should issue from bodies that are themselves elected by universal suffrage and by direct election. If those bodies themselves have direct election, it would be entirely democratic—should that be the way in which we choose to go ahead—for them in turn to elect from their number representatives to the second Chamber. That is the democratic mandate of several second Chambers in Europe. If my hon. Friend wishes to achieve that outcome, he will have to support one of the options for an elected, not an appointed, second Chamber.

On reading the debate in the other place, I was struck by the large number of Members who oppose anybody being elected to the second Chamber on the grounds that the moment one let the democratic principle through its door, that democratic principle would prove to be so powerful and so unanswerable that it would swell until the whole place became democratic. Indeed, one peer, using a rather homely metaphor, described it as letting the genie out of the bottle. I cannot help but feel that if the democratic principle is so powerful and so unanswerable, it might just be the correct principle on which to act. It is odd that those who are most keen on appointment seem to be strikingly lacking in confidence that the virtues of appointment could survive in competition with election.

A number of speakers in the other place argued that appointment could provide for a more representative second Chamber. That is an arguable proposition, but it is not the real point. Legitimacy requires not merely representativeness but accountability, and only election can make those who claim to represent the nation accountable to the nation. We cannot make them accountable by privatising the process of appointment in relation to any variety of independent bodies.

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): The Labour party manifesto says that reform of the House of Lords will make it more representative of a democracy. Its author was one Tony Blair, Prime Minister. Can the Leader of the House explain why the Prime Minister now favours an appointed House, given his commitment in the Labour manifesto?

Mr. Cook: I was under the impression that I had myself quoted the Labour manifesto with approval and as a factor that should weigh heavily with those of us who stood for election on that manifesto. Of course, we have a collective process for producing the manifesto, and we are all bound by the words that we included in it and must attach weight to them when we make our decision.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): Is it not interesting that the greatest advocate of appointment is none other than the Lord Chancellor, who seems to have persuaded the Prime Minister in that respect, and who took the precaution of not being elected by anybody? Is there not a delicious irony in the fact that the one person who is the personification of hybridity in the British constitution, managing to combine at least three jobs in one, is the leading opponent of hybridity when it comes to putting together a sensibly mixed second Chamber?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend speaks with particular authority, as he was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Lord Chancellor for a whole year. All hon. Members look forward with great interest to the time when he writes his memoirs about that particular year. In the meantime, I would say only that the Lord Chancellor is not alone in his views. As far as I can tell, most of those who were appointed to the second Chamber believe that appointment is the perfect way in which to maintain it.

[Mr. Cook]

I was dealing with the point that we do not solve the problem of accountability by privatising the process of appointment. Some have argued that we can remove the difficulties involved in appointment through an independent process of appointment. I should remind hon. Members that we have already tested that process—indeed, tested it to destruction. We had an independent commission that proposed a list of independent peers—estimable people—but that list did not command universal respect. Indeed, it was such a major public relations disaster that, two years on, we have never dared to repeat it. That is not a criticism of those who were appointed, nor of those who did the appointing. It is an inherent risk of the process. If we exclude the public from the process of election, we should not be surprised when the public become cynical about those who pose as the people's peers. Trust is a reciprocal quality. If we want the public to trust politicians, we must trust the public to elect the right people.

Mr. Leigh: The fact remains that an appointed Chamber regularly defeats the Government, but this elected Chamber has not defeated the Government since 1997. What is the right hon. Gentleman's personal view of how to make elected members—if that is what we are to arrive at—genuinely independent? How will he remove them from the sources of patronage? Does he think that there is merit in preventing elected members of the upper House from becoming Ministers?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman's last point was pressed in the previous debate, and I would welcome the Joint Committee's views on it. On the generality of his remarks, he does not show the commitment to the democratic process that I would have hoped for from a Member of this House. After all, he came here through a process of election, he will be proud of that and he will claim to speak for his constituents on that basis. If we claim our own legitimacy through that process of election, it is not wise for us even to hint that appointment might be a more valid method of appointing representatives of the public in Parliament.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Leader of the House give way?

Mr. Cook: How could I resist the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Bercow: The right hon. Gentleman reiterated the plea that he made on 21 January for a commanding majority in favour of a substantially elected second Chamber. Although that is understandable, some of us find it worrying. Given that, as Churchill used to say, a majority of one is enough, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that if the House—by a majority of only one, if need be—voted for a majority elected second Chamber, it would be intolerable if we were eventually to be denied such a thing?

Mr. Cook: I have already said four times this afternoon that I do not intend to anticipate the votes. I hope that when we reach that point this evening, we will end up with a majority of more than one for one of the options. I invite the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the substantial hurdles that we have still to negotiate, even after today. We have to introduce a Bill, which will be subject to all the processes of scrutiny in the House. It has to go to the other place—

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): It will be a long, twisted road.

Mr. Cook: It will be long, with several obstacles, but I am not sure that it will be twisted. Before we embark on it, I should like to know that a commanding majority supports us. The larger the majority, the greater the ease with which we can bulldoze obstacles out of the way.

Mr. Peter Mandelson (Hartlepool): The thrust of my right hon. Friend's comments supports a directly elected rather than an indirectly elected second Chamber. If he wants a diverse, pluralistic, thoroughly representative second Chamber, it requires a system of election that is based on proportional representation. How long does he believe it will take for it to become clear to everyone that separate electoral systems for the two Chambers are untenable? It is inevitable that a single system of electing Members to Parliament would have to be adopted before long. That system would be proportional representation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Cook: I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend has carried the House with him. Let me unpack some of the different elements of his point. First, I am not arguing against indirect elections. Indeed, in several debates on reform I have strongly advocated indirect election as part of a mandate for a new democratic second Chamber.

Mr. Mandelson: What about the electoral system?

Mr. Cook: My right hon. Friend made a point about indirect election. He cannot pick and choose the bits of an intervention to which I respond.

Some form of devolved body covers one third of the British island. There is a strong case for representation of the devolved bodies in the second Chamber through indirect elections. That would count as the elected element. Hon. Members must therefore be clear that if that is part of the solution for securing a democratic reformed second Chamber, they must vote for an elected, not an appointed, option.

My right hon. Friend asked about the election of the directly elected element. It has been common ground in the many different reports on reform—the White Paper, the reports of the Wakeham commission and the Public Administration Committee—that the method of election for the second Chamber should not be the same as that for the first. That ensures that there is no rivalry between them and that their mandate and legitimacy are different.

I understand that my right hon. Friend is a robust advocate of the first-past-the-post system. If he is so committed to it, he should show more confidence in it and its ability to survive competition with alternative forms of election in Britain.

Mr. Mandelson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I shall not deny my right hon. Friend an opportunity to express confidence in the first-past-the-post system.

Mr. Mandelson: My right hon. Friend is wrong. I have never been a robust advocate of the first-past-the-post system. I have flirted with electoral reform, which is not quite the same as proportional representation. However, let me press him further. Are we not expecting a great deal of the electorate if they have to elect Members to two different Chambers of one Parliament, Members of the European Parliament and Members of devolved Administrations through different electoral systems? That is untenable. There will be overwhelming public pressure to converge on one electoral system, and it will prove difficult for my right hon. Friend to resist the argument that it should be proportional. That is the inevitable logic of the course of action that he is urging on the House.

Mr. Cook: I apprehend from my right hon. Friend's comments that he is not prepared to defend the first-past-the-post system. I therefore suggest to Labour Members to whom he may have hoped to appeal that they should not be seduced by his case, since he is not prepared to defend the basis of their election.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: Let me respond to the other point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) made. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] I must be allowed to respond to one intervention before taking another. That is the way in which we proceed.

I have never been attracted to the argument that our electors are not capable of coping with the complexity of the electoral system or with multiple elections. Other countries such as France, Germany, Spain and Italy have different methods of election to forms of devolved Government; all have elections for a central, national Government and the European Parliament, and many have elections for a second Chamber. We should show confidence in the wisdom and intelligence of the people who sent us here and their ability to handle the idea that they are entitled to democracy in more than one Chamber of this place.

Mr. Kaufman: As the only hon. Member who served on the royal commission, let me make it clear that the proposition that my right hon. Friend attributed to its report was not contained in it.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his rebuke, which I take to heart. However, I said that the royal commission did not recommend that there should be elections for the second Chamber on the same basis as for the first Chamber. I believe that my recollection is correct.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak) *rose—*

Mr. Kaufman *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I must give way to my right hon. Friend, since we appear to be in dispute.

Mr. Kaufman: If my right hon. Friend refers to the relevant section of the royal commission's report—I had a large hand in drafting that section—it makes no such recommendation. That was deliberate. Lord Hurd and others agreed on that. There was a recommendation before and after the section, but none on the subject to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Mr. Cook: Who am I to argue with such an august authority? However, I believe that I am correct in recalling that the royal commission proposed the election by regions of a modest number of people on the same basis as elections for the European Parliament. It is difficult to envisage how so few people could be elected for such a large region on the basis of first-past-the-post constituencies.

Mr. Levitt: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: No, I should like to try to share some of my thoughts with hon. Members.

I fully share the determination of many hon. Members that the House of Commons should remain the pre-eminent Chamber. I have been a Member of it for three decades and I have enjoyed no period more than the past two years, when I have had the immense privilege of being Leader of the House. I have no intention of conniving at any outcome in which the House of Commons does not retain its commanding role. The Chamber must remain the ring in which the clashes of opinion in the nation are fought out. Ability to command the confidence of a majority of Members of Parliament must remain the test for every Government.

There are many ways in which to keep an elected second Chamber in a subordinate place. We could give the conventions that limit the powers of the other place legal force in a reform Act. We could ensure that the size as well as the powers of the second Chamber are limited. The Joint Committee proposes a second Chamber of 600. That is too big—I believe that there is consensus on that. The second Chamber should not be the same size as the Commons. It should be much smaller and therefore weaker in its claims to represent the nation.

Taming a second Chamber is not a new challenge. Countries all around the globe have cracked it. I do not believe that any hon. Member would seriously argue that Britain does not have the constitutional wit to achieve an outcome secured by France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Germany and 40 other countries that have an elected second Chamber that remains subordinate.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): My right hon. Friend has not yet referred to the amendment that the Speaker in his wisdom selected and which my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) tabled. It is supported by more than 100 hon. Members. I gather from the tenor of my right hon. Friend's remarks that he does not intend to support our amendment in favour of unicameralism. Does he intend to vote against it, or abstain?

Mr. Cook: I have to say to my right hon. Friend that I am not persuaded of the case for the amendment. I shall therefore be unable to support it and will naturally cast my vote in opposition to it. Since he raises the issue of the amendment, may I say to him that I sympathise with

[Mr. Cook]

the second part of it, which calls for further reform of our own legislative procedures? I have always felt that the least impressive case for a second Chamber is that we are so poor at passing legislation that we need someone else to revise our mistakes. But, however perfect we made our procedures, and however perfect this Chamber became, there would always be the case for a second opinion. No other European country of any size has only one chamber. All have two, on the basis that it increases the prospects for scrutiny of government in the modern era.

I understand the growing impatience of my right hon. Friend and a number of others over the length of time that this argument is taking. The longer that we continue to argue over the reform of the second Chamber, the greater will be the risk that more and more people will ask, "Why are we bothering with reform? Why do we not proceed to abolition?" That is why it is in the interest of the other place, as well of this Chamber, that we reach a clear decision this evening on the way forward to reform of the second Chamber.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I will give way on this occasion, but this must be the last time, because I am very anxious that other hon. Members should have the opportunity to speak.

Mr. Soley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. As a member of the Joint Committee, I, along with others, will presumably be asked to put together the various views expressed in this Chamber. My right hon. Friend will already be aware of the wide diversity of views, even on individual issues such as total election or large-part election. I suggest to him that, if we want to continue with the reform—which is the point that he was making—the way to do so is to recognise that the second Chamber must be a hybrid chamber, that the Joint Committee must have the flexibility to be able to come back with recommendations, and that we are involved in a process of reform and not in some final solution to be decided today.

Mr. Cook: I am very much in favour of the Joint Committee having a degree of flexibility to respond to the votes in the House. I am also very attached to the importance of Members of this House showing flexibility when they approach the decision this evening. The procedures that we have adopted will enable hon. Members to vote for their second and third preferences, and not just for their first preferred option. If we are to find the critical mass of the centre of gravity, hon. Members must be willing to compromise on their own preferred option. In particular, I urge those who support a 100 per cent. elected House not to insist on 100 per cent. or nothing, because there would then be a danger of ending up with nothing. I hope that those who want a largely elected House will vote for all the options that would give that result.

I was saying earlier that there are ways in which we can ensure that the second Chamber remains the subordinate Chamber. What is not acceptable is to keep the second Chamber subordinate by keeping it illegitimate. That would not only weaken the second Chamber but undermine Parliament as a whole, when what we need is a democratic partner in the second Chamber to assist us in winning back public respect for Parliament as a whole. I have already expressed my disappointment that some of the speeches in the debate on this issue in the other place a fortnight ago carried the implication that being a professional politician was something to be rather ashamed of, and that there was something disreputable about political parties and something definitely distasteful about the rough trade of popular elections. Out of sheer self-respect, this Chamber cannot give house room to those ideas.

I am proud that I came here by popular election and through the democratic process. All of us went through that process; we all came here through the ballot box. We cannot accept that there is any fairer or more legitimate way of forming a chamber in a democratic, modern Parliament. That is why I shall be voting for the options for a 100 per cent., an 80 per cent. and a 60 per cent. elected Chamber. The precise percentage is not important, however. What is important is the principle that the majority in any parliamentary chamber should be elected by the people for whom it legislates, and I urge the House to vote for that principle tonight.

1.24 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I almost hesitate to dwell yet again on the stark contradiction that has been pointed to many times today—and before today—between the Labour party manifesto, which stated:

> "We are committed to completing House of Lords reform . . . to make it more representative and democratic",

and the Prime Minister's astonishing revelation last week that he now believes nothing of the kind. Perhaps hon. Members on both sides of the House will regret the fact that the Prime Minister has not had an opportunity to explain more fully how he arrived at that conclusion, which is in direct contradiction to his own party's manifesto.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Before my right hon. Friend makes too much of this point, does he remember that, in 1979, we had a manifesto commitment to devolution?

Mr. Forth: First of all, I am far too young to remember that. Secondly, in 1979, I was too busy fighting and winning my own election to the European Parliament, so I was fighting on a different manifesto altogether.

The other thing that I am reluctant to do is to intrude on what is a quite unprecedented public auction for support between the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister. It remains to be seen who will win that auction. I, like the Leader of the House, would not like to guess, because the whole matter is deliciously uncertain at this stage.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): While the right hon. Gentleman is stirring, would he like to stir a little in his own pot by explaining what his party's policy is on this

issue, and how many Conservative Members in this House and in the other Chamber he expects to vote for that policy?

Mr. Forth: Yes, I would be very happy to remind the House that our policy is to have an 80 per cent. elected and 20 per cent. appointed upper House of about 300 Members. Of course, I shall be inviting my colleagues—and, indeed, others—to consider supporting that kind of approach, but on a free vote. I am pretty certain that not all my colleagues will necessarily follow that view, but that is different matter altogether from the Prime Minister of the day and the Leader of the House of the day openly contradicting each other and inviting support from their colleagues. [HON. MEMBERS: "It is a free vote."] Labour Members say that it is a free vote, and indeed it is. We shall be intrigued to see what the outcome of that free vote is.

I want to remind the House of what the Royal Commission said on this subject in January 2000. It said:

"We show how the second Chamber can complement and support the decisive political role of the House of Commons while increasing the effectiveness of Parliament as a whole by scrutinising proposed legislation and holding the Government to account".

Those are the key words. In December 2002, the Joint Committee said:

"The aim of maintaining the effectiveness and enhancing the legitimacy of the Second Chamber has become common ground."

That, too, is a key phrase. So we have these strands running through this debate to the effect that we require a legitimate and effective upper Chamber to do what Parliament is expected to do. What puzzles and frustrates me is that so many Members in this House seem to be afraid of that idea. The sad truth is that the main challenge to the House of Commons is the Government. It is they, in my view, who have reduced and diminished the role of this House, rather than any challenge from the upper House, in its present form or in any future form.

Mr. Leigh: Most people here want to be in the Government. How does my right hon. Friend propose to make these elected Members in the other place genuinely independent of the Executive?

Mr. Forth: I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend's suggestion that we should at least consider very carefully having no Ministers in a reformed upper House, for exactly that reason. As those of us who have spent any time here know all too well, a combination of patronage, preferment, strict timetabling and all the other things that we have seen developing over the last few years, has resulted in the House of Commons becoming primarily the provider and sustainer of the Government of the day. Sadly, it does not do a very good job of holding the Government to account. Surely, therefore, it is right for us to look to an Upper House with legitimacy and self-confidence to do that job. We are talking about two distinct roles, and I hope that the debate can develop on that basis.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Has my right hon. Friend, with his remarkable persuasive powers, given up all hope of influencing this Parliament to look again at reforms that have done the job of doing down this House's ability properly to hold the Executive to account? Is he already surrendering that power to another place?

Mr. Forth: I have probably effectively given up in this Parliament, under this Government, with this majority. What I have certainly not given up on is the real possibility that in a Parliament of the near future, under a different Government, we will seek ways of restoring much of the balance between the House of Commons and the Executive of the day. A good Government should have no fear of that. I should like to see the Government of the day—my own Government, preferably—accountable to both this House and the Upper House in different ways.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a substantially elected second Chamber that was a Minister-free zone would not just be a good thing in itself, but would carry the additional boon of enabling us to be free of the services of Lord Irvine?

Mr. Forth: I am sure many Members on both sides of the House cannot wait for that day; but I hope we will not be diverted to the subject of the role of one man, no matter how eminent he may be. In that very context, however, I was rather alarmed to see, in today's *Evening Standard*, the following rather sinister report:

"Number 10 officials were pleading with MPs not to 'sleepwalk' into creating a more powerful Upper House that could hamper the Government's ability to put policies into law. The Prime Minister believes elected peers would block controversial Bills—and be less easy to ignore."

That has let several cats out of the bag, and it rather proves the point I am trying to make.

Why is it that we cannot trust the people? Why is it that some Members of this House, and certainly of the other place, are so afraid of giving voters more of a say in both Houses? That is an insult to voters.

Tony Wright: In the context of "not sleepwalking", will the right hon. Gentleman answer a question? The Leader of the House said that, in seeking to secure a majority principle from today's votes so that Parliament could speak with a coherent voice, he urged all Members to vote for 60 per cent., 80 per cent. or 100 per cent. Can the right hon. Gentleman say the same to his own supporters?

Mr. Forth: What I have said is that I hope as many of my colleagues as possible will vote with me for 100 per cent. and 80 per cent., but my judgment is that 60 per cent. is a step too far. My colleagues will, of course, make up their own minds, and I do not doubt that the excellent work of the hon. Gentleman's Committee will be one of the elements they will weigh in the balance before deciding how to vote.

Mr. Foulkes: While making recommendations to his colleagues, does the right hon. Gentleman not find it astonishing that the Leader of the House and, now, the shadow Leader should make speeches without referring to an amendment signed by more than 100 Members and selected by Mr. Speaker? What is his attitude to the amendment? Will he oppose it?

Mr. Forth: I should have thought that, having said what I have said about the sadly diminished role of the

[Mr. Forth]

House of Commons in the current circumstances and hence the vital necessity of a legitimised, invigorated, self-confident upper House, I could hardly in logic either vote for or urge others to vote for the amendment. I do not believe that unicameralism is the right way forward, given our present dispensation, our present parliamentary provision and our constitutional arrangements.

I am aware that unicameralism works in a limited number of other contexts—not least that of New Zealand, one of my favourite countries. I readily accept that in very different circumstances it can be made to work. I do not, however, think it appropriate for us in our circumstances, at this stage of our constitutional development, for the reasons that I have given.

Sir Patrick Cormack: May I ask my right hon. Friend a question similar to the one that I asked the Leader of the House? In arguing so passionately for elections, does he believe that the second Chamber should be a revising Chamber pure and simple, as the Joint Committee suggests, or does he believe that it should have power to revoke?

Mr. Forth: I think I prefer the revocation to the revising end of things, for the reason that I have given. I do not shrink from the idea of legitimacy flowing from elections; I find it entirely acceptable.

Let me pick up a point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson), and the thrust of what was said by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)—who I thought was extremely patronising about voters. I have absolute confidence that we can devise a system of elections to an upper House that would make it distinct from this House. There could, for instance, be many fewer Members. Our official policy favours 300, but I would be prepared to consider even fewer. There could be large electorates, which I had as a Member of the European Parliament. There could be long terms of office—eight, nine or 10 years—and perhaps a third of Members could be elected every two or three years to separate the electoral cycle from that of the lower House. There are many ways of achieving elections and legitimacy, while distinguishing the method of election from that of the House of Commons.

Taking up the point made by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool, I would add that we do not need proportional representation to do that. It would be perfectly possible—indeed, I would prefer it—to do what we did in the glorious early days of the European Parliament, when I was resoundingly elected by the wise people of Birmingham, North back in 1979 under the first-past-the-post system with four large electorates. That seemed to me to work perfectly well.

I believe that there are answers to these questions. They all come back, do they not, to the age-old concept of democracy, votes, people participating, and elections. Many have suggested, both in our last debate and in this one, that voters will not understand the system, that they are easily confused, that they will be bored by the whole thing and that they will not bother to turn out. What an attitude to take towards our voters! As the Leader of the House has said several times today, we are the product of those voters—of their judgment and their ability to turn out. It really will not do for us to say now, rather loftily, that all they can manage is to elect us and no one else.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): While he is talking about age-old concepts, will my right hon. Friend recognise that some of us are keen to ensure that those who would never consider standing for election but are very distinguished in their own fields, and contribute enormously to debates in the upper House, continue to have a role that could not exist in a 100 per cent. elected House and might not exist in a largely elected House?

I understand the preference of many Members, including my right hon. Friend, for an elected element, but does my right hon. Friend accept that many of us want to pay tribute to the huge contribution made by our hereditary peers over the years? Does he accept that some of us regret the lack of an opportunity to vote to retain the status quo?

Mr. Forth: I readily welcome my hon. Friend's comments. I agree with much of what he has said, not least his tribute to our hereditary colleagues in another place. I hesitate, however, to be carried away too much by the idea of very important, very distinguished people making a vital contribution. I mean no disrespect by this, but I think it fair to say that the contribution of many of those very distinguished people is at best sporadic. I want a vigorous upper House, vigorously holding the Government of the day to account and making its own distinctive contribution. A sporadic appearance by very important and distinguished people might not quite fit the bill.

I think we must now hear from as many Members as have an opportunity to speak. I will end by saying—here I join the Leader of the House—that I sincerely and devoutly hope that, after the Government have marched us up this constitutional hill, the House will not allow itself to slither down the other side.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I remind the House that Mr. Speaker has imposed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which applies from now on.

1.39 pm

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): I beg to move amendment (b), in line 1, leave out from 'House' to end and add

'declines to approve Option 1 as it does not accord with the principle of a unicameral Parliament.'

The amendment is in the name of myself and more than 100 Members who seek to establish a unicameral legislature. We did not table it because we take issue with the report produced by the Joint Committee under the very able chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). I accept that the seven options that the Committee came up with are entirely consistent with the terms of reference given to it.

but we believe that the House should have the option of a vote on abolition. I should say at the outset that I consider the amendment a serious option, although I accept that it may not command majority support when we vote later today. Of course, it is equally possible that it will attract at least as much support as some, or any, of the recommendations.

Those of us who have put our names to the amendment have not, as some have suggested, done so as a cynical spoiling tactic: we believe that there is a serious case for a unicameral legislature. However, I will spend a little time answering those who have criticised our motives. As I have said, one particular criticism is that we have set up our argument for cynical purposes. For such a charge to have any substance, we would have to have some other, undisclosed motive: in other words, we would have to be supporting abolition as a smokescreen for some wholly different purpose. Other than in one or two cases that I shall refer to in a moment, nobody who signed up for this option was asked to support anything other than the option of abolition; nor, in most cases, did they offer an opinion as to what their second preference, if any, might be. So for the most part, I have no idea why my hon. Friends and others supported either the early-day motion or the amendment, other than for the obvious reason that they agreed with the position set out.

I can, however, give some information about my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) and me. His first preference is for abolition, but failing that, he favours a wholly elected second Chamber. Similarly, I favour abolition, but because of the problems posed by a rival Chamber, which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister referred to last week, and because of the inevitable inconsistencies of a hybrid Chamber, my second preference is for an appointed Chamber or for the interesting and novel suggestion of an indirectly elected second Chamber. I suspect that each of my hon. Friends who supports abolition has individual reasons for doing so and for adhering to whatever second preferences they may have.

The second criticism, which has been levelled against Labour colleagues in particular, is that there was a manifesto commitment for reform, not abolition. That is true, but as I understand it, we are in the early stages of a process, and I suspect that we are unlikely to implement any proposal this side of a general election. So who knows what any party's manifesto will contain at the next general election?

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: In a moment—I want to finish this point.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has shown again today that he is the strongest proponent of the manifesto argument. He may wish to correct me, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) made clear, our manifesto makes no reference to, for example, the principle of top-up fees or, for that matter, to foundation hospitals.

Sir Patrick Cormack *rose—*

Mrs. Laing *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, just as he has a second preference, so do some of us? Although I shall probably vote against his amendment because it is being called first, I would infinitely prefer a unicameral system with safeguards to a wholly or largely elected House that was a challenge to this one. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that a number of hon. Members share that position?

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—he makes a perfectly reasonable point very effectively. As the 10-minute restriction applies to me, I do not intend to give way any further.

Mrs. Laing: Just once more.

Mr. Howarth: I think that the hon. Lady needs to listen more carefully.

The final argument against abolition—here, the intervention of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) is of help—is that it lacks intellectual substance. I must confess that I find that the oddest criticism of all. The case for a unicameral Parliament has sound historical antecedents, and there are many contemporary precedents within the UK and abroad. The legislatures of Scotland and New Zealand, and of more than one Scandinavian country, are unicameral, and so far as I can tell, they work well. There is no criticism in Scotland or elsewhere—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps there is criticism from my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes). However, such criticisms may be less about such legislatures' operation than about their actions on certain occasions.

Interestingly, much of the case for reforming the House of Lords stems from criticisms about the House of Commons' lack of effectiveness. Three criticisms are commonly cited: first, that this House is not sufficiently powerful to hold the Executive properly to account; secondly, that we do not scrutinise legislation well enough; and thirdly, that we do not debate the great issues of the day with the passion and consistency that those who elected us would expect. I accept that, to varying degrees, all three criticisms have some currency.

For example, it is true that, under both Conservative and Labour Governments, legislation is often deficient in execution, if not in intent. Similarly, we do not act as what used to be called the "cockpit of democracy". For example, people have different views on Iraq. We have had only a couple of debates on Iraq so far, and I was fortunate enough to be called in one of them. However, hundreds of Members of this House have been unable to express their views on what should or will happen in Iraq—or, for that matter, to vote on the issue.

[Mr. Howarth]

There is no lack of intellectual substance in our arguments. We believe that the House of Commons should be reformed before we turn our attention to the House of Lords, which we should then abolish.

Before I conclude, I want to discuss the anachronistic nature of the House of Lords, which still contains an hereditary element. I agree that hereditary membership of any part of any legislature is absurd, and that is an important motive for abolition or reform. The question that follows is how to resolve this situation. The simple, and in my view most practical, solution is abolition. As the seven options before us demonstrate, reform leads either to corrosive rivalry—as would inevitably be the case with an elected Chamber—or confusion and inconsistency in the case of a hybrid Chamber. We have yet to discover whether an appointed system or indirect elections can be further developed in such a way as to command widespread support or consensus.

My central argument is that if, as I believe, the pressing deficiency is in this House, reforming the other place is hardly a logical response. The urgent need is for reform of the House of Commons—for reform not of our working hours or of other matters relating to personal comfort, but of the way that we do our job, so that we can do it better. Why do we not take up that task first? I suspect that the reason, which we doubtless all find depressing, is that we as a political class do not enjoy the respect of the public that many of our predecessors enjoyed. However, that is no reason to set off on an odyssey of constitutional reform, the destination of which nobody knows. The better way is to stand up for the work of this House and to reform it, and, once we have done so, to say confidently, "We're doing our job properly. There is no need for a second Chamber."

1.49 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) because it is right that his amendment should be called for debate and a vote. It is extremely important that the whole House has that opportunity, which I hope will clear the air for votes that may occur thereafter. As I am from a churchgoing family and churchgoing part of the country, I always like to start with a text, in this case:

> "We are committed to completing House of Lords reform . . . to make it more representative and democratic."

That commitment was not made by just one or two members of this House or by members of the Cabinet. Every Government Member committed himself or herself to that manifesto pledge. I presume that the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East admitted some support for that proposition at the last general election and not another proposal. I am certain that no Government Members who stood at the last election asked the public to support an appointed second House. If they did, perhaps they would like to stand up.

It is extraordinary to suggest that, by voting for a wholly appointed second House today, there could be a different form of election. If all Members of the other place were appointed, clearly they would not be there through direct or indirect elections. They will be selected, not elected. It would be absurd for any right hon. or hon. Member to think that indirect election can be achieved by voting for a wholly or partly appointed House of Lords.

Mr. Clelland: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the list system, which I presume his party favours as a proportional representation measure, is a form of appointment? It would provide for individuals to be appointed by political parties. The electorate would have no say. Does he further agree that, if the Scottish Parliament were to appoint members of the second Chamber by a form of indirect election, it would be more democratic than the system that we have at the moment?

Mr. Tyler: That would not be a form of appointment. I support the recommendation of the Select Committee in this House that election should be by open list or a single transferable vote. Therefore, the situation that the hon. Gentleman suggests does not apply. The electorate would choose, not the parties.

The purpose of this debate after a period of reflection and a delayed vote is to allow Members of this House to take note of what has been said in the other place. I hope that other right hon. and hon. Members have read the *Hansard* reports of two days of debate in the other place as I have done—and very interesting they are too.

I hope also that Members of the other place have read the reports of our proceedings—though I doubt it, because some Members of the upper House have a curious idea of this place and the way that we achieve our legitimacy as elected representatives. Some noble Lords clearly have aristocratic disdain for anything so vulgar as elected representatives. I am not just thinking of the Lord Chancellor.

I noted some extremely interesting comments from my noble Friend Lord Goodhart, who said:

> "I have never listened to a debate that has been so deeply depressing. The debate has been riddled with complacency and self-congratulation. Time after time, I have heard the voice of Dr. Pangloss—now Lord Pangloss—saying 'All is for the best in the best of all possible Houses'".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 643, c. 822.]

That is an admirable summary of two days' debate at the other end of this building.

Members of this Chamber who feel disposed to support appointed Members of the other Chamber should look to their allies, because they will find that those allies do not support a position with which they would feel comfortable. My noble Friend was being characteristically charitable, because most of the contributions in another place were smug, arrogant, self-satisfied, wholly anachronistic and out of touch with the real world. Even individuals who were Members of this House not long ago have turned their backs on elected representative democracy, which I find depressing and irksome. I urge any right hon. or hon. Members who feel disposed to follow the Lord Chancellor and his colleagues carefully to read their words not just about this House but about parliamentary democracy as a whole.

Tony Wright: Surely the real argument against an appointed second Chamber is that it would be an

extremely agreeable club where people would sit around telling each other how civilised and intelligent they are. This House and everybody else would regard it as completely irrelevant.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who not only chaired the best analysis of the situation but achieved unanimity in his Committee across all parties on an important element of the proposals—a hybrid, mixed membership second House.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the diatribe just unleashed by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) is a travesty? Does he agree that the House of Lords as presently constituted does an extremely valuable job in scrutinising legislation that this House does not have the chance properly to consider? Will he reflect on the fact that one of the most powerful contributions to this debate over the past two years or more has been by Lord Dahrendorf, a Liberal Democrat peer who cannot be categorised by any of the pejorative epithets that the hon. Member for Cannock Chase heaped on people?

Mr. Tyler: I listened with care to the hon. Gentleman, who may aspire to a seat in the other place. If he thinks that the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) was indulging in a diatribe, he should read the Lord Chancellor's comments about this House. Of course some of their lordships made distinguished contributions to their two-day debate, but the general tone was smug and arrogant. They seemed to think that, in the 21st century, they can continue precisely as they are. I do not believe that that is a sustainable proposition and hope that other right hon. and hon. Members take the same view.

Opponents of democratic representation harp on about the threat to the pre-eminence of this House. Taken to its logical conclusion, that argument suggests that we must keep the other place weak, unrepresentative and illegitimate—a word used by the Leader of the House. I presume that right hon. and hon. Members in any part of the House who take that view want to retain hereditary peers because that would be the best way to make the other place illegitimate. I am glad that Government Members will be voting my way on that issue as well.

Our own Select Committee carefully argued that this is not a zero-sum game. Both Houses can gain and, by working together, be more effective. The hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East—now that he is no longer a member of the Government—is all in favour of this House being more effective in its scrutiny of Government legislation and Executive action. Great: the more ex-Ministers it has, the better this House seems able to deal with the Government of the day. Both Houses, working together, have a responsibility. I am sure that members of the Select Committee and others accept that this is not a zero-sum game. The ability of both Houses, separately and together, to hold the Government of the day to account can be enhanced. That must be done if Parliament's legitimacy and the respect of the public is to be improved.

Mr. Levitt: The hon. Gentleman touched on the primacy of this House but did not answer the question. If he is advocating that the other place should have a more representative system of election, he is arguing that it should have greater legitimacy than this Chamber. If he is even arguing that the other place should have the same degree of representation in elections, which I suppose is his ultimate aim, that would bring about a clash between the authority of the two Houses and in no way addresses the primacy of this Chamber.

Mr. Tyler: I am surprised to find myself in total agreement with the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) on this issue. If there is a different system of election on a different day with no chance of it influencing a change of Government—which is the primary responsibility of this House—and it gives the other place the legitimacy that comes from a different type of continuum, I do not see that as a challenge to our supremacy. That is the conclusion reached by all who have studied the issue, not myself. I do not know how the hon. Gentleman dealt with that problem when he faced the electorate at the last general election. Did he tell them that the second House should be appointed in case it became more legitimate and representative? I doubt it. All Labour Members must face the fact that they promised the electorate that they would make the other House more electorally representative.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I want to make progress.

What about the Lord Chancellor's sudden alarm call about mixed membership? He used the word "hybridity" as if it were some dangerous new concept. Where has he been? The Government have introduced hybrid Houses for Wales and Scotland and different types of election for government in London. Presumably, they will do the same for the regional assemblies in due course. Also, there is of course a different form of election to the European Parliament.

The Lord Chancellor proposed in the White Paper that 20 per cent. of Members of the upper House should be elected. Why was that massacred in a meeting of the parliamentary Labour party? It was not because of hybridity or mixed membership, but because the proposal was that only 20 per cent.—one fifth—should be elected. How did the Lord Chancellor come to say to Labour Members, "I want a hybrid House, one fifth elected," and then, when told that that was not enough, simply go away and say, "Well, I don't want any then."? That is a ridiculous position.

The proposal was massacred at the PLP meeting, and it was laughed to scorn in this House and by the general public, but there is no real argument against the validity and effectiveness of hybridity. The word is not pleasant, but mixed membership chambers work well in other parts of the world, and elsewhere in this country. There is no reason why the Lord Chancellor should be allowed to get away with blackening the name of hybridity when he failed to make his case.

Labour Members who have suddenly discovered the evils of mixed membership should look at their allies' motives. They should be aware also that the Lord Chancellor may simply be scared of having an elected element of full-timers in the other place because it will show up the inadequacy of the part-timers.

[Mr. Tyler]

When it comes to the votes this evening, I make a simple appeal to the House. I fully respect the position of the unicameralists, who wish to abolish the second Chamber. Whether they told electors about their purpose when they signed up to the manifesto commitment that I have already cited is up to them and their consciences, not me. I believe that there is real merit in Parliament having two Chambers, as long as they are enabled to work together effectively. That is the critical issue.

I regret that many hon. Members seem to think that, having supported total abolition as their first preference, they can now go for selection—by whom?—to a second House. Heaven help us all if they think that that is legitimate. I ask them to vote firmly against a fully appointed House, which would be a complete abnegation of parliamentary democracy. That way lies eventual irrelevance, and possible disappearance. It would also ensure the continuation of the present unsatisfactory mess. The House should vote against appointment in the first full vote this evening, and for as big an elected element as possible.

Those of us who would prefer a fully democratic second Chamber must also consider whether, having voted for our first preference, we can then vote for a lesser proportion—80 per cent. or 60 per cent.—that we could live with. Without substantial majorities for those options, the forces of reaction will succeed. I mean not just the forces of reaction at the other end of the building, but those in Downing street. They would be able to say, "Oh, there is no consensus or centre of gravity, so we've got to kick the whole thing into the long grass and forget it."

I too noted the item in the *Evening Standard* today. The article did not refer to the Prime Minister, the Lord Chancellor or any other Cabinet member, but to No. 10 officials. The spin doctors are the ones who are really frightened about what may happen if Parliament regains greater control over the agenda.

After 90 years of dither and delay, the public look to us to finish the job. If we hesitate now, the control freaks will be rubbing their hands with glee.

2.4 pm

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and wish to record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and his fellow members of the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform for their report. It has helped hon. Members to crystallise our views as we consider the next stage of constitutional reform. We have already abolished the hereditary principle—the right, by virtue of their birth, of more than 600 people to sit in the House of Lords. It is important that we remember that today's proposals are a continuation of that process.

The Joint Committee's report has led me—and I am sure other hon. Members—to ask, "What makes an effective Chamber of government?" Many criticisms are made of this House, by people inside it and outside it. I think that what makes it effective is parity of esteem. All hon. Members are equal. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister may be the first among equals, but the fount of his political legitimacy is the same as mine: we were both elected by our constituents to represent them in this House.

What does that mean for the House of Lords? I originally believed that there should be a percentage elected element. I am sure that other hon. Members have thought about what the proportions should be, as I have. Sometimes the exercise has seemed like "pin the tail on the donkey." How should we choose a proportion? What proportion will get majority support? I recently visited Scotland and Wales and, after thinking long and hard about my experience with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, to which I have belonged for most of my time in the House, I have had a change of heart.

Last year, I took part in an inquiry in Scotland and Wales by the Joint Committee on Human Rights. When officials were talking about Members of the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly, or when such Members were talking about each other, they always made it clear whether a Member was elected or appointed. Clearly, at both official and Member level, there are two classes of membership. That division exists, whether or not it is officially stated.

As an active member of the CPA, I know that there are many legislatures in which people are appointed through list systems or other means. Sometimes, that is to do with issues of gender, and I applaud that. However, members of those legislatures talk about each other in a way that makes it clear that they perceive the same two classes of membership that I described earlier. Indeed, a colleague recounted the story of a woman Member of a Commonwealth Parliament, who said that she was a real Member because she was elected, and that others who had been appointed were not real Members. I do not want that to be repeated in the House of Lords.

It is easy to take a pop at the Lords. We can all do it. Like everyone else, I saw the photograph in *The Guardian* that showed a group of Lords sitting on a bench for the state opening of Parliament looking ridiculous in their ermine robes. I dare say that a gaggle of newspaper editors—if that is the correct collective noun—would look just as ridiculous sitting on a bench dressed like that. That photograph does not move the argument forward.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jean Corston: I do not intend to give way, as many hon. Members wish to speak and I want to give them time to do so.

My conclusion is that an effective upper Chamber will be one in which there is equality of membership. It follows that I would prefer either a wholly elected or wholly appointed second Chamber. The appointment process is open to debate. It could be ex officio: for example, the chairs of the regional assemblies could be appointed by virtue of having been elected to their positions. I am entirely open as regards the way in which appointments would be made, but we must be sure that we learn from the history of the past 100 years so as to ensure that we do not relive it. We must not have a system in which there is in-built tension between the two Houses. I am not against new methods of nomination.

I do not think that a second Chamber that was not dominated by political parties would be a bad thing. Some people might say that that is because I have gone native, as a consequence of being the Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. The Committee has Select Committee status and is probably the only one to have members drawn from both the Commons and the other place.

However, it is possible that we are putting the cart before the horse and taking the decision far too early. Preliminary questions must be settled. Some have been raised by other right hon. and hon. Members during the debate. What is the second Chamber for? Is it a revising chamber? Is it one that should seek out the unintended consequences of legislation, which we are not good at doing because we do not have enough time?

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jean Corston: No, I have already said that I do not intend to give way.

Would an elected chamber be satisfied with a subservient role if its purpose was only to revise legislation and to look for unintended consequences?

Twenty-five years ago, Labour party policy was to abolish the House of Lords because it had so many hereditary peers. However, we have moved on and the debate is different nowadays. Given the abolition of the hereditary element, I am not sure whether, with all due deference to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) and other colleagues, their case has yet been made, because we do not have a proper system of pre-legislative scrutiny. If we had such a system, we would not need a second Chamber.

While we are still only in the early stages of assessing the effects of modernisation of this place, we continue to need, in our scrutiny role, a second Chamber. I shall therefore vote only for a wholly elected or wholly appointed House, and I urge my colleagues to think about the consequences of a hybrid second chamber. Ever since the creation of life peerages, there have been tensions in the other place because the hereditary peers thought that they were the only people who knew how to run the place and that life peers were mere upstarts. That attitude continued until the 600 hereditaries left and, who knows, it may still survive.

2.11 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): At the conclusion of the debate, I propose to vote in support of those motions that provide for a wholly or largely elected second Chamber. In doing so, I shall be expressing views that I formed before I became a Member of this House in 1979—views that were reinforced by the 13 years that I spent as a Government Front-Bench Member and further confirmed by the experiences of the past five years in opposition.

Those who argue the case for an appointed second Chamber normally concede that it will lack the legitimacy of an elected one. I find it extraordinary that, at the start of the 21st century, we should be contemplating the creation of a political structure, which by its very act of creation will lack the political legitimacy required either to give it authority or to ensure its survival.

Those who argue against an elected second Chamber do so on the basis that it will erode, if not destroy, the primacy and authority of this House, but such a claim is cruelly deceptive. Those who argue for the primacy of this House need to be more candid with themselves and with the electorate as a whole. Of course, in one sense, this House is sovereign: policies and Bills cannot proceed without the consent of elected Members. That is the form—the theory: but is it truly the substance?

I differ from many of my right hon. and hon. colleagues, because I long ago concluded that this House is in fact but the creature of party. The House is dominated by party, and usually that means the party of Government.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am most grateful to my right hon. and noble Friend for giving way—[HON. MEMBERS: "Noble?"] He is indeed noble.

Since my right hon. and learned Friend is so passionately keen on an elected second Chamber, can he explain why that, too, would not be dominated by party? How would people be elected if not on party tickets or party lists?

Mr. Hogg: On this occasion, because of time, I am going to stick to the high ground—if my hon. Friend will forgive me—although there are objections that need sensibly to be confronted. In very short order, I would have a different mode of election, a different time of election, fixed-term elections and no serving Ministers in the other place. I could make further suggestions.

To revert to my main argument, provided that a party of Government retains its majority, it can, in reality, do as it pleases. We do not have effective counterweights to the power of the party of Government and we have thus created an elective dictatorship. When looked at carefully, the primacy of this House—the sovereignty of the House of Commons—means little more than the primacy and sovereignty of the party in government, which usually means the Prime Minister.

I am not making partisan points. I realise that I often do so, but I do not propose to make many today. I acknowledge that the problem that I have described is of long standing and that the Government of whom I was a member passed a range of measures which in all probability did not enjoy wide public consent—*[Interruption.]* We have to be realistic and I advise hon. Members to be realistic about this matter.

The fact that we have a Government with a large majority who have pushed through a range of procedural changes of great importance adds urgency to the need to try to provide more effective controls on the Executive. I want to increase the independence and authority of parliamentarians. I want to diminish the power and influence of party and, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), the Opposition Deputy Chief Whip, knows well, I want seriously to dilute the authority of Whips Offices. Above all, I want to impose effective constraints on Government policy and Government legislation.

However, I do not believe that unaided this House will so reform itself as to perform its proper and historic role. It is true that one way of doing so has been to incorporate into domestic law the European convention on human rights. I am a cautious supporter of that

[Mr. Hogg]

policy, but I am deeply depressed that elected representatives have to look to the judges to stand up for liberty rather than performing that function ourselves.

I want to see a powerful second Chamber. I shall be candid: my preference is, in effect, for a wholly elected senate with authority and competencies equal to our own. I acknowledge that the existence of such a chamber would be a challenge to the authority of this House and I welcome that. I acknowledge, too, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) pointed out, that there will be practical difficulties in bringing about such a change. However, I find it impossible to believe that we cannot sensibly address the problems. In any event, the advantages of such a change outweigh the disadvantages.

To those who say that people such as me will destroy the authority of this House, I say that we shall be creating another authority of equal legitimacy and that thereby we shall effectively curb the power of party and the power of the Prime Minister.

Over many years, including when I was a Minister, the House has ceded to the Executive power and authority that were not ours to cede. In short, we have undermined the democratic legitimacy of the House.

Mr. Levitt: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hogg: I will not now.

I believe that we now need to create another elected Chamber to fill the void that we ourselves have created, perhaps even to shame ourselves into reforming ourselves, so that we are fully and properly capable of performing our historic role, which, in all conscience, is to safeguard the rights of the individual and to curb the powers of the Government.

2.20 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I mean no disrespect to my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and the Joint Committee he so ably chaired when I say that the assignment that they were given was, with two exceptions, impossible. They put forward seven options in good faith and after hard work. The inadequacy of those options has been demonstrated by interventions that have shown that colleagues would like many other options. That is no criticism of the Joint Committee, but five of those seven options are utterly arbitrary and utterly lacking in any kind of logic. The elected proportion options are lacking in logic because, of course, many other numerical options could be plucked out of the air. We could have 75 per cent. or 25 per cent. elected. We could have one third or two thirds elected.

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): Of course what my right hon. Friend says is absolutely correct. We in the Committee did what we did because we were constrained by the terms of reference imposed on us, which were agreed in this Chamber and in the other place. Of course we could have chosen different options between the two extremes. We chose five—they were quite arbitrary—and we did so in the hope that it would stop dozens of amendments being tabled for this debate and to make the House focus on what we thought was at least something sensible.

Mr. Kaufman: As I say, I entirely respect the role that my right hon. Friend and his Joint Committee played, but, nevertheless, it is a fact that all of those proportional, numerical options are arbitrary and subjective, and we could have had dozens of others. The fact is that we are not playing some kind of numbers game; we are creating a House of Parliament, and we have to take that with great seriousness.

As I found from the year that I spent on the royal commission, there are only two logically sustainable options, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) demonstrated. One is a wholly elected second Chamber—advocated today in the press by Baroness Helena Kennedy, which makes one wonder why she humiliated herself by accepting appointment—and the other is a wholly appointed second Chamber. As we have heard in speech after speech in the debate so far, superficially, a wholly elected second Chamber has its attractions.

Mr. Love: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: No, if my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall continue.

If there were a wholly elected second Chamber, who would vote? It is all very well saying that elections are great things and we are all elected, but the electorate have got elections up to their throats.

Mr. Robin Cook *rose—*

Mr. Kaufman: I will give way to my right hon. Friend, but I should like to conclude my argument first.

The electorate do not want to be bothered with so many elections. They have elections to the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies, the Greater London Authority, the European Parliament and local authorities, with the regional assemblies still to come. How do they respond? In the 1999 European election, 23 per cent. of them polled. In last year's local elections, 33 per cent. polled. In the election to the House of Commons two years ago, 59 per cent. polled. How many or how few would vote for an elected second Chamber?

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Will my right hon. Friend give way—it is an important point?

Mr. Kaufman: No, if my hon. Friend will permit me, I shall continue.

What about the timing?

Mr. Robin Cook *rose—*

Mr. Kaufman: I will give way to my right hon. Friend in a moment, of course.

Some people advocate that such an election should be held with a general election. If so, even with some fancy proportional system, the second Chamber would be a sort of clone, with the party that wins the general election dominating the second Chamber.

Mr. Bryant: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: May I just finish two more sentences, and then I shall give way to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House?

If such an election were held mid-term—which the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) advocates, opportunistically, of course, for the Liberal Democrats—it is quite likely that the Opposition would dominate the second Chamber because Governments are unpopular in mid-term. That would mean gridlock between the two Chambers.

Mr. Robin Cook: My right hon. Friend rebuked me for suggesting that the royal commission report proposed a different form of election for the second Chamber. I have had the opportunity to refresh my memory of the royal commission, and I see that it did recommend that there should be three alternative models for the election, all of which involved a regional list, and that by-elections should be filled by the next person on the regional list. I wonder how my right hon. Friend can really reconcile that with the system of election to this Chamber. Plainly, there is a different election system. As he seems to be making so much of the turnout issue, may I remind him that one of those models included the recommendation that the election could take place on the same day as the general election, when there is normally a high turnout. I do not see my right hon. Friend listed as dissenting from that recommendation.

Mr. Kaufman: My right hon. Friend had better read that report again. [HON. MEMBERS: "He has it with him."] Yes, I see that he has it in front of him, with his marking ink on it. I am not absolutely blind, yet. There is no recommendation attached to that paragraph. We did not make that recommendation. We had a recommendation in front of that paragraph; we had a recommendation beyond it.

Mr. Robin Cook: It is listed here.

Mr. Kaufman: No, it is not there as a recommendation. My right hon. Friend should not heckle just because he is wrong. He is brilliant; he is an intellectual giant, but, on this, he has got it wrong, so may I proceed in my limited time?

An elected second Chamber, whenever it was elected, would without doubt be a second Chamber that was based on candidates chosen on the party principle. We would have in the second Chamber a group of party hacks, albeit a group of party hacks different from that of which we are members here. One lot of party hacks in two Houses of Parliament is quite enough. Yet, however few people voted, the second Chamber would claim the kind of democratic legitimacy that the hon. Member for North Cornwall wants. It would demand greater powers, not fewer. It might demand rights on money Bills, which the Liberal party took away from the House of Lords 90 years ago. It would be very difficult with an elected second Chamber to use the Parliament Act 1911, which the hon. Gentleman's party introduced.

The problem with hon. Members who support a wholly or partly elected second Chamber is that they are distracted from what a second Chamber is about by the glamour of election, which they all enjoy because they get elected. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East told us what a second Chamber is about. A second Chamber that is elected in whole or in part would be a constitutional mess, and I therefore recommend to my hon. Friends that they vote for option 1, unless they vote for the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth).

2.29 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I am conscious, having represented Aldridge-Brownhills for nearly 25 years, that there are certain conclusions that one forms as an ordinary Member of Parliament. I have come to fear majoritarianism when majorities can inflict injustice on minorities, curtail personal liberties and support unwise policies. I have come to believe that it is of great importance in a democracy not only to guard society against the oppression of its Government but to guard one part of society against the injustice of another part.

In a sense, I support the Leader of the House, who is our Publius, if I may say so. It is no surprise that that was the nom de plume of the authors of the federalist papers, who, in turn, were taught by the three great professors of moral philosophy at Glasgow university. These arguments therefore come in great part from the Scottish enlightenment. There is only one justification for forming the legislature of a country in a democracy: election. To secure that principle, we should argue for the House of Lords to be wholly elected. There can be no other basis for its authority to challenge Government. After all, that is the very cause that we have handed away so easily. Publius as Leader of the House has done much to curtail the vitality of this House. Through the constant guillotining of legislation, we serve less the function that we were sent here to execute: to represent the people who sent us.

The first principle—that our authority derives from the people—was readily accepted, 225 years ago, by those who benefited from the American revolution: Britons in revolt against the Crown. They set out principles that have taken our country and most of the true democracies of this world by storm. All the time I have been here, however, we have had a quasi-, neutered second Chamber. I believe profoundly in balances and checks. Under the scheme put forward by some that we should reduce Parliament to one Chamber, we would have the majoritarianism of party. If I may take my Publius analogy a little further, although Publius was a nom de plume, the actual Roman overthrew the Tarquin king and helped to secure our liberties. Today, I hope that the Leader of the House is supported by his party in overthrowing the king who seeks a legislature that is not wholly democratic.

Mr. George Howarth: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not want to misrepresent the case that we are putting forward. Those of us who support abolition do so coupled with the idea that the procedures of this House should be reformed so that we may better hold the Executive to account.

Mr. Shepherd: I am always gloomy when one vested interest sets itself that task. I have sat for two Parliaments on the Modernisation Committee, and I have seen it, through both Parliaments, increase the hold and the control of the Executive over the detail of the timetable of this House, so that we may not even

[Mr. Shepherd]

debate great matters of state if it is inconvenient to the Executive. That could not be imposed on another House elected by other methods.

As I said, Britons in revolt against the Crown, 225 years ago, constructed a constitution in which there were two legislative Chambers. Those now have equal competence—in fact, one could say that primacy was wrestled away from the lower House, as the upper House took upon itself tasks that were more in tune with what the people of the United States wanted. The importance of the division between or within Parliament—the balance and check within it—is an equal qualification to argue, to check and to provide a check and balance within the legislature. The great threat to us, and the extraordinary thing that has diminished my view of our constitutional arrangements, has been the power of the Executive. The way Parliament exercised great checks, overturned improper laws and defended the personal liberty of the individual citizen now seems a romance, and I can only see that return through a legitimate second Chamber.

I share with the Leader of the House the view that the second Chamber does not need to be large. I accept that the American Senate, with 100 Members, can discharge responsible representative functions for which they are accountable to their constituencies. I do not believe, however, that we are near the end of our process of reform. What I am looking for is the assertion of the sovereignty of the people: those who make their legislation should be accountable to the people themselves.

2.35 pm

Janet Anderson (Rossendale and Darwen): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate today. I should first declare a kind of interest, as a member of the Joint Committee that is considering this matter.

When I was first appointed to the Joint Committee, I thought long and hard about how the upper Chamber should be reconstituted as a result of any reform. I decided that if it was right to elect the second Chamber, all its Members should be elected; and if it was right to appoint the second Chamber, all its Members should be appointed. I remain firmly of that view. A hybrid solution, as other Members have mentioned, of the kind before us today—in five of the seven options—is the worst of all worlds. I cannot for the life of me understand why Members should support any of those options. How can we justify the election of 20 per cent., 40 per cent. or 60 per cent., and vice versa in relation to appointment? It simply does not make any sense.

Some argue that we have a hybrid upper House today. In a sense, we do, but none of its Members are elected. To elect some and not others places the upper House in an entirely different context. How would we elect, and how would we appoint? What would be the relationship between the two groups? To have a proportion elected would surely mean that they would be elected along party lines, whatever the method of election chosen. I presume that that would give them some kind of mandate, but who would elect them and how? How would their accountability compare with those who were appointed?

Let us take my region, the north-west, as an example. Suppose that we ended up with a proportion of peers from my region who were elected, and some who were appointed. Who would speak for whom? Who would have a mandate and who would not? Would an elected member of the upper House have a mandate to speak for my constituency of Rossendale and Darwen? More particularly, would my electors in Rossendale and Darwen want to elect someone else, albeit to a second Chamber, to represent them in Parliament? How would their accountability contrast and compare with someone from that region who had been appointed? Would anyone understand the difference?

Given those dilemmas, I am in no doubt that should a hybrid option be adopted, it would not be too long before there was a move to have the whole of the upper House elected, as was pointed out by my noble Friend Lord Hattersley in his column in *The Guardian* yesterday. In his words,

"once the wind of change blows along those red leather benches, the breeze will quickly become a hurricane that carries the whole archaic institution into the 21st century."

It would seem to make more sense if those Members who favour election were to support 100 per cent. election now and get it over and done with. I am afraid that I shall not be joining them. As I said, I entered this debate by believing that if it was right to elect the upper Chamber, all its Members should be elected; and if it was right to appoint them, all should be appointed.

Mr. Love: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Janet Anderson: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not. Many Members want to contribute to the debate, and we are short of time.

Having listened to all the debates in the Joint Committee and in the House, I have come down firmly in favour of an appointed upper Chamber. Let me say that I came to that view long before the Prime Minister expressed a similar one. An elected second Chamber is, of course, an attractive option for those who consider it the only way to secure a democratic alternative to the status quo. It is very easy to say, "Let's elect them." However, if this House is to go down that road, it is important that all the consequences of such a decision be fully taken into account.

It is inevitable that an elected upper Chamber could and would claim a mandate and flex its muscles substantially more than now. As Lord Carter pointed out many times in our deliberations in the Joint Committee, it is a convention well observed in the present House of Lords that the Commons has supremacy. By and large, that makes for a relatively smooth path for the Government's legislation. Sometimes there are one or two hiccups, but the Commons gets it way in the end, and so it should, for we are the only democratically elected Chamber. That would almost certainly not be the case were the Lords to be elected.

There are, of course, other arguments against such a course, and they have been well rehearsed by many Members. However, as I draw my remarks to a conclusion, there are one or two points that I would like to emphasise in relation to the appointed option.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Janet Anderson: No, I have already said that I will not give way, because we are short of time and many Members wish to speak.

Should the House choose the option of appointment, the Joint Committee will have to decide how to proceed. It would be essential for any method of appointment to be transparent and wholly independent, although I feel that there is probably a case for having some political appointments to reflect the balance of the parties in this House. Within such a system, there could also be a case for indirect elections from the regions, something which has strong support on both sides of the House. It would be easier to secure a gender and ethnic balance. In fact, an appointed House could well end up significantly more representative of the electorate than an elected one. However, it would also be possible—this is an important point—to retain the valuable experience and expertise that is manifest in the House of Lords today. Our Parliament would be much the poorer should we lose that element.

2.41 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson) said in her excellent speech. I also congratulate the Joint Committee on the good report that it produced.

I am sorry that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) is not in his place. I listened carefully to what he said in support of a wholly elected upper Chamber, but I shall not support that proposition in the Lobby. He seemed to have a brief touch of political amnesia. He has forgotten what it was like to sit on the Government Benches in the Government of my right hon. Friend the former Member for Huntingdon when, because they had little or no majority, they listened, trimmed, adapted and at times adopted ideas other than their own to ensure that they got their business through.

One of the problems that we face in this debate is the background against which we are talking about House of Lords reform. As previous contributors have said, the powers of this House to hold the Executive to proper account have been tempered by so-called reforms of this Chamber. The hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) suggested that that was an issue for further work, and I agree with him. I very much hope that other Members will embark on that work. To try to talk, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) did in the first debate on the subject, about holding a more powerful Executive to account by means of reforming the other place is automatically to give up the job that we were sent here to do. Legitimising this House—and not worrying about how we change an institution that already does a rather good job—should be the top priority.

I wonder about the many opinion polls that the Leader of the House quoted. None of my constituents come up to me and say, "Oh, Mr. Jack, you must change the upper House. It is doing an awful job; it is not elected." My constituents rather like its buccaneer style of occasionally saying to the Government of the day, "So far and no further, or we must amend this Bill. We think that the Government have gone too far." My constituents respect the slightly idiosyncratic nature of the institution. After all, it is rather British. It does an extremely good job. Its debates are of high quality and, although its constitution could clearly be improved, it brings expertise and experience to the issues. However, this House ultimately has supremacy and it is not challenged by the other when it comes to making decisions.

When my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham spoke about the process of election, he conjured up in my mind questions about the basis on which people elected to the upper House would make their appeal. Would they make it as a series of 200, 300 or 600 independent persons, each with their own manifesto, or would they say that they were loosely associated with this or that party? Will they be elected along strictly party lines, or what?

The biggest problem with the debate is that this House is being invited to make a decision about a format and a formula for determining the membership of the upper House while we are in a complete vacuum when it comes to the method of election that is involved in some of the options upon which we will vote. Clearly, the questions of closed and open lists and proportional or non-proportional representation are serious issues that should be decided in concert with the decision as to whether to have elections. I want to know how people will be chosen and how they will be elected. That will determine whether the electoral system has any legitimacy.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I accept what my right hon. Friend says, but is there any scheme of election that might lead him to support democracy?

Mr. Jack: As we are not able to debate that issue, I shall not answer that question. However, I made my position clear at the beginning of the debate.

How would we determine, in whatever the non-existent electoral cycle might be, how those in the upper House would be replaced? What would happen if they became unpopular? We can imagine that they might fall out with the people who elected them. Terms of 10 or 15 years would be an awfully long time. People make a clear decision for this House and determine once every four or five years what happens in it. They know exactly where they stand.

Mr. Love: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jack: I would like to make a little more progress.

Several of the options before us involve hybridity. If we move away from a 100 per cent. elected or unelected Chamber, we can imagine how the votes of a new Chamber with a hybrid composition would be reported. There would be two columns in the newspaper: one for the elected and one for the unelected representatives.

[Mr. Jack]

There would be great debates as to who actually took the decision and whether it had legitimacy. That is no way to proceed. The House must clearly come to a view that is 100 per cent. one way or 100 per cent. the other. The idea that we can have a fudged solution in the middle raises too many questions and gives rise to all kinds of bizarre debates and decision making that would be reported in the newspapers.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): The right hon. Gentleman's dire predictions about the newspaper reports of votes are not borne out by what happens in mixed Chambers in countries such as Italy, Ireland and Belgium. Why does he think that they will happen here?

Mr. Jack: I have my view as to how the press would look at these issues. Inevitability, some people in a hybrid Chamber would be on a party ticket and others would be appointed. That is a recipe for mishmash. Whatever our view, we must make a clear decision one way or the other.

The Joint Committee presented us with the five qualities that it believed were central to a good upper House: legitimacy, representativeness, no domination by any one party, independence and expertise. We can obtain expertise by appointment, and we can undoubtedly achieve independence and no domination by any one party. Representativeness is open to debate, because I recognise that it can be achieved in different ways. However, a good cross-section of opinion that is geographically spread, with the Church and others representing the views of the country, can be obtained. Legitimacy can likewise be achieved, because this House confers legitimacy on the constitution of this country.

2.49 pm

Estelle Morris (Birmingham, Yardley): Many Members have correctly and understandably referred to the relationship between the House of Commons and those people down the Corridor in the House of Lords. I want to talk about something slightly different—our relationship with the public. It is not a matter of whether we get our Government's policies through or how we tie the hands of a future Government. What we have to remember is that whatever we do, we will be judged on how well we have restored democracy and Parliament in the eyes of the public.

I find myself in a strange situation. I look around at my colleagues and think how 50 years ago my family would not have dreamt of one of its members—let alone more than one—getting a seat in the House of Commons. There are more women, but nowhere near enough. There are members of the ethnic communities, but nowhere near enough. We could say that progress has been made in our representative democracy. Certainly no one could complain that political parties have not put themselves in a position in which they can get their business through the House. I am one of the party hacks that hon. Members mentioned and would defend that role to the hilt. I know that it is the party behind my name on the ballot paper that gets me here. But for all that progress the public are more disillusioned than they were 50 or 100 years ago. That worries me greatly.

I fear that the debate is becoming—in some ways, for all the right reasons—an insular discussion about how our processes and systems work. I respect the fact that the details will have to be worked out. That will fall to the Joint Committee, which produced an excellent report, and we will consider its findings. However, there is a danger in voting because of the detail instead of the principle. I want to mention the principles that are important to me which will guide me in the decision that I make this evening.

I agree in part with the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack). The House of Lords is doing a reasonably good job and I could defend it. It does not get in our way too much. Governments usually get their way at the end of the day, but it does at key points—I direct my remarks to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—trim our sails, make us rethink legislation and help to tidy up the drafting of legislation. The House of Lords has the most brilliant debates because of its expertise. Any Minister or former Minister who has appeared before a Select Committee of the House of Lords will have done so with trepidation. It is a formidable Chamber. I could make an argument for keeping it the way it is, but I do not because when I go around schools, no youngster—no future citizen—has ever said to me, "Miss, how do I get to be a Member of the House of Lords?" That is why it must change. Children have come up to me and said, "How do I get into politics?" Indeed, I was stopped only a few weeks ago by a group of students just outside the House of Commons and two of them said they wanted to be Prime Minister.

So people talk about how they get to become a Minister in this place, but no one thinks that they might be a Member of the House of Lords. No one thinks that it is for them. One of the strengths of our democracy is that working-class kids—black kids and white kids, girls and boys—are beginning to think that this place might be for the likes of them. That is the most important progress that we can make as we move towards a fully representative and democratic Chamber. The House of Lords loses its legitimacy because few citizens think that they will ever stand a chance of getting into it. The problem is not one of percentages or what philosophers of the past might have thought, but that something does not ring true with the people, and we get into murky waters the minute we divorce ourselves from what does not ring true with them.

My first principle is that the House of Lords has to ring true with the people. At this stage in the development of our nation, the way we get things to ring true is by holding elections. We should not forget that. Although I have much respect for my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), I did not judge that a low turnout in an election meant that people did not like voting. Instead, I judged that they did not think that what they were voting for had the powers to make the changes that they wanted. We are in a difficult position because that is less to do with us and

more to do with the way in which our actions and decisions are portrayed to the public through the media. That debate is for another day, however.

Mr. Clelland: Does my right hon. Friend believe that an elected second Chamber will have the powers to make the changes that the people want?

Estelle Morris: Not without a change in the way in which politics is mediated and we debate matters. We need to be far more mature and grown up about our debates. Without change, the elected second Chamber will not achieve what my hon. Friend suggests. By the way, I do not come down in favour of a wholly elected second Chamber.

So my first principle is that the second Chamber has to have a democratically accountable element. My second principle relates to trade-offs. Not all my principles can be met in any one version of a second Chamber. We have to make a trade-off when it comes to what we think is important. I believe in the supremacy of this Chamber. It is the way to get things done. The other thing that will not ring true with the electorate is if we knock on their doors before the next general election and say, "I am awfully sorry that I didn't actually get done what I promised you five years ago, but I was stopped in the House of Commons. I was thwarted by a procedural motion. Five of my Back Benchers were sick and ill." Being able to get the Government's business through the Chamber means that there is no excuse when we face the electorate at the next election for not having got things done.

We need to find a way to ensure that this Chamber remains of paramount importance while introducing a democratically accountable element to the second Chamber. That is why I favour a more than 50 per cent. democratically elected second Chamber that works alongside this Chamber. My compromise is that I would deny it the right to thwart this Chamber by not making it wholly democratically accountable. It is a compromise—it is trimming the sail—but that is how I would get over that difficulty.

Before I came to this Chamber, I could not imagine myself ever making a case for anything other than a democratically elected second Chamber, but I have observed that it works and can see its strengths. It has an independence of mind that is admirable. It finds time to debate issues that we sometimes do not have time to debate. It also has experts who, whether I like it or not, do not choose to stand for election, which is another compromise on my part. I do not want to lose that element from our parliamentary system. It has served us well and is fairly precious. I compromise again by allowing those people to continue to make their contribution.

This is a difficult debate for us all, but for our decision to ring true and for us to have done our jobs in representing one of the major strands in our democracy at the moment—that is elections—we have to be bold enough to say that even though it might make life more difficult for us, we need most people in the second Chamber to be elected. But as we do not want it to challenge our supremacy, it should not be completely elected. By denying it that, we will "keep it in its place." Over the 10 years that I have been in this Chamber, I have learnt to admire and respect the second Chamber. I have seen that the nation and Parliament benefit from its expertise and the representation of different groups there. As a result of that, I would want to maintain a proportion of appointments.

I shall listen to the debate with care when it comes to choosing how I exercise my vote. It has taken us five generations to get to this vote, so no one can pretend that we will consider it again next year. In five generations' time, we will be judged by the principles by which we cast our vote, not who we voted with or who we voted against, or how the party politics looked to play out that evening. That is how history will judge us. When I go around schools or talk to young people in my constituency—the boys and girls who are the future politicians and citizens—I want them to harbour as much ambition to be Members of the House of Lords as they do to be Members of the House of Commons. If we do that, democracy will be well served.

2.59 pm

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): I begin by expressing my delight at having this opportunity to debate and vote on Lords abolition. Like other hon. Members, I was disappointed when the Joint Committee did not include the option for abolition, so I am pleased that the good office of the Speaker has put that wrong right.

When I first asked the Leader of the House why the option of abolition was not included, we first heard about the Labour party manifesto commitment. I said to him that surely the matter was for all Members and should not be left to some flimsy Labour party manifesto commitment. I have had a look at the history of the Labour party's attitude to the House of Lords. Although it is a long time since abolition was at the core of new Labour's mainstream thinking, it was only 10 years ago that a constitutional committee co-chaired by one "Tony Blair, MP" reported that "proper democratic elections" should be introduced for the House of Lords. In the 2001 manifesto, we find Labour saying:

> "We are committed to completing House of Lords reform, including removal of the remaining hereditary peers, to make it more representative and democratic".

That is not what the Prime Minister is saying these days. He wants a fully appointed House of Lords—the antithesis of "representative and democratic". The Prime Minister's words are everywhere in the Labour party manifesto. Surely something is fundamentally wrong when a Labour Prime Minister cannot even be seen to support his own manifesto. I find that shocking and quite appalling.

The Leader of the House has not had a particularly good week either. There was a little rally for him yesterday when a number of junior Ministers said that they would support his preferred option, but I get the sense that that is beginning to ebb today. I have seen some of the activity around the Corridors, and the Whips nodding assiduously in agreement whenever there is any mention of appointment. I think that the Leader of the House is on for a bit of a gubbing this evening. Faced with such difficulties, perhaps the Leader of the House would consider joining us in the move for

[Pete Wishart]

abolition. I suggest that that is one sure way that he can stick it to the Prime Minister and the best way to get rid of this thorny issue of House of Lords reform.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I will give way on one occasion.

Mrs. Laing: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's argument for abolition. Does he not acknowledge that the job of Parliament is to hold the Executive to account? Parliament needs to be strong in order to do that, and by its nature a unicameral system is less strong because it has only half the power of a bicameral system. Therefore, there is no logic to his argument.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I shall come to that important point.

Like many hon. Members, we in the Scottish National party felt disfranchised over the exclusion of options and when we thought that we would have the opportunity to vote only for our second or third choice. Therefore, we are delighted to have the opportunity to vote on abolition. We know that 108 Members have signed early-day motion 529 calling for the abolition of the House of Lords. That might prove to be the most popular option available this evening. Is it not a disgrace that that might not have been available to us?

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: No. I said that I would give way only once, and I want to make progress.

I was disappointed in the debate a couple of weeks ago at the response made on unicameralism. It was suggested that only small and insignificant countries had unicameral legislatures. That is disrespectful to the number of legislatures throughout the world that operate such a system. How can we consider robust democracies such as New Zealand and Sweden to be small and insignificant? It is a disgrace that that claim was made.

If we look at the experience of legislatures worldwide, we find that bicameralism is in the minority. Only one comprehensive survey of national legislatures has been done, and that was by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which identified that, of a total of 178 state legislatures, some 127 were unicameral. So, unicameralism is in the majority.

We do not need to go round the world to find successful examples of successful unicameralism. We need only to cross the border into Scotland. The Scottish Parliament is unicameral and successful. Instead of a second Chamber, it has a powerful Committee structure and practises much more pre-legislative scrutiny. This place can only dream of the accessibility it affords to the public and representative bodies.

Abolition would be very popular with the public. Public opinion on that has not been tested because it was not one of the seven options, but the idea that the public regard the House of Lords with anything like affection is fallacy. The public do not have a clue about what the House of Lords does and are bemused by its activities. In fact, if the public were asked about their predominant view of the House of Lords, I would wager that a good majority would describe some belligerent old soul gently napping while a fellow octogenarian delivered an interminable speech. Being excluded from any democratic control over the new House of Lords would further alienate the public from this Chamber and politics in general. The public would not miss the House of Lords at all.

We understand that this debate is very much a process and that second and third choices will have to be made. I do not expect the amendment to be agreed, but we in the Scottish National party and those representing Plaid Cymru will vote for a fully elected Chamber, and beyond that for any combination that leads to a majority of elected Members. We remain deeply uneasy and suspicious about the issue of appointment. We remain concerned that the indefensible House of Lords will become the unjustifiable house of cronies.

We agree with the Leader of the House when he says that an appointed Chamber must have elections to have legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Indeed, opinion polls show that appointment is the least popular option, even when the question is put in the most favourable way, as it has been on several occasions. The public know what is going on; they just do not like the idea of political carve-ups in smoke-filled rooms behind closed doors. When the public have no say in who inhabits our political institutions, it leads to immediate alienation. When they have no sense of ownership of our political institutions, they view them with justified suspicion.

I do not find the reasons for a fully appointed chamber in any way convincing. The excuse that the public would not be interested in voting for the House of Lords is the flimsiest one around. Voting is a right and it is up to the individual whether to exercise that right or not. Democracy is not abandoned just because people exercise their right to withhold their vote. What would happen if at the next general election less than 50 per cent.—say 40 per cent.—vote? Do we scrap democracy in this place and have an appointed House of Commons? That is a ridiculous argument, which I hope does not merit any further discussion.

The central question is what the Appointments Commission will look like and who will appoint the appointers. The Joint Committee is very unclear about that. Its report gives no suggestion on the type of person who should serve on the commission. In fact, it is very keen on prime ministerial patronage. Its report states:

"We do not take the view that all power should be removed from the Prime Minister and other party leaders."

In fact it goes on to suggest that only the Prime Minister has the right to have nominations concerned. If that is not prime ministerial patronage gone mad, what is? That would be an extension of Tony's cronies.

Appointment is plain wrong. In the hands of a centralising Government who treat this House with contempt, an appointed second Chamber would be the worst type of neutered poodle. Surely no House of Lords is preferable to a neutered appointed House.

We live in a time when the right to choose or dismiss our rulers is beginning to be seen as under threat. It is the standard refrain that the electorate are too bored and

too cynical to vote. There is a world of difference, however, between voters choosing whether to exercise their franchise and the politically weak using the fact that people do not do so as a justification for curtailing such franchise. It would be better to have no upper Chamber than to have one that entrenches the political cronyism that has become such a trademark of this Government.

3.8 pm

Mr. Mark [illegible] (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I welcome the fact that, if the amendment preferred by the hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) fails, he will vote for a 100 per cent. elected House. My preference is for a wholly democratically elected Chamber. I am persuaded by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House when he says that, should that fail, those of us who support it should vote for the 80 or 60 per cent. options. I would do so with considerable reluctance because the argument that some have advanced about the problems of hybridity—two tiers of Member—is a real one. Perhaps cynically, I would vote for the 80 or 60 per cent. options in the hope that, once we were over the 50 per cent. mark, it would be a matter of time—perhaps not the first time, but inexorably and inevitably—before we moved, probably in our lifetime, to a 100 per cent. elected second Chamber. With that proviso, I support the smaller options.

I agree with what the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said about that those who support appointments. One or two hon. Members spoke in favour of that, but they made only a negative case. None of them said that they want to tell the electorate in their constituency, "I do not think that you ought to have the right to elect half of Parliament." I agree with the hon. Member for North Cornwall that, had they even glanced at the debate in the other place, they would have undergone an exercise in aversion therapy as regards appointments.

Even at this late stage, when we have been debating the matter both within and without the Chamber for some time, there is still confusion and doubt about the powers and responsibilities of the second Chamber, and the potential for clashes and deadlock with this Chamber. That is a misconception, as it is not at all difficult to devise a remit for the second Chamber that makes it complementary to this one rather than being in conflict with it. Both Houses have the parliamentary job of holding the Executive to account. We have been sent here to form a Government, if we are in a majority party, and to hold the Executive to account. To do so, we need two strong, confident and legitimate Chambers, both in their different ways holding the Executive to account.

Mr. Bercow: Although a delineation of powers between the two Chambers is necessary to underline the primacy of this Chamber, does the hon. Gentleman accept that the self-confidence that would result from a legitimate elected second Chamber could serve the useful purpose of restraining the legislative appetite of this House?

Mr. Fisher: I agree. I believe that we all agree with the Leader of the House that it is important that the Commons retain its primacy, but few of us have discussed why and how that is to be achieved. We should be in prime position because the Government, the Prime Minister and the Executive are located in the Commons. We need to earn and re-earn our primacy—we should not simply gain it—but that primacy can easily be formalised, as several hon. Members on both sides have said, by removing members of the Executive and Ministers from the second Chamber. That would turn the second Chamber into a House of scrutiny and revision, and reduce—indeed, eliminate—the power of patronage. It would widen the type, range and diversity of scrutiny, making it both distinctive from, and complementary to, our work, and give the second Chamber a legitimacy that we should welcome, not be afraid of. Our House would have legitimacy because we are the House of the Executive and the Government.

Together, both Houses would provide good checks and balances. Inevitably, our House would be more sharply party political than the other place, which would not have Ministers or members of the Executive, but it would still include party members, as elections would be party political. It would operate in the same way as Select Committees, which have party bases but in which scrutiny transcends party priorities when necessary. That would provide a greater variety of scrutiny. Removing the Executive from the second Chamber would be good for the Commons, the Lords and Parliament as a whole.

A democratic election for the second Chamber is needed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris) has a different view from mine, but she said that the matter concerns the people of this country. The decision to elect or appoint Members of a second Chamber is not ours alone—we have to consider whether the people of this country have the right to decide who sits in Parliament. Of course, they have to have that right, which is why we are here.

The system needs to be democratic and nourishing. We learn from our postbags and surgeries every week. We have roots that nourish us all the time, if we care to listen to them and feel them. My right hon. Friend was right that some fine people have been appointed to the upper Chamber. A wise society could, of course, appoint wise and good people, but their wisdom is entirely self-contained—it is not rooted among, or nourished by, the people. For all our constituents' inconsistencies, illogicalities and emotionalism, we learn from them. If we do not, we do not stay in the House, and Governments do not stay in power, for long.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): My hon. Friend seems to be suggesting that Members elected to the other place should have links to the community. Is he suggesting that they should have parallel constituencies to those of Members of Parliament? I cannot see that they would otherwise have links to the community, and I do not support such duplication.

Mr. Fisher: I am glad that my hon. Friend asked about that, as such constituencies would not be at all helpful. The way to avoid that outcome is to have far fewer representatives in the Lords. For instance, there would be two Members of the second Chamber for every European constituency—perhaps 150 Members or 240 maximum. People would not represent individuals and

[Mr. Fisher]

would not take up individual caseloads, but would have a feel for the north-west, the south-west, the south-east and so on.

Mr. Clelland: Is my hon. Friend suggesting that individuals should be elected, but have no link with or responsibility for the people who elect them?

Mr. Fisher: They should have links with or roots in a region. This country has distinct regions, and the world looks very different in Cornwall or Devon from how it looks in the north-east. Members should be nourished by those roots, but they should not represent individual constituencies.

We do not yet have democracy in this country—we have half a democracy. We made progress in the last century: women at last got the franchise, but that century of democratic improvement ended with our having the right to elect only half our Parliament. We now have an opportunity to complete the formal aspect of that democratic change and give people the right to elect their whole Parliament. If they do so in the way suggested by other Members and me, keeping the Executive in the Commons, and making the Lords a house of scrutiny and revision, we would get a better, richer, more diverse and much more self-confident Parliament.

3.18 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), as I agree with most of his remarks.

I wish to deal with the question of unicameralism, on which we shall vote and for which there is a respectable case. It all hinges on one key point—can we reform this place to make it work effectively and touch a nerve with the public, who are clearly disaffected by the way in which we perform our democratic duties? The answer, I believe, is no.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is another key point in the unicameral argument made by me, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), and others? We want to avoid the present situation where patronage rules supreme. Many hon. Members who signed the amendment are not against a wholly elected Chamber, but want to remove the routine of placemen and placewomen imposed on the upper House through patronage, whether by the Prime Minister, the Executive or any imaginable mechanism.

Mr. Tyrie: I agree to some extent. An appointed House will always ultimately be a House of patronage. An elected House, if people are elected on long and non-renewable terms, will not. I therefore hope to find the hon. Gentleman in the Lobby with me, voting for a largely or wholly elected second Chamber.

Tony Wright: Does the hon. Gentleman remember that it was famously said, why look in the crystal ball when you can consult the book? We can consult the book. When this House was asked a few months ago whether it wanted to have its Select Committees controlled by the Executive and the party machines, or to own the Select Committees for itself, it voted for the Executive option. So those who claim that we can abolish a House of scrutiny because we are so vigorous in scrutinising the Executive in this House are talking poppycock, are they not?

Mr. Tyrie: The hon. Gentleman makes a point that I do not have time to develop. I agree with every word of it. Perhaps I can begin my speech.

The truth is that we need a second Chamber to perform a constitutional longstop role. We need a second Chamber that can encourage us to think again. The present second Chamber does not perform those tasks adequately. The composition of such a Chamber must command moral authority in the country. In the 21st century, only a democratic, or largely democratic, method of selection, can hope to fulfil that function.

I was pleased to hear the speech of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris), who brought to the Chamber a sense of what is going on outside it. We look at ourselves introspectively far too much. We will not be taken seriously as a Parliament if we reject democratic options for reform of the second Chamber.

There are numerous objections to democracy, and I shall deal with some of them in the time remaining to me. The first, which is often heard, is that we will replicate ourselves up the Corridor—the clones of the clowns argument, as Lord Howe put it. That is the argument which says that the Whips will end up controlling the other place just as vigorously as they control this place. That is nonsense. Different systems of election will throw up different compositions. Most other countries seem to get round the problem—the United States, Germany, Italy and Spain, to name but four.

Nor is it true that holding elections on general election day to benefit from a higher turnout will lead to a clone problem. The United States elects a third of its Senate on the same day as its lower house, and although there is a coat-tail effect, the swing is not uniform, and there are certainly not clones of the House of Representatives in the upper house—the Senate. The point made by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) on that was wholly fallacious. As for the powers of the Whips, as I pointed out, if Members' terms are non-renewable, the Whips will have little influence.

A second argument is that of gridlock—that is, as soon as we have elections up the Corridor, the two Chambers will be locked in mortal combat. That is a load of old tosh. We have a Parliament Act, which was framed to set out the rules and limits of that relationship and to prevent gridlock from ever happening again. The Parliament Act 1911 resulted from the only gridlock crisis that we have ever had in this country. No one in their right mind in this place would ever repeal the Parliament Act. It is in place to protect us from gridlock.

The Prime Minister accepted all those arguments until recently, or at least it seemed so. He had attached himself to a number of manifestos supporting election—

Sir Patrick Cormack: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tyrie: I will give way one more time.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am extremely grateful. If the House of Lords as it exists is abolished, which it would be on my hon. Friend's scheme, the Parliament Act would go, because it relates to the House of Lords as it exists.

Mr. Tyrie: That is an absurd constitutional and semantic non sequitur and therefore not worth replying to in depth. I will buy my hon. Friend a cup of tea. I am sorry to have made such a seemingly dismissive remark, but shortness of time prevents me from pointing out the legal nonsense embodied in his comment.

I shall address one concern that is taken more seriously: the possibility that the House of Lords could end up challenging the supremacy of this place. I favour a largely elected second Chamber, and again I agree with the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, who said that it would inevitably mean that that Chamber had less legitimacy and could challenge us far less. I fall back once more on the Parliament Act. It seems inconceivable that we could lose a battle while the Parliament Act is in force, and it will not be removed.

The heart of our supremacy derives from the fact that this House is the source of the Executive, and that will not change either. I also support the proposal to remove Ministers from the House of Lords to emphasise the extent to which the other Chamber is a scrutiny Chamber.

There are other arguments against election. One is that there would be a loss of independent expertise. As I mentioned, I favour a minority appointed element that could perform that role. The Prime Minister's objection to that, which is the hybridity argument, is almost certainly an attempt to conceal another view entirely. He does not want a House of Lords that can interfere with what he is doing in the Executive. He wants Executive supremacy and any House of Lords that has moral authority generated from the ballot box will prejudice that supremacy.

That is why the Prime Minister has suddenly come out with the hybridity argument: we can have 100 per cent. elected or none elected. Of course, he does not want 100 per cent. elected. He knows that we will have none elected if Members follow his advice. He controls this place, as everybody knows on both sides of the House, and he wants to make sure that, one way or another, he can neuter the second Chamber. The way in which the Prime Minister intervened in the debate demonstrates the extent to which we need some protection from exactly that kind of presidential power from No. 10.

One more key issue needs to be addressed. Can the existing House, perhaps with the addition of an effective appointments commission, do the job of a second Chamber? Notwithstanding all the arguments that I have presented in favour of democracy, could we devise an appointed Chamber that could do the job? I very much doubt it, for reasons that have already been given. The precedent of the people's peers operation does not augur well. People would soon have the perception, even if it were untrue, that what we had put in place was a self-perpetuating oligarchy of the great and the good.

Nor does the record of the existing House of Lords suggest that it could perform the role. The debate that has just taken place in the other place shows the lack of constitutional imagination on the part of its Members. As has been pointed out, it was an argument that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. It was a collective, ermine-clad Dr. Pangloss speaking. It was, in fact, a parody of Dr. Pangloss. A crucial job for the second Chamber is to think imaginatively and creatively about the constitution. It is a great shame that the House of Lords failed that ultimate test, thereby demonstrating that it cannot do its job.

I am by instinct a Conservative, and it is a fact that most second Chambers are conservative too. One way or another, around the world, they play a more conservative role than the lower House. I beg all Conservatives to think about the role that they want the second Chamber to play, beyond mere reaction to any constitutional proposals from this place. Conservatives believe in the value of organic institutions—institutions that can change and evolve over time. The time has come for the Lords to evolve and change. That process of evolution should have begun a long time ago—nearly 100 years ago—when those who put through the Parliament Act made it clear that they favoured the introduction of greater democracy. They thought that it would come within a few years, but the first world war intervened.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley was right. What we have tonight is a vote of principle. The credibility of this institution is at stake. We have an opportunity to send a clear message to a wider electorate that this House is aware of the public's concerns about the state of democracy—that they are wary of presidential government and think that a second Chamber, democratically elected, could play a role in dealing with that. They want a higher quality of parliamentary democracy than they get now.

A largely elected second Chamber would not provide all the answers to our constitutional concerns, but it would point in the right direction. We must take this opportunity tonight, as an institution, to tell a wider public that we have been listening to them.

3.30 pm

Jim Dowd (Lewisham, West): As the debate has worn on, we have heard few new arguments. The arguments are becoming increasingly familiar, and I will try not to go over ground that has already been covered. Like everyone else, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and his Committee on the work that they have undertaken, but I agree strongly with my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) that they were given a dodgy brief. It is hardly surprising if what they have managed to produce reflects the imperfection of what they were given to work on.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) on his tenacity and ingenuity in ensuring that the House has

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the opportunity to vote on the question of abolition in principle. I will be completely staggered if we are successful in the amendment, but it will at least have served the purpose of airing the arguments. We can then put the issue to one side as we attempt to unravel the Gordian knot of what remains after the votes here and in the other place.

Lords reform is not the most important issue that the House has to address. As others have said, it is certainly not the most important issue in the constituencies. I should be surprised if this were a matter of great and heated debate in any constituency in the country. It certainly is not in "The Golden Lion" in Sydenham. I went through my case load yesterday to see how many letters I had received on House of Lords reform, and they numbered three. All the letters had been received since the publication of the White Paper in 2001. For those who have speculated on what we may have said to our respective electorates, I replied to all three that I am a unicameralist and I believe that reform of, and confidence in, this Chamber are far more important than trying to fix problems elsewhere in the building.

For simplicity's sake, I refer the House to the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) a fortnight ago, because it put the case forcefully, succinctly and, more than anything, briefly, for our having the confidence to move to a unicameralist system and take on the challenges that would then lie before us.

Of all the arguments that would persuade me to vote one way or the other, the exhortations of the Opposition would count the least. For years, those born-again reformers told us that if we tampered with the other place at all, the temple would be rent asunder and reduced to ashes around us. They told us that the Lords was a magnificent institution and that although we would not invent it, it worked. Now they are saying that it does not work, with all the zeal of the convert. Listening to the Opposition reminds me of the story of the mature couple who were spending a few days at a seaside hotel. On the second evening, one said to the other, "The food here is absolutely inedible." The other replied, "Yes, and such small portions." That is the position of the Conservative party on House of Lords reform.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) spoke a fortnight ago, with his usual eloquence. He said:

> "to strengthen Parliament's control over the Executive . . . should be our only guiding motive".—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 215.]

Reading between the lines, that sounds more like a plea to protect the House from Ministers like him. He was a senior member of the Conservative Government and held some of the highest offices in the land over those 18 years. He is a forceful, courageous and persuasive person. How could somebody now so fired by that zeal have managed to keep a lid on it for all those years? That is an act of restraint that is an example to us all. Nor is the right hon. and learned Gentleman the only Opposition Member of whom that question could be asked. I exonerate the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and the hon. Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) and for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack)—the latter has not yet spoken, but he has made several interventions—who have stuck more closely to the traditions of the Conservative party.

The Conservatives appear to wish to try to achieve by procedural means that which they cannot achieve by electoral means. Because the British people have twice, by large majorities, shown that they do not trust the Conservative party, it does not want to trust the British people. Instead, it wants to put in place structures that it can then try to exploit.

In 1845, Benjamin Disraeli, probably in this very Chamber—[HON. MEMBERS: "Not this Chamber."] I refer not to this physical place, but to the Commons. I apologise; I was not speaking geographically. At that time, Benjamin Disraeli described the then Conservative Government as an organised hypocrisy. Some 160 years on, he could reflect on the fact that the Conservative Opposition are a disorganised hypocrisy, and they need not expect us to be taken in by it.

There are many examples of democratic systems and models throughout the world, whether they are unicameral, bicameral—even tricameral, for all I know—or presidential, executive or parliamentary. I do not know whether any one is better than another or whether somebody can say that they live in a better democracy because they have a bicameral system as opposed to a unicameral one, or because they have a President as opposed to a Prime Minister and a parliamentary system. I was taken with one of the interventions made from the Opposition Benches, which told us that a bicameral system had twice the power of a unicameral one. In that case, why do we not have a tricameral or even quadricameral system? It could go on and on. That is a ludicrous proposition.

An organisation and institution is as strong as the structures that it has in place. The challenge of unicameralism is to take that on and to have confidence in our ability to hold the Executive to account and take on some of the changes that we have engineered in recent years. Numerous changes have been made in respect of pre-legislative scrutiny and draft Bills. We could even incorporate the interrogatory role of the Select Committees into the legislative process, if we wanted to do so. There are 659 of us, for goodness sake, so we should be able to achieve that degree of change if we believe in it.

The worst option and the one that has taken the heaviest battering today is hybridity. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) does not like the name, but that is what the option is. I wrote in my notes that it was the worst of all worlds, but I noticed that my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson) said the same thing earlier. I do not know where she got it from. As to other hybrid solutions, or alleged solutions, not only are some of them half-baked, but others are completely unbaked.

Just under 30 years ago, when I was first elected to the London borough council of Lewisham, I remember that we had people called aldermen. I am sure that plenty of hon. Members will remember them. They were abolished—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, as somebody says, they were appointed. All the councillors were elected, and in the first council meeting after the election, they used to appoint aldermen, who had all the powers of a councillor with none of the responsibilities. They had no

electorate or constituents and nothing to equalise their position with that of councillors. Four years later, they were removed and their role was abolished. That was done by general and universal consent, because we could not have two types of councillors. We can only have one type and all the theories about hybridity cannot overcome that problem.

Mr. Bryant: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jim Dowd: No; although I would get extra time for giving way, it would probably come out of somebody else's speech, so if my hon. Friend does not mind, I shall continue.

The aldermen system went back to the middle ages. It predated representative democracy of any sort and it took centuries to abolish it, so I am surprised that we are being dragged back to it 25 years later. I understand the argument about hybridity as a staging post to other things, but while I usually subscribe to the theory that every wedge has a thin end, I do not believe that everything is wedge-shaped.

The challenge is for this House and each and every Member of it to restore its reputation and the interests of the public in our democratic system by not being timid but being bold, adopting the truly radical option and reforming Parliament itself. That is a task that we should undertake immediately, enthusiastically and imaginatively.

Mr. Tyler: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is there any way in which we can be informed of the outcomes of the Divisions that are taking place in the Lords? One has already taken place, and I understand that, contrary to expectations, 335 Members voted for a fully appointed House and 110 voted against, which shows that a much higher than expected percentage are against a fully appointed House. Is there any way in which we can get important information from the other end of the building?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I think the hon. Gentleman has already imparted some important information to the House. It is not a matter for the Chair.

3.40 pm

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Hon. Members have made many interesting contributions to the debate. There were one or two canters around the clichés, but the vast majority were extremely thoughtful. I was particularly taken with the remarks of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris), who talked about the effects on the public. Those of us who are professional politicians and constitutional anoraks would do well to take account of that sometimes. I occasionally give speeches in which I mention reform of the House of Lords, and the question that often arises at the end is, "Why bother? What's the point? Why not concentrate on health, pensions, crime or the other important matters that affect people?" Ultimately, however, until we are able to get our Parliament right, we will be unable to deal effectively with the issues that affect our citizens.

The current system has two central flaws. First, our Parliament is flawed by the illegitimacy of the way in which the other place works. Secondly, people are frustrated by the political process, and find it difficult to understand why we in Parliament cannot arrive at a consensus on much of the detail that is before us. It is therefore vital that reform goes through and is not left for another century.

The amendment tabled in the name of the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) refers to unicameralism. There is certainly an argument for that system, and I would not dismiss unicameral Parliaments simply because they have only one Chamber. However, in this country, in this democracy, at this point, it would be virtually impossible to get rid of the other place and to create a unicameral system. If we took that route, it is likely that we would lose what little is good of the other place—there is a need for a revising Chamber—and would be unable to replicate it here. Although I have given the hon. Gentleman's suggestion considerable thought and think that the argument has merit, I shall move on to the other options that are before us.

Before 1995, when I entered Parliament on the death of my father, I was, in principle, broadly in favour of reform, but with a strong streak of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Many people took that view. Within a very short time of entering the other place, I decided that it needed to be reformed, that it needed to be reformed quickly, and that it needed to have a strong element of election. That was simply because I had realised that it does not work—that it does not fulfil the purpose for which it was designed, namely to offer a decent check and balance and to allow us to revise legislation properly. Too often, a perfectly sensible amendment—not an amendment concerning the principle of a Bill or a wrecking amendment—is knocked back in the ping-pong process simply because a majority of Members in this House have insufficient time properly to consider what the other place has asked them to consider.

I therefore rapidly came to the conclusion that the best option was for a wholly elected second Chamber, which would be my first preference in a vote. I recognise, however, that the option of 80 per cent. elected with 20 per cent. appointed has some attractions. There is an argument that says that the great and the good cannot stand up to the electoral process, poor dears, but ought to be brought into the other place, and I recognise that that has some validity.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): The hon. Gentleman implies that if a majority in this place knocks back a wholly reasonable amendment, an elected other place could countermand the wishes of the Commons. Is that his position?

John Thurso: Not exactly. I shall deal with that point later. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do so in the appropriate part of my remarks.

I do not subscribe to the argument for the great and the good. The idea that 20 per cent. of the second Chamber can be found among those who are worthy of passing judgment on our laws but are not up to the process of election does not wash. However, I will vote for the option of electing 80 per cent. and appointing 20 per cent. because I understand the arguments for it.

[John Thurso]

I shall also vote for electing 60 per cent. and appointing 40 per cent. because if at least the majority are elected, the process will work sufficiently well and be so inexorable that my objective will eventually be achieved, probably in three or four generations.

I shall vote against all the other options. The worst of all worlds is surely a fully appointed House. That is simply the status quo. We are right to get rid of the hereditaries—the rest of them should go—but frankly, the current House of Lords is fully appointed except for the few hereditaries, who will be removed.

Mr. Love *rose—*

Mr. Levitt *rose—*

John Thurso: Let me make some progress. I am keeping an eye on the time. The present House of Lords is broadly appointed. It is interesting to consider the two lines of defence for that. We heard one on the "Today" programme this morning from the Home Secretary, who said that we should stop mucking about with an elected House of Lords, which would get in the Government's way, and concentrate on the archaic procedures of the upper House.

Lord Norton of Louth presented the other argument in the previous debate in the other place. He argued that the House of Commons had full democratic power simply because of the manifesto, which gave it authority over everything that the other place could do. That gentleman has never sought election and I doubt whether he will ever do so.

There are therefore two strands of defence for a fully appointed House. They are represented by those who want to push through their business and those who want to stay in the club for life.

Mr. Tyler: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority. Does he acknowledge that Lord Norton's argument that the manifesto must carry the day puts Labour Members in difficulty today?

John Thurso: My hon. Friend makes a good point, with which I concur.

I support a fully or mostly elected House because people outside must see the second Chamber as legitimate. Having sat in the other place, I know that no method other than election can achieve that.

I do not believe that election threatens the primacy of the House of Commons. First, we must discuss and define its primacy or supremacy. The manifesto is about principles and this House will therefore always have its way on principles, but the other place must have the right to deal with detail. It is important to maintain the conventions between the two Houses, especially the convention that provides that peers, Lords, senators or whatever they become should not get involved in constituency business. That is vital. They must stick to a regional interest. The convention of not voting down manifesto business must also be maintained.

The conventions may have to be strengthened in legislation later, but if they can be maintained, the primacy of the House of Commons will not be in doubt.

Jim Dowd: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Thurso: I only have a minute left.

The Leader of the House compared Lords reform to "Waiting for Godot". Like him, I fear that we will end up with no change and that the status quo will be perpetuated. It is time to consider another Beckett play—"Endgame".

3.49 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Instinctively, I am a unicameralist, and it is right that we are considering that option today. Indeed, I was one of those who signed the early-day motion expressing regret that that was not among the original options. Having considered the matter, however, I part company with others who are instinctively unicameralist on the issue of whether embarking on that route at this stage in our development would maintain the pace of reform, and whether it would achieve what the unicameralists wish it to achieve.

The unicameralist argument often states that the key issue is not the relationship between one House and the other but the relationship between Parliament as a whole—the legislature—and the Executive. That is the argument that took me down the unicameralist route, and it is one that we all have to address. It is also true that our political system is highly centralised in character. In many ways, it is increasingly presidential. The political environment that is created in an era of mass communication and instant media leads politics in that direction. This is underpinned and given greater impetus by the changes that are taking place in the global nature of economic and social relations. So to win office at a general election, the message of any political party has to be honed and distilled and, to get that message across, it is important that everyone remain on message.

Meanwhile, the media will constantly try to get below the radar of that message, to create what is perceived to be the best news and the best story, which is—surprise, surprise—a good row. If the good row is between people on the same side, it is better news than one between people on different sides. The impact of that on politics can be very destructive, because the political parties go further into defensive mode, which recreates the problem over and over again. This carries on after the election when a party is in government. Indeed, if members of a party are committed to radical change, the need to keep their eye on the ball and not be deflected from their purpose becomes even stronger. If they try to depart from that purpose at any point, people will have a go at them for that as well. Let us just consider the response that we have seen today to the issue of having a free vote on this matter.

It is not surprising, therefore, that politics becomes centralised or presidential. Nor is it surprising that the Opposition develop a tendency to score points rather than to scrutinise. That is part of the same process. In regard to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris) said, those are

good reasons for the disconnection from politics that exists outside this place. We need to address that issue. If we are to do that, we need to achieve a greater separation between the role of the legislature and the role of the Executive. We could do that by implementing a unicameral solution, but the consequence of that for this place would be far greater than hon. Members might wish. It would almost certainly involve a change in the size of the House of Commons and a change in its voting systems. I would be comfortable with that, but I am not sure that many other Members would. It might also mean, if we were going to do it properly, that we had to elect the Executive separately. There is something to be said for that model, but it is not realistically on the agenda, either today or for some years to come.

If we are going to stick with a system in which the Executive are chosen from the main House of Parliament, that House will always have a dual role. It will always have a principal duty—perhaps rightly—to help the Executive, the Government of the day, to achieve their programme. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is why, in practical terms, we need a second Chamber. That argument leads those who, like me, are instinctively unicameralist to say that if we accept the need for a second Chamber, it must have legitimacy. That legitimacy can be achieved only if all, or at least a majority, of its Members are elected.

We should not be worried about the perceived threat to the primacy of this place. This is the House of Commons. It is the place from which the Government are drawn and, when push comes to shove, the Government will and should have the right to get their manifesto programme through. But surely that does not mean that they cannot be scrutinised properly. It surely does not mean that on occasion the legislature could not exercise some independence from the Executive.

If we are worried about that, we can of course specify limits. We can codify the system, much better than we do at present. But if we are ultimately saying that a second Chamber should in no circumstances have the right to challenge or to question, what are we really saying about the role of the legislature vis-à-vis the Executive? That is today's key question, and that is why I am not troubled by the principle of election.

Different forms of election can be adopted. Many speakers have mentioned the different models that might be used. It is also true that people with less traditional roots should be able to sit in the second Chamber, perhaps through indirect election or perhaps by other means. I certainly think that representation of the regions and the nations of Great Britain should be possible. I also believe that if we are to retain the second Chamber's role as a legislature but also a revising Chamber within a legislature, the suggestion made by several Members on both sides of the House that it should be separate from Government, and that members of Government should therefore not sit in it, has great merit.

As has been said by those who have advanced the unicameralist argument, if we believe in democracy we should have confidence in ourselves. That does not just mean confidence in this place, or in ourselves here and now; it means having confidence in Parliament as a whole, and allowing Parliament to fashion the institutions necessary for that to be achieved.

The purpose of all this is not some dry constitutional one. It is not merely to establish the right precise mathematical relationship between the different Houses. The key issue is democracy, and the people who are most important to democracy are those of whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley spoke. Those people are not here; they are not even in the other place. They are the people outside who are losing confidence in the political process. That loss of confidence is not just a threat to us because fewer people turn out to vote in elections; it is a threat to democracy itself. Those of us who worry about the rise of racism and the far right in this country should ask whether there is not a connection between the lack of credibility of the conventional, mainstream political process and the fact that people are turning to those alternatives.

This is a key debate, not a dry constitutional debate. We should strengthen Parliament. We should vote for a second Chamber that is either wholly or substantially elected, and we should seek to change the way in which all too many people outside feel about Parliament as a whole. It is not that they agree with the Commons or with the Lords; they are saying, "A plague on both your Houses". It is time we changed that.

3.58 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): You at least, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were born a Lord and will die a Lord.

I am tempted to say that if we have been chewing over the problem of the future of the House of Lords for 100 years and have not come up with a solution, it may just possibly be because the problem has not presented itself as a particular problem. On the whole, political systems are able to respond to the need for things to be done, and we should be cautious about assuming that an imperative now exists that did not exist before. None the less, I think it sensible to act, and my inclination will be to vote for the "elected" options.

All of us who have been in Government have experience of the House of Lords. My experience is that when it is good it is very very good, and when it is bad it is awful. It is very very good when its members take advantage of a body of expertise and know what they are talking about; it is awful when they just pick up the press release from the lobby group. That may cause them to become insufficiently analytical and too sentimental in their treatment of serious political subjects. I have to say that fisheries comes to mind.

We should also beware the tyranny of the manifesto. At the last general election, I took the precaution of dissociating myself in some regards from my party's manifesto. What is important is to tell the electorate that there are things for which one stands as an individual. I do not believe in the sort of determinism whereby one acts exclusively within the framework of a manifesto. Indeed, as several hon. Members have mentioned, the Labour Government are doing or envisaging things that are miles away from any thoughts that they had at the time of their manifesto's writing.

I should say by way of a preliminary that we should beware of looking for what one Labour Member rather chillingly called the final solution; things shift constitutionally. We are witnessing major constitutional change within the United Kingdom, and eventually we

[Mr. David Curry]

may well wish to reflect those changes. If we go down the route of a much more genuinely federal state, for example, there could eventually be an argument for representing the nations and parts of the United Kingdom in a forum where the diffuse interests of government can be represented, as against the centralised instruments.

The issue is not one of the House of Commons against the House of Lords. It is a mistake to regard this as an inter-Chamber conflict—I am much more interested in the accountability of the Executive and their scrutiny by Parliament itself. If we are to have effective accountability and scrutiny, my own inclination is increasingly towards removing the Executive not merely from the House of Lords, but from Parliament altogether, thereby adopting a much more congressional system of government. I can see the argument for unicameralism. In many ways, a unicameral Chamber would be much more responsible—indeed, it would have to be so—than a Chamber for which a long-stop was present in case it made errors, but the case has yet to be made.

Nor do I think that the relationship between the House of Commons and the House of Lords is incapable of being regulated in such a way as to maintain the supremacy of the House of Commons. A series of measures—including the Parliament Act, which would continue to have force—enables the maintenance of the supremacy of this place. We could, at a pinch, give the House of Commons exclusive competence over certain matters of constitutional importance, in order that we hold the brief entirely within our own hands. However, it is no bad thing if the House of Lords strains against the traces in the process of establishing the customs and practices that determine the practical functioning of our constitution. So I have no problem with a period in which everybody is feeling for where the new relationships lie in the new structures.

Of course, an elected Government must ultimately have their way on issues for which they have specifically sought a mandate, but they must argue for their way. Given that so many political programmes today are aspirational rather than specific, we should, as I said, be somewhat cautious before we elevate the manifesto to the status of biblical truth.

There are, of course, other ways of hobbling the Government. A classic one is simply to have a system of proportional representation, which normally denies Governments a majority made of one particular party. I do not favour that option, but it is certainly available. There is also the genuinely federal structure, and the separation of the Executive from the legislature. There is no single model that would enable us to achieve the supremacy of, or the accountability of, a particular Chamber. I know that colleagues from Wales and Scotland have been somewhat scarred by the notion of competing Parliaments, but devolution does not provide the analogy. Devolved Parliaments are primary legislatures in a limited range of activities, but they are primary legislatures none the less. Even though they may ultimately derive their powers from this place, in practice they are primary legislatures, and nobody is suggesting that the House of Lords should aspire to, or be granted, that status.

I am also slightly suspicious of the use of the word "legitimacy". Legitimacy is divisible—there is no single concept of it. What does it mean in practice? It means that people accept that peers and others in positions of political authority are there by virtue of a particular merit, having gone through a particular process. I am afraid that there are only two ways of displaying merit in the modern, complex, technological state in which we long since abandoned the hope of identifying some form of renaissance man. One is the vulgar method of election, and the other is the Aristotelian method of nomination by elders. The latter is demonstrated in "The Magic Flute", in which a number of people preside over the highest sphere of wisdom, insight and purity, and occasionally invite others to join them. Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends would undoubtedly be candidates for that high office, but it may not be immediately relevant to our present debate. A revising Chamber does not necessarily need the same legitimacy as a primary legislative Chamber. We should not get hooked on some deterministic notion of what constitutes legitimacy.

My inclination is to go for an elected Chamber because that is the simplest outcome. On the whole, simplicity is a virtue in politics—not least because it enables me to understand. I am willing to contemplate a hybrid Chamber, but it would be helpful to know how big it might be. If we assume that an element of nomination is needed to ensure a certain degree of expertise, it would be useful to know whether that Chamber will have 120, 200 or 150 places to distribute that expertise around. I would have liked that question to be settled first because that would have assisted me with my percentages.

Tony Wright: The Public Administration Committee recommended a House of 350 Members and showed with great precision how, over a 10-year period, we could get from where we are now to where we would like to be.

Mr. Curry: As we have gone virtually 100 years without substantial change, I have some hesitation in assuming that in the space of the next decade or so, we shall make such rapid progress as the evolution indicated by the hon. Gentleman. The size of Chamber that he mentioned would be more congenial to me than 600—perhaps one even smaller.

As to the means of election, beware funny franchises. The idea of a non-renewable franchise is a monstrous affront. One would invite people to vote specifically to enable one to renounce any accountability that the electors may have vested in one. One would simply say, "Goodbye. I am not coming back."

On what basis people would vote, I do not know. My inclination would be seven years, which has a certain biblical ring. If there is no better precedent, no doubt that would be reasonably congenial. After all, we are talking about a political body—not some great academic institution that exists to preserve the country's culture. We are not talking about nominations to the Académie Française but about a second political chamber of the British Houses of Parliament. Let us not shun the idea of electing politicians to do a political job.

Of course there will be difficulties. The electorate will ask, "What is at stake?", and there is always a problem when there is nothing specific at stake, such as a change

of Government. It is difficult to give a ringing speech such as, "I am standing on a mandate and asking you to give me the power to revise." From the point of view of a political stump, I would rather watch that than perform it, but we must get over such difficulties. There will be no point blaming the electorate if the process lacks sufficient interest.

I am concerned about the implications of nominations. I fear the nomination of the self-promoting and the highly profiled, and defining the expertise required. The individuals who identify the expertise and make the nominations may turn out to be the most powerful people in the land—the real senate. And I hope that we do not get stuck with an obsession with gender, ethnic balance, sexual preference, regional origins and all sorts of other criteria—so that we put a jigsaw puzzle into the House of Lords, then find that the bits do not fit.

The Government have modernised this House and reduced our ability to scrutinise. We depend on their Lordships to deliver the checks that we can no longer provide, but it is unsatisfactory if the primary legislature is merely a vehicle for Government. We need to think in terms of Parliament, not Chamber. We cannot have a combination—the danger we face—of the impotent and the illegitimate. We need to get on with the measured reform that we now have the prospect of achieving.

4.9 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I will not take up my full time because many colleagues wish to speak.

I feel ground down by this debate. We have discussed the matter exhaustively and I hope that we will reach a resolution, so that at long last something will happen rather than endless navel-gazing.

I have always been in favour of a small, directly elected second Chamber. To paraphrase the Prime Minister, "Let's go for it. We are at our best when we are bold." The Leader of the House has searched for a long time for the centre of gravity, and we can discern it emerging through the mists. Astonishingly, the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats came down in favour of 80 per cent. elected and 20 per cent. appointed. Despite what the Prime Minister has said, the Labour party has always had an overwhelming majority in favour of an elected second Chamber.

I am a member of the Select Committee on Public Administration, and I was prepared to sink my differences and try to find the centre of gravity. The Committee favoured a ratio of 60 per cent. elected and 40 per cent. appointed. That was not my preference, but I was prepared to sign up to it to get some change. That is what we must hold on to in this debate: we want there to be some movement and some change.

The Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform report proposed a second Chamber of 600 Members. That is completely grotesque. The Leader of the House told us earlier than only five upper Chambers in the world have more than 200 Members. We simply do not need a second Chamber of such elephantine proportions. It would be absurd.

Another thing that sticks in my throat is to hear in debate after debate about all the philosopher kings in the second Chamber. We are told so much about peers' wisdom that there seems nothing that they cannot do, but most are part-timers. The Public Administration Committee inquiry found that 25 per cent.—one quarter—of peers asked 87 per cent. of the questions and made 76 per cent. of speeches and interventions. Most simply do not turn up.

Mr. Foulkes: It is a bit like here.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's support, but I hope there is no more heckling from him.

I shall end with the position of the Prime Minister. It has been comprehensively rejected by the Labour party. I have gone through the all the studies and reports, and all the findings from the commissions and policy forums that have been set up. Not one submission called for a wholly elected second Chamber—

Hon. Members: Appointed.

Mr. Prentice: I am sorry, I meant to say appointed. I was getting carried away. I need to chill out.

In 1994, just after the Prime Minister became leader of the Labour party, he said:

"We have always favoured an elected second chamber."

That is not true: between 1983 and 1992, the Labour party was going to abolish the Lords. However, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield went on to say that he wanted there to be in the Lords

"a genuine body of the distinguished and meritorious—with a better, more open and independent means of establishing membership."

That is where he was coming from. That thinking led us to the bizarre recommendations of the Wakeham Commission, religious representation and all that nonsense. That thinking led to the House of Lords appointments commission and the pantomime of the people's peers.

I do not want people's peers. I want a people's Parliament, and that means election not appointment. In that, I think that I speak for the Labour party more than the Prime Minister.

4.14 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) said that the Prime Minister may have changed his mind, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that he has done so on issues other than this one. In 1983, the Prime Minister campaigned on coming out of the EU.

Pete Wishart: What about his membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am reminded that the Prime Minister was also a CND member. He has been on a steep learning curve. In my opinion, he has improved very much. He has now arrived at a very commonsensical solution.

I have sat through every debate on House of Lords reform both in this Parliament and in the last one. Furthermore, in the last Parliament, for three years, I had the honour to be a Front-Bench spokesman and

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

frequently had to give way to interventions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) who constantly advocated a senatorial solution—

Lynne Jones: And a sartorial one?

Sir Patrick Cormack: And always a sartorial solution as well—of course.

As we come to the end of this phase of the debate, there are two logical ways forward. The first is to go for a fully elected House, which means several things. It will inevitably lead to the abolition of the House of Lords as it exists at present, and its replacement by a second Chamber that is differently constituted in every particular. If that second Chamber is to attract people of real calibre to stand as Members, it must have real power. That means a redistribution of powers between our two Chambers and, in effect, that for the first time we have a written constitution.

We must face up to the logic of that argument. Members of the second Chamber would have to be elected on the same day as the general election. They could be elected for eight-year terms, rather like Members of the US Senate who serve six-year terms. We would thus move towards fixed-term Parliaments. Those who advocate a fully elected second Chamber must face up to that logic. The Leader of the House did not do so, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst did precisely that when I asked him whether he was really advocating a revising or a revoking chamber. He replied honestly—I commend him for that—that he was really arguing for a revoking chamber, which would have the power to revoke things decided in this place.

I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) is not in the Chamber, although I have his full authority for what I am about to say. He has apologised to me for his rather dismissive reaction when I said that if we took the route advocated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the Parliament Acts would almost certainly go. That is the opinion of many constitutionalists. What would certainly go would be the Salisbury convention. As hon. Members on both sides of the House know, the Salisbury convention is that the House of Lords, as currently constituted, always gives a Second Reading to every Bill that is referred to in the manifesto of the party in government. It is one of those things that help our delicately balanced constitution on its way.

Mr. Forth: As we have demonstrated that on this issue—as on others—the Government pay scant regard to their own manifesto, does my hon. Friend agree that we need not be worried by an elected upper House paying scant regard to a manifesto?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I shall not follow my right hon. Friend along that line, except to point out that Members in opposition always behave a little differently from when they are in government. I listened with a degree of amusement both to my right hon. Friend and to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who made a splendid speech. When they were Ministers and I opposed the poll tax—as I did, even for Scotland—I know what they said about me.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): They were right.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I think that I was right.

If Members want a powerful second Chamber, which has the power to revoke, they must face up to all the consequences that I have described and to many more besides. We should have a very different sort of Parliament. I believe in the primacy of this House—as does the Joint Committee. I am sure that almost every Member will agree that the proudest moment of our lives came when we were first elected to this place. To come here to represent a British constituency is the highest honour that anyone can have.

I believe in the primacy of election and in the primacy of this House, but I also believe that there is a case for having a Chamber constituted of people who have rendered signal service to the state in a whole range of fields and disciplines. That is what we have in the House of Lords at the moment. I do not believe that the system of appointment is perfect, and the Joint Committee will have to address that issue with great care and thought, and in detail. Nevertheless, I would rather have a fully appointed, nominated House than one that would inevitably challenge the primacy and supremacy of this House.

As I said in an intervention, I would much rather be a unicameralist, with such things as weighted majorities written into the constitution, than one who supported two elected Chambers. I cannot vote for the unicameral solution. I asked Mr. Speaker whether he could allow such a vote last, but he said that he could not—I fully understand why—so the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) will understand why I cannot vote for his amendment, although I am glad that it was selected. That way lies a certain logic; the way that I am arguing lies another sort of logic: a balance between the two Houses—one of the elected representatives of the people and the other to provide the counsel of elders and experts who can revise and scrutinise. Far from criticising the size of the Chamber and the fact that its Members are part-time—they are very cost-effective, too—we should realise that it is a very good thing that people go there and speak when they know what they are talking about, which is not always the case here.

Mr. George Howarth: Will the hon. Gentleman take it from those of us who support the abolitionist cause that we are very pleased that he will be with us in spirit if not in person?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his gracious recognition of my position and why I cannot be with him in that Lobby.

I urge all colleagues, wherever they sit in the House, to put aside manifesto commitments and all those other things and look at the merits of the argument. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) was right about manifestos. I have distanced myself from my party in my own election

address manifesto many times—I make no apology for doing so because I am answerable to the electors of South Staffordshire and to no others, and so it must always remain—but I urge Members to put aside all other considerations and say what will give the best Parliament to the nation.

If hon. Members wish to sacrifice power and to have a powerfully elected second Chamber, the logic of that argument is to vote for a wholly elected second Chamber. I respect hon. Members who take that position, but I disagree fundamentally with them. If hon. Members do not believe in such a Chamber, while believing that this House obviously needs reform and improvement because it is not the most effective first Chamber in the world, the logical course is to vote for a wholly nominated or appointed second Chamber, whatever the Prime Minister may do.

I believe that to go for a hybrid is the worst of all solutions for the very honestly adduced reason given by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso), who spoke a little while ago. He said, "Well, I will go for 60 or 80 per cent. elected because I know that that will lead to 100 per cent. being elected in due course."

Mr. Bercow: Excellent.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My hon. Friend, who has been noticeably silent today—most amazing—may say that. Well, okay, but I shall end as I began. There are two logical positions: to have a wholly elected second Chamber with real power, a revoking Chamber, or to have a revising Chamber that is not a challenge to this House but derives its legitimacy from this House. That way would preserve the best of the Parliament that we have at the moment.

4.24 pm

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): I rise with some trepidation since I note that every person for whom I have ever worked has already taken a view on House of Lords reform. All my bosses have taken a view that is contrary to mine. My first boss was the Bishop of Oxford, and I suspect that he has already voted in the other place in favour of a wholly appointed Chamber. My second boss was my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), and he has gone down some very odd routes this week. My third boss was John Birt—now Lord Birt—who made a speech two weeks ago. I used to write his speeches, and they have not improved. I note that my present boss also disagrees with me on this subject. It is to the Government's credit, however, that we have a free vote on the issue. It is a great shame that the media have tended to turn this into a personal row between different members of the same party, on both sides of the House.

The truth is that this is a matter of settling the long-term constitution of this country, which is not something that can be drawn on the back of a fag packet. It is entirely right that there should be a free vote and that we should use our consciences. I support democracy and have always done so. I do not know whether that is just because part of my childhood was spent in Spain under Franco and I have strong memories of his dictatorship making sure that nobody had the opportunity to vote. I also spent some time, in 1986, in Latin America—in Chile, Peru and Argentina. Argentina had just come into democracy, Peru was a democracy with terrible problems, and Chile was still under the power of Pinochet, although he only ever appointed 25 per cent. of the Members of his Senate. One of the most bizarre things about sitting on the Joint Committee with my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) has been hearing so many lectures, especially from Members of the House of Lords, on the perils of democracy. One could easily have been sitting in the Politburo.

I have also been astounded to hear, and to read in the debates of the other place, how few people seem to have confidence in the concept of political parties. I am passionate in my support of political parties. It is only through political parties that manifestos are delivered. Only through political parties can one prioritise a programme of work. Only through political parties can the cult of the maverick, which is profoundly misguided and tends to be lionised by the media, be avoided. I believe in party politics and the discipline that it provides and I believe that we should say that out loud.

All sorts of things have been said about the House of Lords, but people have tended to forget that the majority of the current Members of the House of Lords are politicians—not elected politicians, but politicians—many of whom used to be in this House or work for political parties in all sorts of different ways in society. They are now able to claim up to £44,000 tax-free in expenses every year. Any politician in the second Chamber should be elected. That seems incontrovertible. If somebody is to be a party politician and take a Whip in the second Chamber, they should be elected.

Many people have referred to the role of the House of Lords. Of course, that is an area in which some of the debate has been a little thin. In the Joint Committee, however, there was a great deal of consensus on the issue. I believe that the primary role of the House of Lords is to legislate—a word that has not been used so far—to scrutinise, to revise and, in main measure, to help the Government make amendments to their legislation. So often, Ministers say in Committee that they will think about a particular amendment, and one knows that that amendment will not appear again until the Bill progresses to the House of Lords. That is a very important part of the processes in the House of Lords.

The role of the other place, as it is presently constituted, also involves the wielding not only of influence but of power. The truth is that it helps decide how people in this country live nearly every aspect of their lives: for example, in relation to issues such as social security or how people are taught in schools. If somebody wants to have the right to decide how I live my life, they should put themselves up for election. If people want to say, "I want power over your life but am frightened of standing for election," they are the first people who should not be put in any second House.

Many arguments have been advanced against democracy in the House of Lords. The first and foremost, and the one that I hear most frequently, is that, if we were to have elections to the House of Lords, it would fundamentally change its character. Well, amen to that, say I. I find it impossible to believe that people cannot see that the House of Lords, as presently

[Mr. Chris Bryant]

constituted—and as it would be constituted if it were wholly appointed—is elderly and sclerotic. Frankly, it reminds one of the days when Colonel Blimp used to run the country from the Turkish baths at the Royal Automobile Club. We need to move to a new generation.

The present House of Lords is fundamentally reactionary. On many issues, the House of Lords has chosen to disagree with the House of Commons. For example, during debates on anti-terrorism legislation a year ago, I believed that we should have a law to prevent religious discrimination. However, the Lords ensured that that did not become law, and I think that they were wrong.

Another argument that many people have advanced against having an elected House of Lords is that there would be gridlock with a rival Chamber. The word "gridlock" comes from the American system. The American system is very different from ours: it is not a parliamentary democracy. The Executive in the United States of America are constituted completely without Congress. The very fact that the House of Commons constitutes the Government of this country, by the majority that the Government enjoy in here, is the fundamental premise on which our primacy must reside.

I am not sure about taking all Ministers out of the second Chamber, but we certainly ought to have a rule that the Prime Minister cannot be a member of the second Chamber. We do not yet have such a rule. It has become custom and practice that the Prime Minister is from this House, but there is no rule to say that that has to happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) advanced an especially interesting argument in the first debate on this issue two weeks ago. He said that he wanted to vote for a wholly appointed second Chamber so that it would be more democratic. I have always found that argument difficult. It seems to me that it would be difficult to create a more democratic and more transparent appointment system, because political parties will not want their nominations to be subject to a third party—namely an independent commission. Moreover, the people's peers have already been derided.

How would a new set of Lords Spiritual be appointed? Many people have spoken about this issue and suggested that we could have members of other religions and faiths in the second Chamber. However, we would then have to make invidious decisions on which Hassidic Jewish community should be represented, and which Muslim community should be represented. It would be far more sensible to go directly for election. Some people have asked whether we should have indirect elections.

Caroline Flint: A number of people who have spoken about direct elections have also said that the basis on which people are elected should not conflict with the constituencies that are used in our election to this House. That suggests that direct elections will move to a system of proportional representation and therefore to a party list system. What is the difference between that and appointments? In a PR system, parties would be able to appoint people to a list or to have indirect elections for people from organisations such as the TUC or the CBI, and from regional government or elsewhere.

Mr. Bryant: The point of having an election is that if nobody votes for the political party for which a person is standing, that person will not be elected. If nobody votes Conservative at the next general election and the next European elections, no Conservative will be elected. Amen to that.

Those who support indirect elections should vote in favour of options that include an elected component. If we vote for a wholly appointed Chamber, there will be no chance—as was made clear in the Joint Committee—of having indirect elections.

In my final minute, I want to say a few words about the bishops. The bishops should go. Nobody else has said that today, but they must go. They represent only England, not Wales or Scotland. I believe in a strong Church but I do not believe that a strong Church has to be represented in the legislature.

The commitment to democracy, and to political change through democracy, is at the heart of the historic Labour party. Appointment, nomination, patronage and privilege—whether of birth or of personal connection—have always been inimical to the interests of the ordinary working people whom Labour represents.

Public opinion wants, and natural justice demands, that those who decide how we live our lives should be elected and removable. Our freedoms depend on the secret ballot, universal suffrage and free and fair elections. We turn our backs on democracy at our peril. I urge hon. Members to vote for an option that will give us a wholly legitimate Parliament, albeit with a majority, but partially, elected second Chamber, or to support 100 per cent. election, if only to say to the bishops that they have got to go.

4.35 pm

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): We have a constitutional opportunity of immense importance and a chance to achieve what many believe unachievable: to complete House of Lords reform and provide for a second Chamber that is both democratic and legitimate, but which neither duplicates the Commons nor challenges its primacy. It is an opportunity to provide for a second Chamber that is representative of the people and the regions, but still expert enough to do the job that we give it. It might even be an opportunity to build a consensus on the best way forward and to begin to agree the next stage of the constitutional evolution of the nation at a time when we are so bitterly divided.

I listened to the siren voices against a directly elected second Chamber and agree with much of what I heard. I cannot bring myself to support a 100 per cent. directly elected second Chamber because it would fundamentally undermine our bicameral system of Parliament, which works only if one House has primacy over the other. The Lords had primacy for centuries because the landed aristocracy were perceived to be superior to the lower social orders. It was only with the advent of democracy that this House took primacy because it brought with it legitimacy, and primacy followed that legitimacy. History compels me to the

view that, if the second Chamber is directly elected and has a legitimacy equal to that of this Chamber, it will one day assert that legitimacy against the Commons, so I cannot support a directly elected second Chamber.

I cannot support an appointed Chamber either. I am a democrat and as such can see no point in reforming the House of Lords unless it is to make it more democratic. The only thing wrong with the other place is that none of its Members has been elected. It was because the hereditary peers were an affront to democracy that we removed them. Life peers are equally an affront to democracy, and we must remove them as well.

Of course, democracy does not equal legitimacy, but it does confer it. It affords two vital constitutional protections: government by consent and government by representatives. That is why our forefathers fought so hard for the vote and why we still fight for democracy across the globe. It is simply inconceivable that we turn our back today on democracy and embrace patronage instead. If the power of appointment is placed in an independent commission, we will simply have patronage by the great and good for the great and good, and if it is placed in the parties, we will simply have cronyism. Neither would command any respect so I cannot support an appointed second Chamber.

If I cannot support an appointed Chamber or a directly elected Chamber, neither can I support a hybrid that is part directly elected and part appointed. Two half wrongs do not make a right. A hybrid Chamber would certainly not make for a stable constitutional settlement because constitutional stability demands that all Members have the same standing—none is more legitimate than another. Some people claim that the House of Lords is already a hybrid, but they miss a crucial point. At present, all Members of the House of Lords owe their presence to patronage. Their mandate is by appointment only. Not one peer has the legitimacy that democracy alone can confer. Introducing a directly elected element into the second Chamber will create a Chamber of conflicting mandates, and I do not think that it could stand, let alone fly.

I agree with parts of all the speeches that I have heard. All three principal options are objectionable in principle: direct election threatens the supremacy of this House; appointments are not a democratic expression of the will of the people; and a hybrid Chamber would be a constitutionally unstable fudged compromise. What does all that mean? It means that we must recast the entire debate if we are to agree on a way forward. The debate has become far too narrow. The seven motions reduce complex constitutional issues to a set of merely numerical choices. We should be debating principles, not numbers—legitimacy, primacy, expertise and, above all, participation. We need to do more than choose between varying proportions of Members elected and Members appointed.

If mandate is the problem, we must look at the mandate—not percentages. We need to consider the means of election to the second Chamber. We must devise an electoral model that is democratic and will lead to a membership that makes the second Chamber both effective and legitimate, but ensures that it neither duplicates the composition of the Commons nor receives a mandate from the electorate that allows it to challenge the Commons' primacy.

Mr. Boris Johnson (Henley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Stinchcombe: This is a very short debate. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I shall conclude my remarks.

We need to look to a model of indirect elections to the second Chamber—models not even canvassed in the report of the Joint Committee, on which I served. In choosing our model of indirect election, we must have in mind the crucial need to re-engage the electorate, so that they not only participate in our democracy more fully, but begin once again to trust it, own it and even, Lord forbid, cherish it.

I no longer support the functional constituency model under which Members are elected by discrete representative groups, because that would narrow the electoral base to the vested interests and we would simply have a Parliament of lobbyists. I do not support direct regional elections, with Members elected by those already elected to local authorities or even assemblies, because the regional agenda is too undeveloped. Nor would that encourage the participation of the electorate.

I emphatically support the model persuasively advocated by the singer-songwriter and activist Billy Bragg in his pamphlet, "A Genuine Expression of the Will of the People", which I recommend all hon. Members read if they want to be serious students of constitutional reform. Under that model, MPs would continue to be elected by the first-past-the-post system and enjoy the primacy that only direct elections can confer. However, each vote cast at the general election would carry with it a secondary mandate for a second Chamber. The membership of the second Chamber would then be composed by distributing the seats in proportion to the votes cast for each party in the nations and regions of this kingdom. That would be a democratic expression of political preference.

Mr. Robin Cook: I hear what my hon. Friend says in support of that model. He will be aware that its distinguished author has listened to much of this debate. I spoke to him earlier, and I think that if he were consulted by my hon. Friend, he would encourage him to vote for one of the largely elected options. To put my hon. Friend right on one point of detail, none of the options says "directly elected". They say "elected" and embrace the option that he is proposing.

Mr. Stinchcombe: I am grateful for that intervention. I have been working closely with Mr. Bragg in preparing this speech. When I served on the Joint Committee, I voted precisely to ensure that indirect elections could continue following this debate. Indeed, I shall be voting for a 100 per cent. elected Chamber in the last resort.

We should have a secondary mandate for the second Chamber. It would then be a democratic expression of political preference. Because it would be only a secondary mandate, it would confer a legitimacy on its Members one step behind the primary mandate of directly elected MPs. The secondary mandate would

[Mr. Stinchcombe]

encourage the electorate to re-engage with the political process because we are much more likely to reinvigorate our participatory democracy if we add more weight to the votes cast than if we impose another tier of elections on an electorate already suffering from election fatigue.

A secondary mandate would add real weight to votes. Currently, the only votes that count at the general election are those cast for the winning candidate. Under the secondary mandate system, all votes would count. More votes would lead to representation, and that representation would be proportional, so that no single party could obtain an overall majority in the second Chamber. Independence could therefore continue in that second Chamber, with smaller parties having their voice, albeit through the legitimate means of the democratic process, not the engineered means of patronage and appointment. Because we would be electing from regional lists, regional representation would also be secured, curing one of the most obvious ills of the second Chamber: government of the nation but not by the nation—by the well-heeled south-east instead.

I accept that we would not have exactly the same expertise in the second Chamber, but Governments appoint experts to Select Committees to advise us as we go about our business. Certainly some experts—perhaps many—will be willing to stand on an indirect basis, providing they can do so. After all, most experts happen to have a political viewpoint. Many are in the Lords already and many take the Whip. Most Cross Benchers have a political viewpoint too, even if they rarely turn up to express it.

I have heard the calls for us to make the second Chamber a politics-free zone, but we cannot take politics out of the legislature, nor can we take parties out of the politics—and nor should it be tried. If the only people we lose from the second Chamber are those who are unwilling to put themselves forward for election in a democratic age, that is no bad thing. We can hardly argue for the need to reinvigorate our participatory democracy, then go out of our way to find room in Parliament for those who refuse to participate in elections and deny all the people any say whatever in their appointment.

4.45 pm

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): I will not take up my full time allowance. It will be an unalloyed pleasure in a few moments' time to go into the same Lobby as the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House. I have never truly understood whether he is a total man or a substantial man. Having listened carefully to him, I am none the wiser, but I have come to the conclusion that it does not matter very much. It will be a joy to be in the same Lobby as him and my right hon. Friend, but before then, I shall have an interesting diversion, as I shall be in the unicameralists' Lobby, together with, I hope, a substantial number of my colleagues.

I am a unicameralist, and would abolish the second Chamber. For the avoidance of doubt, that means removing the bishops and Law Lords from Parliament, and abolishing the office of Lord Chancellor, replacing him with a democratically elected Minister—a Secretary of State for justice, an office that was central to every Labour manifesto for 50 years until 1997, when it mysteriously disappeared. I believe in unicameralism because the House of Lords has been an alibi for our own inadequacies on many occasions.

I echo what my good and hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) said the last time we debated this matter. He spoke about an occasion in the last Parliament when he organised a small but perfectly formed rebellion. I cannot remember what it was about, but I was almost certainly a part of it. He recollected that many people said that they would have supported him, save for the fact that they knew that the Lords would ultimately do their duty.

Something similar happened when we were fighting for jury trial, and there was a large rebellion. Forty Labour Members voted against the Government, and 90 abstained. However, several told me that they would certainly have voted against the Government on jury trial if they had not known full well that the House of Lords in due course would throw the measure out, which it did. I have often reflected on what would have happened if we did not have the House of Lords, and Members who would undoubtedly have fought for jury trial had voted against the Government in the Commons, knowing that it was their last chance to do so. We might easily have beaten the Government, with their vast majority. If we had done so, we would have struck enormous simultaneous blows for parliamentary democracy and the oldest of our civil liberties.

That is the answer to people who say that unicameralism is a dangerous road. The plain fact is that it will concentrate the minds of elected Members of Parliament to a far greater extent than any other superficial reform. However, we are not going to get it, so there is only one option—a fully elected House. There is no other option, and what has been offered as a challenge to this House is pure bunkum. The House of Lords will be a creature of statute, and will be bound by a statute of our making. The behaviour of its Members will undoubtedly deteriorate when they are elected, but there is no sign whatever that there will be an outbreak of mass delinquency. Let us vote for election, because it is a vote against the greatest curse of the British political system—the continuation of patronage in any form, whether deferred or otherwise.

4.49 pm

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I shall be brief. I support a totally elected second Chamber. I will vote tonight for 100 per cent. elected, but I am also prepared to support a substantially elected body if that means that reform can be achieved. I urge all those who support a fully elected second Chamber to vote for 80 per cent. and 60 per cent. as well, so that we can make progress. It is vital that we make progress on an issue that has been discussed for so long. I hope that we can reach a substantial majority for one of the options tonight. It is good that we have a free vote, so that, within parties, we can express our differing views. It is important for hon. Members to remember that we have a free vote tonight, and that we can vote for what we believe in.

I have no worries about a hybrid House. I do not recognise the description of the Members of the Welsh Assembly given by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston). She grossly exaggerated the position in the Welsh Assembly.

A reformed second Chamber must be seen by the public to be democratic. I do not support abolition or unicameralism, and I do not support the amendment to that effect. We need a second Chamber to scrutinise and revise legislation. Even with pre-legislative scrutiny, we need a second Chamber so that a different set of people can scrutinise legislation. We need checks and balances to ensure that the laws that we make are, as near as possible, right.

Many reasons have been given for the election of a second Chamber. Many hon. Members argued that that would give it greater legitimacy. It will not be a place where Members from this place go when they no longer want to go through the electoral process and the hurly-burly of the hustings, or where they and others go if they are not prepared to put themselves in front of the people.

Much has been said about Members of the second Chamber with enormous achievements in other fields. I do not belittle their contribution, but how much time can they give their duties in the other place? It would be interesting to look at the voting records of people with expertise who have been nominated to the other place.

Mr. Bercow: I entirely agree with what the hon. Lady has just said. Does she accept that her point about part-timers and relative inactivity is underlined spectacularly this afternoon by the fact that in the first vote in the other place, only about half the Members bothered to vote?

Julie Morgan: I believe that it is a myth about brilliant achievers taking part in the second Chamber. If their expertise is needed, they can be co-opted on to Committees in the second Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) made the point strongly about the so-called experts.

The public would find it incomprehensible were we to set up a totally appointed House of Lords. Do hon. Members remember the derision that not so long ago greeted the Wakeham report and the proposal for an elected element of 20 per cent.? As the Leader of the House said, public opinion does not suggest support for a move to a totally appointed House of Lords.

Many arguments against an elected House have been heard in the debate today. One of the main ones is that it would challenge the primacy of the House of Commons. That can be dealt with in many ways, as we heard.

Mr. Clelland: Does my hon. Friend agree with the Leader of the House, who told us that a vote for direct elections can also mean a vote for indirect elections? Is she aware that in the Committee that prepared the report before the House, there was only one vote on any option, and that was a vote by those members who favour elections to eliminate any reference in the report to indirect elections?

Julie Morgan: Indirect elections can be considered as part of the elected whole.

In conclusion, we have an historic opportunity to move forward, and I urge hon. Members to go the way of democracy. Let us have a fully democratised second House.

4.54 pm

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): I congratulate right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have taken part in our two days of debate on this issue. On behalf of the official Opposition, I also wish to thank the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and the members of his Committee for producing the report on which our proceedings are based. We have had an interesting and wide-ranging debate, with many differing views being expressed.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) mentioned, the official Opposition's policy is to support a smaller, but largely democratic House of Lords. We favour a ratio of 80 per cent. elected to 20 per cent. appointed. I thought that the criticism from the hon. Member for Lewisham, West (Jim Dowd) of the official Opposition having a policy on the subject was misplaced. We would indeed be open to criticism had we failed to engage in this debate at all. I am happy to confirm that, like Labour Members, we will have a free vote: my right hon. and hon. Friends are free to vote as they choose.

For the first, and perhaps only, time I agree with the conclusions of the Leader of the House on this issue and I intend to vote for all those options that would result in a second Chamber in which more than 50 per cent. of members were elected and against all the other options, including the amendment. I support the bicameral system that we have and I thought that a strong and eloquent case was made by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris), in one of the best speeches of the two days of debate. We need a safety valve in our system. We need a second Chamber that enables us to rethink and revisit legislation and acts as a safeguard, not least against this Chamber prolonging its own life.

Some other interesting secondary issues were raised. The more that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) spoke, the more I agreed with him, especially his point that there was a good case for removing members of the Executive from the other Chamber. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) mentioned on a point of order the vote in the other place. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that the fact that only 445 peers voted out of a potential electorate of 700 leads one to ask where the others were. Why were they not in their places to vote on their own future?

Whatever one's view on what is the best option this evening, we all hope that the votes tonight will lead to a lasting resolution of the issue. We need an effective and legitimate second Chamber that is willing and able to scrutinise properly and not afraid to use its powers. For me, and many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, that means a democratic element, not a Chamber of cronies. I hope that, when we vote, the House agrees.

4.58 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): Given the time and the nature of the debate, this will not be a traditional winding-up

[Mr. Ben Bradshaw]

speech. However, I wish to thank all those who have taken part and I am sure that the Joint Committee will be grateful for all their contributions. It would be invidious to single out one speech, but I must say how good it was to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris) making her first speech since her sad departure from the Government.

Several hon. Members have suggested that, if one wants indirectly elected peers in the other place, one should vote for a wholly appointed Chamber. That idea needs quashing. To get indirect elections, one would need to vote for some kind of elections and then lobby the Joint Committee to decide that they should be indirect rather than direct.

We are about to vote on the options. There will be eight votes, including the amendment on abolition, which will be taken first. Members may vote for, abstain on or vote against as many of the options as they wish. As has been repeated often, this is a free vote. The Joint Committee will reconvene later this month to consider the results in this Chamber and in the other place, and it will then produce a second, more detailed report. I am sure that all Members of the House look forward to that report and to seeing this House's final word on composition, which we will now deliver.

It being five o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Order [30 January], put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

The House divided: Ayes 172, Noes 390.

Division No. 75] **[5:00 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Begg, Miss Anne
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Burgon, Colin
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Annabelle
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heyes, David
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McWilliam, John
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Miller, Andrew
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salmond, Alex
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Helen
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes: Jim Fitzpatrick and Dan Norris

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, rh James
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beard, Nigel
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bell, Stuart
Bellingham, Henry
Benn, Hilary
Bercow, John

Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, rh Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Caborn, rh Richard
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Caplin, Ivor
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, rh John
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gummer, rh John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hammond, Philip
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, rh Oliver
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Linton, Martin
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, rh Ian
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, rh Francis
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miliband, David
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Moss, Malcolm
Mudie, George
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Portillo, rh Michael
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, rh John
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Raynsford, rh Nick
Redwood, rh John
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Richard
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare

Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, rh David
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walter, Robert
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes: Charlotte Atkins and Mr. Phil Woolas

Question accordingly negatived.

It being after Five o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put forthwith the remaining Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that hour.*

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 245, Noes 323.

Division No. 76] **[5:17 pm**

AYES

Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Amess, David
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bell, Stuart
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, rh Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, rh David
Boateng, rh Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burgon, Colin
Burns, Simon
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobson, rh Frank
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Efford, Clive
Fallon, Michael
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, rh Derek
Foulkes, rh George
Francois, Mark
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Gummer, rh John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Ingram, rh Adam
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Lilley, rh Peter
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
McKenna, Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Malins, Humfrey
Mandelson, rh Peter
Maples, John
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*

Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Portillo, rh Michael
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, rh John
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Redwood, rh John
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Anthony
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trimble, rh David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Ward, Claire
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Phil Woolas and Charlotte Atkins

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Bercow, John
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, rh John
Dismore, Andrew
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Goodman, Paul
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendry, Charles
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hinchliffe, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Hoyle, Lindsay
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Lazarowicz, Mark
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*

Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maude, rh Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Mercer, Patrick
Miliband, David
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, David
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Dan Norris and
Gillian Merron

Question accordingly negatived.

HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House approves Option 2 (fully elected) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).

The House divided: Ayes 272, Noes 289.

Division No. 77] **[5:31 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Bercow, John
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, rh John
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Dodds, Nigel
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howard, rh Michael
Hoyle, Lindsay
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*

Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Lazarowicz, Mark
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maude, rh Francis
Meacher, rh Michael
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Owen, Albert
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, rh Joyce
Redwood, rh John
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N.
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes: Dan Norris and Charlotte Atkins

NOES

Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Amess, David
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, rh David
Boateng, rh Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cabom, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Cameron, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flook, Adrian
Foster, rh Derek
Foulkes, rh George
Francois, Mark
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Gummer, rh John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Ingram, rh Adam
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor

Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lilley, rh Peter
Linton, Martin
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Malins, Humfrey
Mandelson, rh Peter
Maples, John
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morris, rh Estelle
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Portillo, rh Michael
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, rh John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Straw, rh Jack
Streeter, Gary
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tredinnick, David
Trimble, rh David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walter, Robert
Ward, Claire
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Phil Woolas and Gillian Merron

Question accordingly negatived.

HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 3)

Motion made,

That this House approves Option 3 (80 per cent. appointed/20 per cent. elected) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Question put and negatived.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm that the Government have just refused to vote on a motion that they originally included in their White Paper on reforming the House of Lords? They no longer stand by the Lord Chancellor and his cronies.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): That is not a point of order for the Chair.

HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 4)

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House approves Option 4 (80 per cent. elected/20 per cent. appointed) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

The House divided: Ayes 281, Noes 284.

Division No. 78] **[5.47 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Ancram, rh Michael
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Benn, Hilary
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Bercow, John
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*

David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, rh John
Dismore, Andrew
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendry, Charles
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Lazarowicz, Mark
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maude, rh Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Meacher, rh Michael
Miliband, David
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Owen, Albert
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Linda
Pickles, Eric
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, rh Joyce
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N.
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes: Dan Norris and Charlotte Atkins

NOES

Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Amess, David
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Banks, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bell, Stuart
Bellingham, Henry
Bennett, Andrew
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, rh David
Boateng, rh Paul
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burgon, Colin
Burns, Simon
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Conway, Derek
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobson, rh Frank
Dodds, Nigel

Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, rh Derek
Foulkes, rh George
Francois, Mark
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Gummer, rh John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Healey, John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Ingram, rh Adam
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lilley, rh Peter
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
McKenna, Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Malins, Humfrey
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Maples, John
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Mercer, Patrick
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Portillo, rh Michael
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, rh John
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Redwood, rh John
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Sheerman, Barry
Shepherd, Richard
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tredinnick, David
Trimble, rh David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Ward, Claire
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Phil Woolas and Gillian Merron

Question accordingly negatived.

HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 5)

Motion made,

That this House approves Option 5 (60 per cent. appointed/40 per cent. elected) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Question put and negatived.

HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 6)

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House approves Option 6 (60 per cent. elected/40 per cent. appointed) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 316.

Division No. 79] **[6:03 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Benn, Hilary
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Bercow, John

Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, rh John
Dismore, Andrew
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendry, Charles
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maude, rh Francis
Meacher, rh Michael
Mercer, Patrick
Miliband, David
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Owen, Albert
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thurso, John
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Wareing, Robert N.
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Dan Norris and
Charlotte Atkins

NOES

Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baird, Vera
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bell, Stuart
Bellingham, Henry
Bennett, Andrew
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Boateng, rh Paul
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burgon, Colin
Burns, Simon
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor

Cash, William
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Collins, Tim
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobson, rh Frank
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, rh Derek
Foulkes, rh George
Francois, Mark
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Jack, rh Michael
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lilley, rh Peter
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
McKenna, Rosemary
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Malins, Humfrey
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Maples, John
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Portillo, rh Michael
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, rh John
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Redwood, rh John
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Sheerman, Barry
Shepherd, Richard
Sheridan, Jim
Simmonds, Mark
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soames, Nicholas
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Trend, Michael
Trimble, rh David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Viggers, Peter
Walley, Ms Joan
Walter, Robert
Ward, Claire
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wills, Michael
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr. Phil Woolas and Gillian Merron

Question accordingly negatived.

HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 7)

Motion made,

That this House approves Option 7 (50 per cent. appointed/50 per cent. elected) in the First report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).—*[Mr. Cook.]*

Question put and negatived.

Mr. Forth: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Now that the House has put itself in an interesting position, and the Government in an even worse position, in that the commitments made in the Government's manifesto look as if they are now in shreds, and the option that got the closest vote was my party's policy, can we expect an immediate statement from the Leader of the House as to where he expects us now to go—

Hon. Members: Home.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Forth: —not least so that the Government honour their manifesto. Can the Leader of the House tell us that now, please?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair, but if the Leader of the House wishes to make a comment, he may do so.

Mr. Cook: The view expressed by hon. Members was wise. We should go home and sleep on this interesting position. That is the most sensible thing that anyone can say in the circumstances. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the next stage in the process is for the Joint Committee to consider the votes in both Houses. Heaven help the members of the Committee, because they will need it.

Mr. Tyler *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: To be fair, I will take just one more point of order. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful for the enthusiasm for my contribution. Further to that point of order, I point out to the House that it seems that the majority of Labour Members have not voted for their policy and the majority of Conservative Members have not voted for their policy. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am pleased to be able to say that that is not a point of order for the Chair. We must move to the next business, which is petitions. Will hon. Members who are leaving the Chamber please do so quickly?

PETITIONS

Food Supplements

6.20 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I have the honour of presenting a petition signed by more than 1,000 of my constituents and other residents of Kent who, unlike this House, have the great merit of being able to make up their minds about what they actually want done.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of Consumers for Health Choice and its supporters

Declares that consumers in the United Kingdom have for many years maintained good health by choosing to take safe vitamin and mineral supplements and herbal remedies and fears that the European Food Supplements Directive and the European Directive on Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products will severely restrict the number and range of such products on general retail sale in the future.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons requires that the Secretary of State for Health does all in his power to protect the rights of UK consumers by ensuring that such European legislation does not unnecessarily and unacceptably restrict the availability of natural health products.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

T&S Stores

6.22 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I wish to present a petition on behalf of constituents and others who were very concerned by the proposal made by Tesco to take over T & S Stores. The people who signed the petition were concerned that the takeover of the stores would mean that many people all over the country would no longer have corner or high street shops. Some 318 people have signed the petition.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of local convenience shop owners and others

Declares that the local corner shops are important for the survival of our local communities, and that local shop owners as opposed to national supermarkets should continue to be the sole owners of such shops.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to make arrangements to ensure that the proposed merger between Tesco and T & S does not go ahead without a proper competition inquiry.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

The merger has gone ahead, but I still wish to present the petition.

To lie upon the Table.

Gas Disconnections

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

6.23 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I am most grateful for the opportunity to raise in the House the distress, anguish, pain and real suffering that has been caused to my constituents in Belgrave as a result of the disconnection of their gas supply in December 2002. I am delighted to see that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), will reply to the debate, because he is one of the most assiduous constituency MPs in the House.

I would like my hon. Friend to imagine for a moment how awful it must have been for the people of Belgrave and how they suffered as a result of what happened. They had no gas and, in some cases, no electricity, heating, hot water, or any effective means of communication to find out what had happened. Old and vulnerable people were left shivering in the dark, with babies crying because of their discomfort, schools closed and people off work because they could not find emergency child care. People with disabilities and indeed diabetes were unable to move and confined to their homes. Those were the horrifying consequences of the disconnection of gas supply faced by my constituents.

Although this matter affects residents in my constituency, it also affects those in that of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), who is of course Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. In some cases, our respective constituents come from the same family. We have been in constant contact about the issue in order to do what is best for local people, and we will continue in our joint efforts to ensure that justice is done. My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) also represents constituents who have relatives in the area, and I am delighted to see him in the Chamber. I am especially pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill), the deputy Chief Whip, who was born in one of the houses that had its gas supply disconnected. Of course, that was a few years, but not many years, ago.

All Leicester is extremely anxious to know what the Minister and the Government are proposing to do. On Wednesday 4 December, the headline in the *Leicester Mercury* screamed "Left in the Cold". The newspaper reported that 1,800 households in Belgrave faced five days without heating. For five days—and more than that for many people—people were left without heating or huddled around borrowed heaters.

The facts were these. A burst water main was reported at 1.45 am on Abbey Park road. Hundreds of pupils were sent home after Catherine junior school and Abbey primary school were forced to close. By 7 pm, 10,000 gallons of water had been pumped out of the system. Ten days later, the figure had risen to 100,000. By the end, a total of 200,000 gallons had been pumped out.

I am very pleased to see that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, whom I mentioned earlier, has joined us in the Chamber. I am glad that she is here for this debate.

I pay tribute to the people of Belgrave for the community spirit that they showed in those difficult weeks. They pulled together in a most spectacular way, giving each other support, help and encouragement. I am proud of them. They include people such as Rita Valland, Tara Patel, Sumita Valland, Meena Joshi, Urvashi Raithahta, Puri Patel and the local head teacher of Abbey school, Wendy Allan, and her magnificent staff. Local residents were united, but also furious. In total, there were three public meetings. The first attracted 600 residents. They were upset and angry. I have never seen constituents so upset about something in my 16 years as a local Member. That community spirit and unity was, I am afraid, in direct contrast with the lack of co-ordination among the private sector companies.

I also want to pay tribute to the local elected officials for their work: Councillors Veejay Patel and Ramink Kavia in Latimer ward; Councillors John Thomas and Sakarlal Gaggar in Belgrave ward; and Councillors Manjula Sood and Mo Chouhan in Abbey ward in the Leicester, West constituency. They acted as an important bridge between the community and the companies involved, articulating their views and pushing constantly for urgent action.

The supply of gas is a very complicated matter. It is transported from the beach through to the meter, after which its transportation passes to a shipper, who gives it to a supplier. There are about 60 gas suppliers in England and Wales. Transco was the company in the lead as far as these matters were concerned. My constituents had a number of genuine concerns about the speed with which Transco operated. However, I want to thank Brian Popplestone, the chief executive, and Stephne Ross for acting swiftly in informing me about what was happening. I also commend them for agreeing to hold an inquiry of their own.

It was clear to me from the start, having inspected the photograph, that the fault lay primarily with the water that was supplied by Severn Trent, which had entered the gas main. I am informed that it took 48 hours to restore gas to the first properties, and that most services had been restored by 16 December. Transco had 60 personnel working around the clock and had brought in people from all over the country. In the end, 200,000-plus gallons of water—enough to fill two Olympic swimming pools—and 0.5 tonnes of soil, gravel and sand were removed from the gas system. Transco has paid £250,000 in statutory compensation. I shall return to compensation later.

Another cause for concern to residents was the need for Transco to deal with its call centre and emergency number. Several residents who rang the number felt that they were not properly dealt with; some felt that they were pushed from pillar to post. Moreover, many residents did not speak English and some were very old. It would be helpful if, when a big company such as Transco finds that there is an emergency, people with language skills—in this case people able to speak Gujerati—are able to take some of those calls.

Last year, East Midlands Electricity, which is part of Powergen, made profits of £298 million. It, too, has failed to live up to our expectations. We need to consider the failures of Powergen. When the heating supply was switched off, there were approximately 2,000 heaters that could have been used; but they were not, because,

people were told, the local generator would be overloaded and would blow up if the heaters were all switched on at the same time. I ask hon. Members to consider the foolishness of having so many heaters that could not be used in such an emergency.

We know that the water came from Severn Trent. Last year, that company had profits of £357.4 million, yet it has offered not a penny in compensation. More than 250,000 gallons of Severn Trent water entered the gas mains over this period, yet it is unwilling to take responsibility for its failures. I have seen the hole myself, and it is clear that the water entered the gas mains through it. It remains a cause for concern that it took Severn Trent several hours to turn off the water.

It is worth reminding the House of the point at which Severn Trent got involved. At 1.45 am, a resident called Transco. At 2 am, Transco was on site. At 2.45 am, Transco made a request to Severn Trent to turn off the water supply. But it was seven hours later, at 9.55 am, that Severn Trent turned off the water main. That delay was scandalous, and we need a full explanation of why it happened. The company's communication has been poor. Many of the anxieties that residents raised about the call centre at Transco were repeated about the one at Severn Trent. I believe that Severn Trent is to blame for what has happened. Legislation does not cover the element of compensation that is over and above that for which the code provides. I believe that Severn Trent should pick up the Bill.

To add insult to injury, during the crisis, I received a letter from Brian Duckworth, managing director of Severn Trent. He did not manage to write to me to tell me what was happening during the crisis, but he wrote to inform me that Severn Trent would increase water charges from 1 April 2003. Poor Severn Trent was running out of money, but not of the water that remained in the gas mains of Belgrave.

I thank Leicester city council for its actions. The local council reacted well, and bore the brunt of the work and the explaining. I pay tribute to Charles Poole, service director of democratic services, and Pravin Ruparelia of Belgrave neighbourhood centre and his staff. The city council provided more than 150 staff and volunteers, who prepared, cooked and served meals. They delivered hot meals to the vulnerable and a team of 27 social workers made home visits to vulnerable people. Two thousand four hundred hot meals were delivered to vulnerable people in their homes. More than 11,000 hot meals were served at the Belgrave neighbourhood centre, of which 8,500 were prepared and cooked on site.

Although Powergen was unable to do anything about the electricity supply, the council converted the overnight boiler at St. Mark's to dual fuel, thereby enabling the district heating system to be reconditioned so that it was fuelled by oil instead of electricity. I hope that its sizeable bill will be passed to Severn Trent.

I shall outline what I should like the Minister and the Government to do. First, I would like my hon. Friend's assurance that he will reconsider statutory compensation. The amount of compensation offered is derisory. Each household has been given only £30. Some households have not received any money. I want my hon. Friend to compare the figure with the distress that people have suffered. He should also compare it with the figure under the electricity proposals.

Such compensation is especially derisory when compared with the profits of the three companies last year. They were: £357 million, £298 million, and £1,298 million in the case of Transco. The figure of £30 derives from the network code. The agreement was made not with the Government but under the auspices of Ofgem. The maximum amount payable is £1,000. That is not enough, and the fixed rate does not cover the losses that the traders on Belgrave road suffered. The agreement lasts until 2007 and I appreciate that even someone as strong and assiduous as my hon. Friend cannot tear it up. However, I ask him to reconsider it to ascertain whether the figure can be increased when it is renegotiated in 2007. If he can, I want him to call for a new level.

Secondly, we want the Minister to refer the matter to the regulator Ofgem for a full inquiry. I asked each body involved to conduct an investigation. Transco and the city council have completed their inquiries, but we have received no news from Severn Trent.

Thirdly, we should like the Government to play a more active role. Private sector companies have been unable to co-ordinate their activities properly. They need leadership at such a time, and I believe that it falls to the Department of Trade and Industry to provide it. As the Department that deals with the energy companies and the regulator, it is best placed to provide that leadership. I do not know what the Minister can do under the confines of the statutory powers, but I hope that he will look at this.

Fourthly, we would like the Minister's support in our pursuit of Severn Trent. The company has not paid up. This very afternoon, it organised a party in a banqueting room for Members of this House. It must have cost a bit. The people of Belgrave do not want a party from Severn Trent; they want compensation for the loss and distress that the company has caused, be it through gas meter readings that were wrong, frozen food that went bad, days off school resulting in emergency child care having to be paid for or a day's holiday being lost, equipment going wrong, or the cost of phone calls or postage. All these cause distress and inconvenience. For the traders on the famous Belgrave road—from the Khadir Refreshment House in the west to the Sharmile Sweet Mart in the east, and many others besides—the loss of business runs into thousands of pounds.

I hope that the Minister will consider those four points. I should like to add two more. Will he remind the companies concerned that we are dealing with loss caused by damage? Some consumers are entitled to new appliances. Let us not dilly-dally and argue over this. Let us get on with it, and hand over those new appliances. Some people have still not received their statutory compensation. Louise Jones, who lives in Bruin street in Belgrave, e-mailed me this afternoon to say that she was still waiting for compensation from a company called Stay Warm—although, of course, she was not warm during this event. She has a different supplier from her next-door neighbour in Bruin street, who has received his compensation. Will the Minister please look at the plethora of suppliers, to see whether he or the regulator can find out what has been paid and what has not?

Lastly, we ask the Government to issue good practice guidance in these circumstances. An incident such as this is going to happen somewhere else. I do not believe

[Keith Vaz]

that the people of Belgrave, and of Leicester, East and Leicester, West, were fated by some divine interference to be affected in December. This will happen again, and we need to learn lessons from it. Good practice guidance from the Department of Trade and Industry will help people who face these problems elsewhere.

My hon. Friend is a first-class Minister, and we do not want him to sit on the sidelines on this matter. In the interests of consumers—of whom he is a true champion—I ask him to champion these people, and to help us to ensure that justice is done and that those responsible face the consequences and pay the full amount of compensation that these people deserve.

6.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Nigel Griffiths): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) for securing this debate and giving the House the opportunity to hear in detail the problems that were caused to his constituents and to hear how those responsible reacted, so that we can all learn the lessons from this. This has become an issue because of his and others' efforts, on which real progress has been made. He will never know just how fast the Department of Trade and Industry officials reacted to his standing up for Leicester in this debate.

I fully share my hon. Friend's concerns about the adverse impact on the residents of the Belgrave area of Leicester of the interruption of their gas supply in December. As he has explained, the interruption was of unusual severity, and was caused when a main owned by Severn Trent Water burst and damaged the Transco gas main. Customers were left without a gas supply for several days, and my hon. Friend was right to identify among his chief concerns the level of compensation subsequently offered to those customers by Transco, and the co-ordination between Transco, Severn Trent Water and the other utilities involved in the incident.

I thank my hon. Friend for the briefing that he has given to the House, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Patricia Hewitt), who personally briefed me on this issue on behalf of her constituents, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall). They left me in no doubt of their anger on behalf of their constituents, and their desire to ensure that firm lessons were learned from the incident so that other Members' constituents would not suffer what is at best inconvenience and at worst considerable disruption. I also pay tribute to the local Labour council, whose response showed it to be a shining example of councils that are well organised to help people locally, working closely with local people. It did its best to co-ordinate the necessary activities. The Belgrave neighbourhood centre, which I know my hon. Friends and right hon. Friend visited during this incident, performed a magnificent task in helping people in their time of need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East asked direct questions about the compensation regime, and gave us an idea of his understanding of it. Concern about the regime governing compensation for gas customers affected by third-party action has been under discussion for some time. Individuals affected by third-party damage, and their representatives, were justifiably aggrieved about the lack of an automatic regime to compensate individuals and businesses when third parties—particularly, as in this case, water companies—had damaged gas mains and caused interruption to their supply.

Although interruptions that were Transco's fault did result in the automatic payment of compensation for inconvenience caused, any that were the fault of others and impinged on Transco and its customers did not attract such compensation. In those circumstances Transco, as the supplier, was entitled to declare force majeure and not pay compensation. Sadly, as my hon. Friend said, the performance of the water company and third parties was patchy at best. On some occasions they would compensate customers, but on others they would not: they would deny liability, and would dig in for a protracted legal wrangle with Transco.

Clearly the position was highly unsatisfactory. I am pleased to say that since 2000 the industry regulator, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets—Ofgem—which oversees such matters, has pursued the establishment of arrangements under which consumers would receive compensation. We strongly encouraged Ofgem in that course, and we believe the outcome marks a considerable advance for gas consumers. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and others for the help, advice and exhortation that they gave the regulator.

Under the Water Industry Act 1991, water companies were not automatically responsible for the payment of compensation for inconvenience. They were, however, responsible for any ensuing loss or damage. As for compensation arrangements with Transco in cases such as this, detailed discussions have taken place with the company, and in the autumn of 2001 Transco agreed to compensate customers on a no-fault basis. Transco or its insurers would then seek redress from the third party concerned. Those arrangements were formalised in March 2002. The agreement now runs from last April until 31 March 2007, the end of the current Transco price control period.

I know that my hon. Friend and other hon. Members will warmly welcome this agreement. It will be reviewed at the same time as Transco's price controls, to ensure that customers receive exactly the same level of compensation for interruptions caused by third parties as they would receive for those caused by Transco itself. It is of course important, in the light of the information that my hon. Friend has supplied to our Department and to the House, that any review gives full consideration to what actually happened in Leicester during that winter evening and in the subsequent days.

Keith Vaz: I understand the Government's difficulties in intervening when an agreement has been reached between these companies and the regulator. However, it is surely open to the companies themselves to come together and say, "Well, we have looked at the situation, and 2007 is a long time away. Can we consider raising the compensation level before then?" I am not asking the Government to intervene if they have no power to do so, but presumably they would not want to prevent those companies from taking such action.

Nigel Griffiths: That is right; indeed, we would want to go further than simply not preventing them. We

would want to offer the active encouragement that my hon. Friend urges on them, because that is the right thing to do. It is regrettable that, so far as I am aware, the water company itself has not paid compensation. Transco has paid out, and I should not like it to be thought that Transco was limiting its compensation because of Severn Trent's unwillingness to meet its share. The regulator will undoubtedly look into that matter.

I want to ensure that the issue of boardroom matters and profits, which my hon. Friend raised, is separated from that of the tremendous efforts of Transco and water company staff, who worked round the clock in difficult circumstances to reconnect the supply. I should also acknowledge the fact that fan heaters and other items were supplied. The electricity grid's difficulty in maintaining them is a tribute to the scale of the problem, rather than an indication of a lack of preparedness on its part. However, it must answer for itself, and the arrangements certainly did not proceed entirely smoothly. It is important that lessons are learned by the companies involved, and by other companies that may be involved in future. I am pleased that Transco paid to suppliers compensation of £187,000 in respect of 1,226 constituents of my right hon. and hon. Friends. It was due to make further payments in respect of domestic consumers on 25 January, and I am seeking confirmation that they have indeed been paid. When I receive it, I shall write to my hon. Friend.

In conclusion, it is important to stress the need for third parties, as well as utilities, to learn the key lessons from the experience of the constituents of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Keith Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend very much for what he has said so far, but I raised several other points, and unless he can respond to them now, I wonder whether he might write to me about them once he has considered them.

Nigel Griffiths: Absolutely. I am sorry if I gave my hon. Friend the impression that I was about to sit down—it was my intention to raise some of these key matters.

We agree entirely about the need for improved co-ordination, and I shall ensure that these matters are taken up with Ofgem. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend's concern about the appropriateness of compensation levels has been noted, and is shared by other Members of the House. I shall ask Ofgem to look at those matters as well and to report back to my hon. Friend directly as well as to the Department. I want to ensure that Transco keeps Energy Watch informed of progress, deals with any inquiries that it has raised on behalf of my hon. Friend's constituents and meets its responsibilities on behalf of consumers.

I understand that Transco has commissioned its own report into the incident, which will be conducted by an independent and external consultant, and that the key issues which emerge will be shared with Severn Trent Water and my hon. Friend's excellent local authority—whose own report I also commend. If other local authorities want a model of how a council should react to such an incident, they should beat a path to the door of my hon. Friend's council and talk to the people there who showed excellent leadership in the incident—as they do in many other aspects of their work.

It is vital that all share their findings and views with Ofgem. I want the substantial improvements to the regime in respect of third party damage to show fruit. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are keen to identify further advances that might be made.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to the attention of the House. If he feels that any other matters require further clarification, I shall be happy to write to him.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 5 February 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

TRANSAS GROUP BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Wednesday 12 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Northern Ireland Assembly

1. **John Robertson** (Glasgow, Anniesland): If he will make a statement on the recent discussions he has held with Northern Ireland political parties on re-establishing the Northern Ireland Assembly. [94820]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): Intensive discussions are in progress, aimed at restoring the full operation of the devolved institutions and at the continuing implementation of the Belfast agreement. They involve the political parties in Northern Ireland and both Governments, including the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, who will visit Northern Ireland on 12 February. It is essential that we restore the institutions on a stable basis, founded on the use of exclusively peaceful means.

John Robertson: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that the breakdown in trust and confidence that led to the suspension of the Assembly needs to be repaired to ensure that devolution is re-established. Does he also agree that Northern Ireland wants devolution to be restored? How will he ensure that all the political parties can be consulted during the process and achieve devolution?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I do believe that people in Northern Ireland want the institutions to be restored. I believe that devolution has been a success there, and the sooner I can ensure that my responsibilities for health, education and all the other matters that were devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive are returned, the better.

My hon. Friend is also right that it is important for everyone in Northern Ireland, nationalist or Unionist, to have trust and confidence in each other and in the institutions.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): The Secretary of State will recall the Prime Minister's visit to Belfast in October, when he called for acts of completion on the part of paramilitaries, that being a euphemism for the complete cessation of all activity by the IRA and, effectively, the IRA's winding itself up. Will the Secretary of State assure us that, in their discussions with the republican movement, the Government are pressing for genuine acts of completion? Given the length of time for which the discussions have been going on, lest it turn out that the republicans are unable or unwilling to deliver the acts of completion that the Government require, are the Government thinking of having a plan B?

Mr. Murphy: We must concentrate on what we are doing now—on plan A—before considering any other plans. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, what is important is ensuring a complete cessation of paramilitary activity that is real, total and permanent. All our efforts over the past few weeks—and what will be done next week when the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach come to Hillsborough—involve our concentrating on ensuring that that is delivered. Of course other issues must be discussed during the talks; the right hon. Gentleman knows what they are. Central to all our activity, however, is addressing the problem that has caused trust to break down. He and other parties will of course be invited individually to talk to the two Prime Ministers on Wednesday, and I hope that the issues will be discussed fully then.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): Does the Secretary of State agree that the real weakness is the lack of political negotiations between the political parties? Negotiations are about matters military or paramilitary, and are conducted between the representatives of an illegal private army and the Prime Ministers of two sovereign Governments. Can the Secretary of State understand the difficulties that that causes for the other political parties, which do not have private armies to inflate their importance or to increase their negotiating powers?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is right to say that it is important to involve his party, and indeed all others in Northern Ireland, in meaningful discussions. He is aware, however, that the reason the Assembly lies suspended and there is no Executive is that trust and confidence have broken down. They collapsed because of paramilitary activity. That issue is central.

My hon. Friend is also aware that other issues are being discussed—issues such as human rights, equality, policing and the devolution of justice, which different parties have brought to the Government's attention. Parties are discussing between themselves, and in different formats, the issues that I know my hon. Friend considers most important. His party met the Prime Minister in Downing street some weeks ago, and all parties will have that opportunity during the forthcoming round of talks.

Mrs. Iris Robinson (Strangford): How many times must the institutions collapse before the Government recognise the necessity for new institutions and structures, so that all the people of Northern Ireland can unite behind them?

Mr. Murphy: I believe that the institutions established by the Belfast agreement are the best because people voted for them in referendums. They voted for the institutions that we want to restore. The hon. Lady should understand, however, that whatever institutions are established in Northern Ireland must have the confidence of both the Unionist and the nationalist communities.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): The journey back to devolution will probably involve fresh elections, yet there is concern that up to 200,000 electors are missing from the electoral register, including 50,000 young people who are attainers, and who can get on the register only if they present photo passes. We have a problem with the young engaging in the electoral process in general. Can my right hon. Friend give me some assurance that the Northern Ireland Office will look seriously at the problem of those who are missing from the register, and in particular at how we can get young people to register, making it as easy as possible for them to take part in that process, so that they can have a stake in the Assembly once it is elected?

Mr. Murphy: Like everybody in this House, I want to ensure that as many people as possible vote in all the elections that we face. My hon. Friend will know that there have been particular difficulties in Northern Ireland over the years that we have had to address. I realise that there have been some misgivings about the current process, but I believe that the chief electoral officer has introduced an effective method of looking at these matters, and of course there is now a rolling register. However, my hon. Friend may certainly have my assurance that, if the NIO can do something to ensure that more people vote, then all the better.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Does the Secretary of State agree that any settlement in Northern Ireland and the future of the Province as a whole must be based on the full implementation of the Belfast agreement?

Mr. Murphy: Yes I do, and that is exactly what we have been discussing during talks in the past couple of weeks.

Mr. Davies: Does the Secretary of State recall that article 1.vi of the Belfast agreement recognises

"the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland . . . to hold both British and Irish citizenship"?

If so, why, on 29 January, did the Labour party make the following formal deposition through its lawyers—one cannot get much more formal or binding than that—concerning the case of Mr. McGivern, a Northern Ireland resident who wants to join the Labour party? It states:

"People resident in Northern Ireland are not British subjects or citizens of Eire and are therefore ineligible for membership"

of the Labour party.

Mr. Speaker: Order. That has absolutely nothing to do with the question.

Irish Language Broadcasting

3. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the establishment of funding for Irish language broadcasting. [94822]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Angela Smith): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has contacted the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, expressing his wish that officials from all relevant Departments will continue to explore ways to make urgent progress on the Government's commitments on Irish language broadcasting under the Belfast agreement.

Mr. Thomas: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will know that there is a treaty commitment to establish a fund for Irish language broadcasting in Northern Ireland. Will she look at the Communications Bill that is currently going through this House, and which puts on a statutory footing funding for Welsh language broadcasting and for Gaelic broadcasting in Scotland? Will she use that opportunity to set up on a statutory basis the fund promised in the Belfast agreement for Irish language broadcasting in Northern Ireland?

Angela Smith: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are looking at all practical and effective ways in which to pursue our obligations in respect of Irish language broadcasting under the Belfast agreement. The Secretary of State has asked me to introduce further proposals for funding, including the establishment of a production fund.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): Can the Minister explain why the cultural diversity required under the Communications Bill has been applied to Welsh and to Scots Gaelic, but not to the Irish language? What consideration has her Department given to the very detailed submission made on behalf of the Irish language by Foras na Gaeilge, the all-Ireland body that is trying to instigate those aspects of the Good Friday agreement that refer to cultural diversity?

Angela Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interest and concern. I assure him that my Department is fully committed to implementing commitments made under the Belfast agreement. We will give the proposals full consideration, and do what we can in the light of the further funding that we hope to make available.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): On cultural diversity, does the Minister accept that there are more Chinese people who would like their language to be used in public broadcasting? Does she also accept that Ulster Scots Gaelic was the language of Northern Ireland,

not Irish Gaelic, and that the latter has been used in the Republic—and now in Northern Ireland— as a political tool, rather than as a cultural one?

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman may be aware of my meetings with Lord Laird of the Ulster-Scots Agency. I assure him that we follow what is in the Belfast agreement and fulfil our commitments as well as we are able.

National Stadium

4. **Mr. John Grogan** (Selby): What plans he has for a new national stadium in Northern Ireland. [94823]

Angela Smith: There is support in Northern Ireland for a national stadium— indeed, for a competition-sized swimming pool—and it is certainly a possibility that I support. However, I must tell my hon. Friend that my immediate priority is to encourage more people to be active in grass-roots sport by creating better opportunities for participation at community level and to improve the existing sports infrastructure, particularly at local level.

Mr. Grogan: Given that a passion for sport has always united divided communities in Northern Ireland, and that there are now national stadiums in Scotland and Wales—with one on the way in England—does my hon. Friend agree that it would be a powerful symbol of a new beginning in Northern Ireland if the long-cherished ambition of getting a new national sports stadium, free from the sectarian background and history, could be realised?

Angela Smith: I share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm and support for a national stadium, but there are hurdles to be overcome that are not to be underestimated. For example, about £100 million of public sector funding would be required. We should like to consider whether lottery funding could be made available. I take on board his comments and I hope that it is something that we can achieve.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) for his continuing support for and interest in a national stadium for Northern Ireland. The former Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, initiated the bringing together of a working party to consider a national stadium. Will the Minister bring together interest groups and seriously address the issue of under-provision for sport in Northern Ireland, and does she agree that there would be huge benefits in making such a provision?

Angela Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interest. I shall certainly look at the working party's report. As I said, there are hurdles to be overcome, but I think that the aim is achievable, and I have taken on board his comments.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): The Minister talks about wanting to improve participation in sport in Northern Ireland. Does she believe that it is right that British taxpayer's money goes to fund Irish athletes who then compete against British teams at the Olympic games?

Angela Smith: I am not aware of the circumstances that my hon. Friend mentions. The important thing is that we improve participation in sports in Northern Ireland at the grass-roots level so that as many people as possible can take part.

Northern Ireland Assembly

5. **Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley): What plans he has to devolve policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. [94824]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): The agreement sets out the Government's readiness in appropriate circumstances to devolve responsibilities for policing and justice issues. There is widespread support in principle for that among political parties in Northern Ireland, but significant differences over timing. We are pursuing those issues with the parties at the moment.

Mr. Donaldson: Will the Secretary of State outline what those appropriate circumstances are? It is clear, in the absence of political stability and with ongoing paramilitary terrorist activity in Northern Ireland, that the very idea of devolving justice and policing powers at this time is not tenable.

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman knows that the issue was discussed in the run-up to the signing of the Belfast agreement, and in fact it forms part of that agreement as a matter of principle. He is right to point out that the question of timing is crucial. The matter has been discussed among the parties in Northern Ireland. It is being dealt with, first, in the context of the negotiations and discussions that are being held and will hopefully be resolved as quickly as possible and, secondly, of course, with the agreement of the parties in Northern Ireland.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one necessary first step in the process towards devolving policing powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly is ensuring that every party that wants the reconstitution of that Assembly nominates people to take part in the Policing Board?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is right in that, for policing in Northern Ireland to be complete, everybody in Northern Ireland has to have confidence in its policing system. That includes republicans, nationalists, Unionists, loyalists and everyone else. These matters are being discussed and form the basis of some of the issues that we need to resolve as quickly as possible.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North): Given the current state of play in Belfast as a result of the loyalist feud and the killings that have taken place—I know that people in my constituency and across Northern Ireland deeply regret that feud and want it to end as soon as possible—will the Secretary of State ensure, in his discussions about policing, that the police and the Army have the

necessary resources on the ground to prevent further bloodshed arising from the feud and other terrorist activity in Belfast and throughout the Province? Will he accept that negotiating with Sinn Fein-IRA about further reductions in security and dismantling security installations sends out completely the wrong signal at this very difficult time in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to condemn what has gone on over the past days, weeks and months as regards the loyalist feud, and of course we all condemn the killings at the weekend. It is important that the House is aware that the police are taking a great deal of action in respect of these matters: 70 policemen are involved in investigations at the moment, 37 people have been arrested, and 17 people have been charged with offences such as attempted murder, conspiracy to murder, and so on. Although the police are engaged in those matters, it is important that we carry on ensuring that the talks continue, and that people remain aware that political loyalists such as David Ervine and others are very different from the criminal gangsters evident in past weeks.

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): In the context of devolution, and given the Government's willingness to proceed with some quite controversial parts of Patten, how about some progress on a part of Patten with which everyone agrees—a new police training centre?

Mr. Murphy: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I know that the Policing Board takes the matter very seriously, and a business plan is out for consultation. I share the board's view about what is a very important part of Patten.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Is the Secretary of State aware of the organisation Families Bereaved Through Car Crime? It seeks an improvement in justice in Northern Ireland by having deaths caused by joyriders redesignated so that instead of being classed as driving offences, they would be classed as murder. Does he agree that the organisation's structured and measured approach is a huge improvement on the vigilantism that was often used to resolve such matters in Northern Ireland in the past?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. So-called joyriding is a curse in all parts of Northern Ireland. It is a curse in Great Britain too, but it is of special importance in Northern Ireland because it has caused so many deaths. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) is dealing with these matters and meeting the families. We are considering holding a consultation process on the matter in order possibly to change the law. We also want to ensure that all the agencies involved will act together collectively. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I call the next question, I ask for order in the Chamber.

Decommissioning

6. **Helen Jones** (Warrington North): If he will make a statement on decommissioning of terrorist weapons. [94825]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Jane Kennedy): The IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Red Hand Commando have all suspended contact with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. Clearly, we regret that, and I would urge all paramilitary organisations to engage with the commission immediately. It is imperative that both republican and loyalist organisations complete the transition to exclusively peaceful means—real, total and permanent.

Helen Jones: I am grateful for that reply, but does my hon. Friend agree that it strains people's patience when dissident republicans and loyalists both claim to be on ceasefire while refusing to decommission weapons and carrying out gang warfare on the streets of Northern Ireland? How long will they be able to claim the benefits of ceasefire while they refuse to carry it out?

Jane Kennedy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State keeps under constant review the state of all paramilitary ceasefires, but the House knows that we have moved beyond that. We now need acts of completion from the IRA and from anyone else with a role to play in the peace process. The Government and the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning will resolutely continue to pursue complete decommissioning by all paramilitary organisations. Recent events, including the loyalist feud casualties, make it patently clear that all illegal weapons must be taken out of circulation; otherwise, their very accessibility will always remain a threat.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry): Does the Minister agree that there is increasing cynicism in Northern Ireland about the whole decommissioning project, and that people in Northern Ireland, both Unionists and nationalists, would prefer the forcible seizure of arms by the police and the Army rather than this incessant waiting for voluntary decommissioning after political concessions were given to the political wings of the violent organisations with no end product?

Jane Kennedy: The police take action to seize illegal weapons wherever they have information that those weapons exist. I accept that there is grave distrust of the intentions of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland and that the retention of arms distorts the normal political process on both sides of the electoral divide. On those points, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Our whole objective is to take weapons out of the political process in Northern Ireland; all our energies are concentrated on that effort. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House is far too noisy. It is unfair to Members who are here for Northern Ireland questions.

Lady Hermon (North Down): The Minister will recall that on 18 September 2002, the then Secretary of State

announced that there would be an independent ceasefire monitor. Four and a half months have passed and no announcement has been made. When will the Minister indicate to the House the name of the ceasefire monitor?

Jane Kennedy: That question remains under discussion and the details of the proposals continue to be worked through. It is one of many issues that form part of the discussions as we try to resolve the overall impasse that we face at present.

Secondary Schools

7. **Mr. Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight): What evidence he has collated on the effectiveness of secondary schools in the Province. [94827]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Jane Kennedy): Examination results, research and school inspections show that many children in post-primary schools achieve very good results. However, the same evidence demonstrates that too many young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, leave school with low qualifications—more so than in England. The Government are committed to tackling that problem.

Mr. Turner: I thank the Minister for that answer, but as the achievement of Northern Ireland pupils has for a generation exceeded that of pupils in England, will she confirm that, in changing the selection system, she has no intention of diluting the excellent Ulster secondary school selective system?

Jane Kennedy: I am happy to confirm that the aim of the post-primary review is precisely to maintain the current high levels of achievement, but also to build a modern and fair education system that enables all children in Northern Ireland to fulfil their potential.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): Does my hon. Friend agree that the 11-plus exam has cast a blight over the lives of far too many thousands of Northern Ireland school students over the years? Can she confirm that education policy in Northern Ireland must try to raise the standard of every pupil in every school and not just of the elite few?

Jane Kennedy: I am happy to confirm that that is our intention.

Good Friday Agreement

8. **Tony Cunningham** (Workington): If he will make a statement on recent developments under the Good Friday agreement. [94828]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): I refer my hon. Friend to the answer that I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson).

Tony Cunningham: I hope that the Minister will agree that we are going through a crucial period in the discussions to re-establish the Assembly. What further steps are being taken to ensure that we create the complete confidence in the Good Friday agreement that is desperately needed on all sides?

Mr. Murphy: As I told the House earlier, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach are meeting at Hillsborough next Wednesday. I hope that that will give them the opportunity to speak to all the parties individually and to move the process forward. Everybody in Northern Ireland wants a resolution as quickly as possible.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): Looking at developments under the Belfast agreement, will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Labour Government's view of the Britishness of the people of Northern Ireland is different from that of the Labour party?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is obviously referring to events last week. I have talked to the Minister without Portfolio, the chairman of the Labour party. Both he and I disown what was in the newspapers last week. I am sure that everybody in the House is of the view that people in Northern Ireland are British citizens.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [95443] **Mr. Michael Foster** (Worcester): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 5 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Although not supported by everyone in the House, the extra investment in our national health service is making a real difference in Worcestershire—including a new £95 million private finance initiative hospital. However, there is some concern that the 112 acute beds in the Aconbury wing in Worcester might be under threat. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the extra investment in our health service will support those acute beds and that, along with our dedicated nurses and doctors, we will have a health service to be proud of?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that we will carry on making the investment in the health service. The £95 million new Royal Worcester hospital is an indication of the number of hospitals being built up and down this country. It is in addition to the 300,000 extra operations a year, the 40,000 extra nurses, the 50 per cent. increase in the number of scanners and the fact that there is not a single national waiting list indicator—in-patient or out-patient—that is not better than it was in May 1997. That is why the

Government will carry on with that investment, and why we are proud of our national health service and those who work in it.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Prime Minister said that Labour would abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a democratically elected second chamber. Has the Prime Minister kept that promise?

The Prime Minister: In our 2001 manifesto, we said that we would build on the Wakeham commission proposals, which include a 20 per cent. elected element. That was the position of the Government. We put that forward in a White Paper in November 2001. There was no agreement on that. The Conservative party then approached us and said:

"We therefore call on the Government to abandon the White Paper plans and establish a Joint Committee of both Houses to review further change."

That is precisely what we then did.

Mr. Duncan Smith: As ever, lots of excuses—but the right hon. Gentleman made a personal promise and he broke his personal promise. The Labour manifesto said that the Government would

"make the House of Lords more democratic".

Last night, the Prime Minister voted against the manifesto and broke his personal promise. In the same manifesto, the Prime Minister promised to remove more than 30,000 failed asylum seekers a year. Has he lived up to that promise?

The Prime Minister: First, I will correct the right hon. Gentleman once again on the House of Lords. It is correct that in the manifesto we endorsed the Wakeham proposals on the House of Lords. That was the position of the entire Government. The reason why it changed was that, after publication of the White Paper there was plainly no consensus anywhere on those proposals. We were then asked by the right hon. Gentleman and both Opposition parties to establish a Joint Committee, and that is what we did. It is therefore absurd in those circumstances to suggest that we flouted the will of the House or any other body.

Secondly, on asylum seekers, it is correct that we have not attained 30,000 removals a year. It is however also correct that we are removing more than any other country in Europe and roughly three times the number attained when we came to office.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Prime Minister has broken that promise as well. Now the Government have dropped all the asylum targets and the system is in complete chaos. When he launched that same manifesto, he also said that people should not suppose that he planned to increase national insurance. Has he kept that promise?

The Prime Minister: We certainly kept our promises on tax. We said that we would not raise the basic or standard rate, or the top rate of income tax. We did not make a pledge on national insurance. We have raised national insurance—that is coming in this April. We have raised it because it is necessary to get additional investment in our hospitals and the national health service. If the right hon. Gentleman is opposed to that rise in national insurance, let him tell us how he can then support the investment in the national health service.

The truth is, yes, we have said that taxes will go up to pay for a better national health service. That is because we believe that that is the fairest and best way of financing health care. That stands in stark contrast to the right hon. Gentleman's position, which is a 20 per cent. cut in spending across the board.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The answer is that, before the last election, the Prime Minister made a promise, and he has broken it. From April, every single working person and every company will pay for his broken promise.

He also wrote, in his manifesto that "our guiding rule" is to "deliver what we promise." On asylum, on tax, on crime, on pensions, on top-up fees, on Lords reform and on anything else, he has broken his promise and failed to deliver. The fact is that that publication should be entered for the Booker prize, because everyone knows that it is a classic work of fiction.

The Prime Minister: What we promised in our manifesto was to increase spending on the national health service. We are proud that we are increasing national health service spending. We are proud that the Labour Government do not stand for 20 per cent.—*[Interrruption.]*

The Speaker: Order. Let the Prime Minister answer.

The Prime Minister: We did promise that we would increase national health service spending. We are proud that we are increasing that spending and that extra nurses, doctors, equipment and hospitals are being delivered as a result. Yes, that is true. We will not stand for a 20 per cent. across-the-board cut in spending.

As for other countries and the taxes on business, yes, it is true that business, too, will have to pay the 1 per cent. increase in national insurance, but let me say what the alternative is. The alternative is either private medical insurance, which will cost people and businesses—*[Interruption.]*

The Speaker: Order. I say to Mr. Loughton that he must not shout. *[Interruption.]* Order. I have given an instruction not to shout. The hon. Gentleman must not shout.

The Prime Minister: The alternative to business paying the 1 per cent. national insurance is either private medical insurance—last year, in the United States, private medical insurance went up by 13 per cent., and that is what families and businesses would have to pay—or social insurance. In France and Germany, that has meant a 10 per cent. rise in social insurance premiums for French and German businesses. That is why we promised that we would increase investment in the health service. We will keep to that promise because we believe in the national health service.

Q2. [95444] **Keith Vaz** (Leicester, East): The Prime Minister has made it clear that the assessment of the five economic tests will be concluded two years after the

commencement of the Parliament, which will be in June this year. Given that my right hon. Friend and his officials are usually very well prepared for any eventuality, can he share with the House his proposed timetable for a referendum on the euro if the tests are met, and his proposed timetable for a reassessment of the tests if they are not met?

The Prime Minister: All those issues will have to await the outcome of the tests. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the tests have to be completed by June this year and, of course, they will be.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Last week, the Prime Minister said that there were links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. This morning, a leaked intelligence report says that no significant links exist. Does the Prime Minister believe that the assessment in that document is accurate?

The Prime Minister: First, I should like to comment on that document for a moment. It was said this morning by the BBC that I was on the circulation list for that document and that it was a Joint Intelligence Committee document that was submitted to me. It was not. It was an internal Ministry of Defence document. I was not on the circulation list and I did not see it. It is not part of the reports that are given to me by the Joint Intelligence Committee. If the right hon. Gentleman reads the report, as I have done this morning, he will see that, in the round, it is not primarily about al-Qaeda and Iraq. It merely says—this is absolutely true—that, historically, it has always been the case that al-Qaeda and Iraq would have different positions. What I have said to the Liaison Committee, and this is backed up by the evidence that we have from intelligence submitted to me by the Joint Intelligence Committee, is that yes, on the one hand, we do not know of a link between Iraq and the attack of 11 September but, on the other hand, there are unquestionably links between al-Qaeda and Iraq. Just how far those leaks go—*[Laughter.]* I hope that the leaks have stopped. How far the links go is obviously a matter of speculation, but I should also point out that the situation is not static; it is changing. We are getting fresh intelligence the entire time.

Mr. Kennedy: The entire House agrees that the case against Saddam Hussein must rest on his compliance with the weapons inspectorate and on the identification and elimination of any weapons of mass destruction. Given the remarks that the Prime Minister has just made, will he also recognise that—in the court of public opinion in this country—if the case for war is to be made, it will undoubtedly be weakened if not fatally undermined by talking up links between al-Qaeda and Iraq that do not appear to be sufficiently supported by our domestic intelligence services?

The Prime Minister: I think that it is unfair to suggest that we have talked up the links. It is unfair because I have made it clear each time I am asked about this—I am asked about it, and I obviously have to respond to those questions—that we do not rest our case against Saddam and Iraq on the basis of links with al-Qaeda. However, it is also the case—trying, as I said before the Liaison Committee, to choose my words carefully—that it would be wrong to say that there is no evidence of any links between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime. There is evidence of such links. Exactly how far they go is uncertain. However, as I pointed out a moment ago, there is intelligence coming through to us the entire time about this. I do not rest my case on this but, each time I am asked, I say—which is true—that I know of nothing to link the Iraqi regime with the attacks on 11 September. However, it is not correct to say that there is no evidence of any links between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda.

I think that the right hon. Gentleman will find that, far from having pushed this as the reason for action, what we have done on each occasion, and as I have just done now, is respond to questions. I do not think that it is fair to suggest that we are trying to push this in some way as a cover for any lack of argument on weapons of mass of destruction. I believe that our case on weapons of mass destruction is very clear indeed. It is perfectly obvious that Saddam has them. The United Nations has said that he has to give them up, but he is not giving them up at the moment. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman would agree with me that, unless the United Nations ensures that its will is upheld, damage will be done not just to world security but to the UN itself.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): Can the Prime Minister confirm that the new Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland recently met members of the republican movement? If the right hon. Gentleman confirms that, can he tell the House what understandings may have been reached about military matters with which he himself is currently dealing in the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: The answer is that I do not specifically know of meetings between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and republicans. That is not to say that there have not been any, but I do not know of them specifically. However, we are having a discussion with all the parties in Northern Ireland at the moment to see how we can make progress on the basis of fully implementing all the provisions of the Belfast agreement, including ensuring that all paramilitary activity of whatever nature ceases.

Q3. [95445] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): The East Elmbridge and Mid Surrey primary care trust is withholding more than £2 million from my local hospital trust, the Epsom and St. Helier NHS trust. That is hindering the implementation of a Commission for Health Improvement plan and stopping the local trust reinvesting savings and recruiting nurses. Will the Prime Minister ensure that those funds are released immediately to the benefit of thousands of patients locally?

The Prime Minister: First, I do not know about the particular situation in that primary care trust but, in any event, especially as I understand that the Liberal Democrats are in favour of devolving those decisions downwards, we should allow the primary care trust to decide for itself how it disburses its money. I simply do not know the reasons for the situation, and I obviously cannot answer on the basis of one question. However,

it would be unwise of me to promise to interfere with the decision, which should properly be taken at a local level.

Q4. [95446] **John Robertson** (Glasgow, Anniesland): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a peace settlement in Palestine and Israel is of paramount importance to the peace process in the middle east? Does he also agree that if George Bush put as much effort into an Israeli-Palestinian agreement as he has into promoting a war in Iraq, the whole country would be a lot better off?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with one aspect of my hon. Friend's question. I believe that pushing forward the middle east peace process is an urgent priority for the world, irrespective of what happens in Iraq—it is right in its own terms. The conference we held in London was, I think, successful, and a follow-up conference is happening on 10 February. It is vital that we make progress on three aspects—security, political reform in the Palestinian Authority, and the development of final status talks based on the twin-state solution of Israel and a viable Palestinian state.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Does the Prime Minister think that the London congestion charge is a good idea or a bad idea?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before, that is a decision not for us but for the Mayor. Since we have given the power to local government to charge for congestion, we should let it do so if that is what it wishes to do.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Everyone in London has a view about whether the congestion charge is a good or bad idea. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry says that it is a good idea. The Prime Minister usually has a view on absolutely everything, so I do not understand why he is being coy. The Opposition believe that congestion charging is a bad idea and should be scrapped. I know that the Prime Minister is one of the privileged few who will not have to pay the charge, so that may influence him, but will he say, both as Prime Minister and as someone who lives in London, whether the congestion charge is a good idea or a bad idea?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman is such a control freak on this issue—I thought that he was in favour of devolution to local government. Local government has the power to introduce congestion charging, and the Government's proposals allowing that were based on earlier Green and White Papers produced by the last Conservative Government. It is a right of local government to make those charges, and it should be allowed to do so if it wishes.

Q5. [95447] **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): While almost everyone of sound mind would agree that those who have the ability to go to university should be encouraged to do so, does my right hon. Friend agree that exactly the same opportunity should be afforded to those young people who want to learn an equally valuable skilled trade? What plans does he have to increase the number of apprentices, and will he pursue that with the same vigour with which he pursues university places?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As well as making sure that more people can go to university if they have the ability to do so, it is important that we extend the apprenticeship scheme. About 200,000 young people every year go into the modern apprenticeship scheme, and over 100,000 of them are on the advanced modern apprenticeship scheme. As a result of the additional funding that we are putting into skills training, the opportunity to go on those apprenticeship schemes will increase, which is enormously important, not just for those young people but for the British economy.

Q6. [95448] **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): I recognise the Prime Minister's principled and courageous position on Iraq, weapons of mass destruction and the sufferings of the Iraqi people. Will he adopt the same guts and determination towards another brutal despot, Mr. Robert Mugabe, who has brought famine, devastation and violence to the people of Zimbabwe? What advice did he give to his EU partner, President Chirac, and is he prepared to meet with me a deputation from the Zimbabwean Opposition?

The Prime Minister: Of course, I would be pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman and his deputation. The options available as to what we can do in respect of Zimbabwe are more limited than they are in respect of Iraq. However, we are doing everything we can to mobilise international opinion, and we are doing it precisely because of the repression of human rights and the appalling situation in which millions of people are starving needlessly in Zimbabwe.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Nottinghamshire police run a hugely successful anti-drugs education programme in local schools, but local people tell me that they are scared to give information to the police about the drug dealers and drug pushers. Should not the Government look at innovative ways in which we can give local people the confidence to say who the drug dealers and drug pushers are, so that we intimidate the drug dealers and drug pushers, and they do not intimidate decent, law-abiding people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. That is one of the reasons why there will be further measures in the Criminal Justice Bill to protect witnesses. Also, as a result of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 we can now seize the assets of drug dealers and make them prove how they came about the money. It is vital that this be seen as part of an overhaul of the criminal justice system, in which we are tightening up the rules that are exploited by these people and making sure that the proceeds of their crimes are taken from them and used to the benefit of the people.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Last night the right hon. Gentleman voted against an elected House of Lords and in favour of a wholly appointed House. He clearly remembers the

commitment in the Labour party manifesto to make the second Chamber more representative and democratic. Does he remember who signed the letter commending that manifesto to the electorate? Was it not the right hon. Gentleman who commended it to the electorate? Would he be so kind as to tell us when and why he changed his mind, or was he always content that the electorate should misunderstand him?

The Prime Minister: First, I do plead guilty to recommending our manifesto to the electorate, which is not an unusual position for a party leader to be in. Secondly, I have explained to the right hon. and learned Gentleman what has changed. At the time of the manifesto there was a Government position based on the Wakeham commission. When we published the White Paper in November 2001, it was obvious that there was no consensus in this House, or in the other place, for reform. As a result, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party told us that the way forward was to abandon the White Paper and instead have a Joint Committee of both Houses. That is precisely what we did. I then combined that with saying that we would no longer have a Government position; we would have a free vote. For the life of me, I cannot see why a free vote is not in the interests of both the Labour party and the Opposition. Incidentally, if anyone was in any doubt about it before, yesterday's vote shows that there is indeed no consensus in this House.

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): If a second Security Council resolution does authorise action against Iraq, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that part IV of the Geneva convention will be upheld, so that cluster bombs, depleted uranium and tactical nuclear weapons would not be deployed by any of the forces acting for the United Nations?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we shall always obey our legal obligations, and we would do that in respect of any military action on Iraq. I have said—I think it was on Monday—that the notion that we have plans to use nuclear weapons in Iraq is completely false. The circumstances in which we use cluster bombs are set out and have been the position for many years. Any weapon that we use will be fully consistent with any legal obligations that we have.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): May I refer the Prime Minister to the action being brought by a trade unionist from Northern Ireland against the Labour party's ban from membership of all people of Northern Ireland? If the only defence that can be made is the absolutely ludicrous statement that people in Northern Ireland are not British citizens or British subjects, why is the action being defended? The Prime Minister should tell the Minister without Portfolio, who is muttering to him at the moment, to stop the action and not come to the Dispatch Box and try to justify discrimination.

The Prime Minister: It is not the desire to implement discrimination against anybody. It is a difficult situation for all the reasons that the right hon. Gentleman knows. We are not saying in any shape or form that people in Northern Ireland have fewer rights than people in the rest of the United Kingdom. But, for the very reasons of the politics of Northern Ireland, it is a different and difficult situation. He and I have discussed this matter over many years and I hope that we can resolve it, but it has to be resolved with some sensitivity to the broader issues that arise particularly in Northern Ireland.

Q9. [95451] **Mr. Chris Mullin** (Sunderland, South): May I say as a friend and supporter of the Prime Minister, although not quite a Blair babe, that I could not support an attack on Iraq unless it was specifically endorsed by a second resolution of the United Nations Security Council?

The Prime Minister: I have set out my position for my hon. Friend on many occasions. Surely, the position has to be this: if there is a breach of the original United Nations resolution 1441, a second resolution should issue. That was the anticipated outcome. What resolution 1441 says is that the inspectors go into Iraq, and if they notify the facts that amount to a material breach, a second resolution should issue. That is why I believe that if the inspectors continue to say, as they are now, that Iraq is not co-operating, there will be a second resolution. The only circumstances in which I have left room for us to manoeuvre are those in which it is clear that the inspectors are finding that Iraq is not co-operating, so it is clear that Iraq is in material breach, but for some reason someone puts down what I would describe as an unreasonable and capricious use of the veto. I do not believe that that will happen and I hope that it will not, but I do not think that it is right to restrict our freedom of manoeuvre in those circumstances because otherwise, the original spirit and letter of resolution 1441 would itself be breached. I believe and hope that we will resolve this issue through the United Nations.

Q10. [95452] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): Last week, when I asked the Prime Minister about his Chancellor's damaging raid on pension funds and the collapse in the stock market, he rather blandly said:

"stock markets have fallen across the world".—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 870.]

Will he tell the House why the British stock market has fallen faster and further than those of our main competitors?

The Prime Minister: It has not, as a matter of fact. I can give the hon. Gentleman the figures for 2002. France's CAC index fell 34 per cent. and Germany's DAX index fell 44 per cent., and that compared with a 24 per cent. fall here. It is absurd to suggest that this is the only country in which stock markets are falling, but this is the only major country that has the record that we have on employment and unemployment. As a result of the Chancellor's stewardship, we have the lowest inflation, interest rates and unemployment that we have had for decades. Compare and contrast that with 3 million unemployed, interest rates at 10 per cent. and recession under the Conservatives.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): Following a well-publicised televised interview which shows that Saddam Hussein is beyond reproach, a model citizen of the world and not a self-serving propagandist, should not this be the time to pull out the weapons inspectors and welcome

him back to the international family, or does my right hon. Friend have a different interpretation of events, as I do?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that Jeremy Paxman or John Humphrys are at any great risk in terms of a probing interview. However, there is a serious point. On the idea that Saddam Hussein is a peace-loving person who is simply a victim of American and British aggression, this is somebody who has started wars of aggression against his neighbours on at least two occasions, used chemical weapons against his own people and has a history of brutality, repression and disdain of human rights that is unequalled anywhere in the world after the fall of the Taliban. Whatever people think about the situation in Iraq and the wisdom of the action that we are pursuing, the one thing on which I would have thought that everyone could agree is that Saddam Hussein is a thoroughly dictatorial and repressive man who does not care for the rights of his own people, never mind the rights of the world.

Q11. [95453] **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): There are 90,000 British expatriates living in the Gulf region. Can the Prime Minister tell us what contingency plans are in place to ensure their safety in the event of military action against Iraq?

The Prime Minister: Of course, in any area where there is likely to be conflict, we give our own citizens advice and make sure in so far as we can that we give them proper protection. The procedures, which are well known for that, will, of course, be applied in this case, too.

Mr. Piara S. Khabra (Ealing, Southall): President Bush wanted Osama bin Laden dead or alive, but he is still at large. Will the Prime Minister tell the House about the latest information available on his whereabouts? Furthermore, can he confirm whether bin Laden and his al-Qaeda followers have already crossed the border into Pakistan? If so, what steps are being taken to pursue him over there?

The Prime Minister: I hesitate to make the obvious point that, if I knew his whereabouts, I would do something about it, but it is worth making just two points. The first is that we do not know whether he is harboured in Pakistan or not, but we are in touch with the Pakistani authorities, and we have undertakings from them about missions to search any territories that he may be in. The second point, which is very important, is that we have hugely weakened the infrastructure of al-Qaeda, but both President Bush and I said at the time that this is a battle that will go on for years. Those extremists are well dug in in virtually every country around the world. There is not a single major country at the moment that does not have terrorist cells operating. We have destroyed their centre of operations in Afghanistan, but it is important that we pursue them in every other part of the world until this battle is finished and won.

Sustainable Communities

Mr. Speaker: We now come to the statement from the Deputy Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* Order. Will those hon. Members leaving the Chamber please do so quietly; there is a statement to be delivered.

12.31 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): Last July, I made a statement to the House about the Government's plans for a step change in our policies for building sustainable communities. Today, I am publishing "Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future"—a comprehensive programme of action to take these policies forward. Copies are in the Library.

The future of our communities matters to all of us in the House, and I would like to record my appreciation to the Select Committee for the work that it has undertaken on those issues, including its recent report on affordable housing. Much of the communities plan is properly about housing, but sustainable communities need more than just housing. They need a strong economy, jobs, good schools and hospitals, good public transport, a safe and healthy local environment, better design, more sustainable construction and better use of land, and much more. The plan is part of the Government's programme to deliver better public services, strengthen economic performance and improve our quality of life.

The history of housing over the past 30 years shows that all Governments have failed to meet housing need. All Governments have failed to provide sufficient long-term investment. All Governments have failed to deliver enough affordable housing, and all Governments have ignored the mistakes of the past, when we built housing estates, not communities. Not only did we underinvest in our housing; we used land wastefully, and too much of what was built was poor quality and poorly designed. In 1970, we were building nearly 300,000 homes a year. Today, it is half that, but the demand has increased. The result is a legacy of spiralling house prices, rising land values and a shortage of affordable homes.

In London and the south-east, more and more young people and key workers cannot afford to live where they want. They are being priced out of their communities. In other parts of the country—in the north and the midlands—the housing market has collapsed and thousands of homes face demolition. While private house building has declined over the past 30 years, so has the condition of local authority housing.

By 1997, the repairs backlog on local authority housing was a record £19 billion. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s not enough was done. The problem just got worse. As more people moved into home ownership—many of them through the right to buy—local authority housing continued to decline. The 1.5 million right-to-buy sales since 1980 cost the public purse a massive £40 billion at today's prices in discounts. Despite the £29 billion in actual receipts, not nearly enough was invested in improving the housing stock.

Local authorities were denied the money that they needed to repair the homes of their own tenants. Instead, capital receipts from right to buy were used to pay off the national debt. That is the legacy that we inherited—fewer homes being built and the condition of the stock getting worse by the year. We decided that the overriding priority was to halt the decline. That is why we released the £5 billion of capital receipts, which the previous Administration kept in the local authority banks, for housing refurbishment and why we established the major repairs allowance, which released another £1.5 billion a year—and this to apply nationally as the problem applies nationally. That is also why we committed ourselves to making all social housing decent by 2010, and we are on track to do that with 500,000 homes already improved.

Our first priority was to deal with the £19 billion backlog across the country. The decent homes programme will achieve the replacement of the £19 billion disinvestment by 2010. Now we must tackle the fundamental problems of high demand in the south and a collapse of housing demand in some of our most deprived communities.

May I deal first with the action that we propose to tackle housing market collapse? I am talking about communities where the properties have become almost worthless and where people on low incomes have become trapped in negative equity. In the worst cases, whole streets have been abandoned. In those places, there is no shortage of housing, but there is no sustainable community either. However, low demand requires a new approach—to re-create places where people want to live, not leave. That means not just tackling housing but, where we can, rebuilding sustainable communities.

We have already invested £5 billion over the next three years to help regenerate those areas, and we have set up partnerships in nine of the worst low-demand areas. Today, I am announcing a new fund of £500 million to help those partnerships over the next three years. In some areas, the only option will be to demolish houses that are obsolete, and we will make that easier for the residents. Home owners already get back the value of their home and the cost of moving. We propose to increase the compensation for the disturbance of moving home by more than £1,000—the first increase since 1991. We also propose to prevent the automatic renewal of planning consents, which will reduce the development of greenfield sites in low-demand areas.

The issues in high-demand areas are different. Rising house prices and shortages of affordable homes, especially in London and the south-east, are having a damaging impact on public services and the country's economic performance. We need a step change in housing supply, reversing the trend of the past 30 years. Two years ago, after extensive consultation, we said in RPG9—the regional planning guidance—that local authorities could provide new homes at the rate of 62,000 each year in London and the wider south-east. We put in place a "plan, monitor and manage approach" to planning, moving away from the failed "predict and provide" approach of the past, as I announced to the House.

We have said that if we used more brownfield land at a higher density, we could build more homes on the same amount of land. We are meeting our 60 per cent. brownfield target—seven years ahead of time—and will continue to do so. We are also taking steps to push up the density of build in the south-east.

[Mr. John Prescott]

Those changes, together with the £350 million extra resources that we are putting into improving planning and design, will increase the supply of new housing on brownfield land and the quality of what we build and where we build. Good planning means the right communities with the right homes and the jobs in the right place. I emphasise "right place", as I want to make it absolutely clear that we are not talking about homes anywhere and everywhere. We are talking about homes in sustainable communities to meet the shortfall in supply—not suburban sprawl, not soulless estates and not dormitory towns.

I recognise and share the genuine concern about our countryside. May I remind the House that a Labour Government introduced the green belt formulas over 50 years ago? *[Interruption.]* How true. Mr. Speaker, may I remind the House that a Labour Government introduced the green belt planning system over 50 years ago? I am glad that hon. Members appreciate and support that. They did not at the time, as I remember, but I leave that aside.

It was this Labour Government who provided access to the countryside and proposed the first national park in the south downs, and this Government who added an extra 30,000 hectares of greenbelt land, which is an area the size of the Norfolk broads national park. That is what happened in the first four or five years of a Labour Government.

We are now taking that further. Today, I give the House a guarantee to maintain or increase green-belt land in every region in England. We are creating a new body, the land restoration trust, to turn 1,500 hectares of derelict land in our towns and cities into new urban green spaces. We are providing resources for English Partnerships and the regional development agencies to reclaim more than 1,400 hectares of brownfield land each year—an area the size of a typical town. Now that is what I call a step change.

The House will be aware that in July last year I announced four priority growth areas to help to meet the shortfall in housing supply in the south-east. Each area offers an exciting opportunity for new design-led sustainable communities, such as the successful Greenwich millennium village, which is now being built. Each will maximise the use of brownfield land and accommodate growth in a sustainable way, with jobs, housing and regeneration going together.

The Thames gateway is the largest brownfield site in Europe. Plans for its development have been on the table for years, and we must now turn these plans into action, so today I am announcing new seedcorn investment of £446 million, which will help to attract extra private investment. With our partners, we will set up new local development agencies in east London and Thurrock to increase the pace of development. We will also invest £164 million over the next three years in the other three growth areas: Milton Keynes and the south midlands, London-Stansted-Cambridge, and Ashford. The four growth areas, including London, have the potential to deliver 300,000 more jobs and an extra 200,000 homes in the next 15 to 20 years. We must take that opportunity.

Every part of the country needs affordable housing, both for rent and for purchase. We are making £5 billion of our housing investment money available for more affordable housing over the next three years, including at least £1 billion more for key worker housing—trebling the current rate of investment—and extra resources for affordable homes built using fast-track, modern methods of building and design.

We will also tackle the problem of empty homes. In London and the south-east 70,000 privately owned homes have been empty for more than six months. That is not acceptable. The House will be aware that local authorities can lease empty properties on a voluntary basis. It is our intention that councils should be able to bring empty properties back into use through compulsory leasing, as recommended by the Select Committee. I also intend to allow local authorities to end their council tax discounts on empty homes.

Many rural areas, too, suffer from acute shortages of affordable housing. We are therefore increasing the number of affordable homes built in small rural communities, and we have changed the regulations to make it easier to keep homes bought under the right to buy for local people.

The Government are committed to home ownership, which has increased by 1 million since 1997, but we also want to protect the social housing stock. Right to buy is one way to help people into home ownership, but there are other ways that do not involve the loss of a social home to the community, and I believe that we could make better use of those schemes. That is why today I am asking the Housing Corporation to lead a new home ownership taskforce to advise on ways of helping more tenants into home ownership, using the whole range of existing ownership schemes, but without reducing the amount of social housing. *[Interruption.]* I remind the House that such schemes give social housing back to the community—they do not simply sell it off to the private sector and thereby reduce the number of houses available. That is the sort of social ownership that we have to take into account. The Conservatives spent £36 billion on giving right-to-buy discounts, but there are better ways of using public subsidies to assist home ownership and the provision of public housing. No doubt, we will debate the matter in future.

Sustainable communities need a safe and attractive local environment. We have already given local authorities an extra £1 billion in the local government funding settlement to improve the local environment and cultural services. I am now backing that up with more funding. Over the next three years we will give £50 million for neighbourhood wardens to help people to feel safer; £41 million to drive up the quality of skills in urban design; £70 million for community-led programmes to improve neighbourhoods; and £89 million to help local authorities to transform the quality of their parks and public spaces. All that will be supported by the proposals that we will make in our forthcoming antisocial behaviour White Paper and Bill, which will tackle issues that undermine our communities.

The most basic requirement of a sustainable community is a decent home. That is why we are making sure that tenants will be involved right from the start in decisions about how their homes are improved. It is why we are investing £2.8 billion over the next three years to

improve council housing, making the private finance initiative easier to use, and providing £685 million of PFI credits to refurbish local authority homes. It is why we are providing an extra £60 million to improve conditions in private housing and £260 million to tackle the problem of temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation. We also want to improve conditions for people in privately owned homes, especially older people and those on low incomes.

As the House has often said, there are inadequate powers to tackle bad private landlords who make life a misery for too many of our people, often supported by public subsidy through housing finance. I will publish draft legislation to licence all houses in multiple occupation and introduce a selective licensing scheme to tackle bad landlords in low-demand areas. In advance of the legislation, we are already funding new pilot schemes to target bad landlords.

The step change that I have described requires a different approach, which links housing with regeneration, growth, transport, public services and good design. It also requires major reforms of our system of housing finance. We must move away from the top-down approach of the past and decentralise our policies and programmes so that we can deliver regional solutions to regional problems.

I am pleased to tell the House that for the first time we are publishing nine regional daughter documents with the report, which set out what the action plan means for all our regions. As I said in July, we will move towards pooling housing spending in regional pots. Housing strategies will now be drawn up at regional level by new regional housing boards involving the key partners. English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation will also work together at the regional and national levels so that finding the land is directly linked with providing the housing.

This is a comprehensive programme of action for sustainable communities that I hope will command support across the House. Perhaps I am hoping for too much. *[Interruption.]* In view of the Opposition's proposed 20 per cent. cut in public expenditure, perhaps they could support these proposals. The programme is backed with substantial resources of £22 billion, a 40 per cent. increase over three years and more than double the cost of the plans that we inherited when we took office. That is a step change in resources by anyone's standards.

But that is just a start. This is an enormous challenge for all of us. The proposals are about people and the places where they live. They are about raising the quality of life and working in partnership. They are about taking a different approach and creating sustainable communities. I commend them to the House.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I usually begin by thanking the Deputy Prime Minister for making a statement and for advance sight of it. But today's statement is characterised by the amount of it that had already been briefed, leaked and spun to the press before the House saw it. That that strategy is deliberate is clear from the leaked letter from the Deputy Prime Minister to the Prime Minister about the communities plan and his right-to-buy proposals. *[Interruption.]* The Deputy Prime Minister asks for examples. He said in his letter:

> "I do not want the media coverage of the Communities Plan to be swamped by headlines on the Right-To-Buy".

So what did the Government do? They smuggled out the vindictive, punish-the-poor policy cutting right-to-buy discounts in a written statement so that they could not be challenged in the Chamber, then spent the intervening time briefing favoured journalists on a selective view of the communities plan policy.

The Deputy Prime Minister's biased view of the right to buy was even demonstrated today when he misread his speech, the printed version of which said that right-to-buy raised £44 billion, not, as he said, cost £44 billion.

The communities plan has enormous implications for our constituents throughout England, and the House therefore has the right to hear about the policy first in the Chamber, and nowhere else.

We have already had the headlines, but good headlines are not the same as good policy, and there are some serious questions to be answered today. The Government's record in this area is five years of failure. In that time, we have had the new deal for communities, the urban taskforce, the urban White Paper, the rural White Paper and the active communities unit, to name a few. Yet if anything we are worse off than when we started.

The Deputy Prime Minister has told the House that he wants to build more homes, and to make communities grow and become sustainable. If that is the case, why has the number of newly built social houses fallen by a third since Labour came to power? That is some 35,000 extra homes that could have been available now—enough to house the families currently living in bed and breakfast three times over. Why, during the right hon. Gentleman's time in power, have the fewest houses been built since 1926, despite his claims about so-called legacy? Today's announcement of a dramatic increase in house building, particularly social housing, must be seen in that context. A cruel but accurate description of the right hon. Gentleman's plans seems to be that he intends to bulldoze the north and concrete the south. What he proposes amounts to concreting an area the size of Hull every year.

Will the Deputy Prime Minister now answer some questions? The Council for the Protection of Rural England claims that the Government's grand plan means that a total of 500,000 new homes will be built on green fields. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm whether that figure is correct, and will he say how much of that greenfield land will be green belt? Will he set out the full extent of greenbelt and greenfield development under this Government to date and say how much he expects to take place in future years, including under the plans that he has outlined today? His guarantee of greenbelt land is meaningless if all that he is doing is removing the green belt designed to protect our cities and declaring as green belt a field somewhere else.

It seems, although the Deputy Prime Minister did not say so, that his plans rely heavily on urban development corporations—a Conservative idea that has proved successful, not least in the London docklands where Michael Heseltine oversaw the development of 25,000 new homes and 100 miles of new road links. I am very

[David Davis]

happy to see newspaper headlines saying, "Prezza copies Hezza", but I will withhold any further compliments until we have seen the plans in detail. We will want to look very carefully at the operation of such corporations, and I warn the Deputy Prime Minister that Ashford and Milton Keynes are not the London docklands. Will he guarantee to the House that he will use such corporations properly, as an instrument to release brownfield land, and not as an instrument for compulsory purchase of greenfield land?

What effect does the Deputy Prime Minister envisage that the expansion to the Thames gateway will have on the growing problem of flooding? I thought that I heard a Labour Member call out "floodplains". Just a few weeks ago we saw the problems caused by that issue for people who are trying to get insurance for their houses. What discussions have Ministers had with the insurance industry about those problems, particularly in light of the increase risk as a result of today's announcement?

The Deputy Prime Minister says that he wants to improve transport infrastructure, but the truth is that he himself cut the roads budget, cutting more than 70 important road projects from Government plans. He cut spending by more than £2 billion in the first five years of this Government. Last year, not one extra mile of major road was built. What is more, the financial pressure that he is putting on southern local authorities today will force them to protect vital services such as education by cutting back on transport services, compounding the problem that the right hon. Gentleman has created. The Government are five years behind the game, and if the Deputy Prime Minister's five and 10-year plans do not work, how are we meant to trust his 20 and 30-year plans? With that in mind, he will forgive the House for judging him by his actions, not his words.

Overall, employment growth east of London and in Kent is only 1 per cent. a year, compared with 5 per cent. in the west of London. The Deputy Prime Minister claims that he will not create dormitory towns. How will he ensure that? Will not people in the east of London and in Kent have to travel to get to their jobs?

I have asked specific questions of the Deputy Prime Minister, and I shall be interested to see whether he answers any of them. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will be able to unite in the desire behind his plan, which is to improve the quality of life in Britain for this generation and the next, but there are inevitable differences in approach.

We cannot overlook the failures of this Government which have brought us to this point. It is all very well the Deputy Prime Minister talking about housing shortages, but has not his direct failure contributed to them? It all very well for him to talk about transport infrastructure, but has not his direct failure led to a standstill on road-building and a standstill on our roads? I could not believe it, but in his statement today he yet again boasted that Labour created the green belt. This is the man who famously said, "The greenbelt is a Labour achievement and we mean to build on it." We have teased him about that before. Some thought that he had made a mistake; some thought it a joke; some thought it yet another "Prescottism". Sadly, however, today's announcement proves that that is one of the few promises that the Government have set in concrete.

The Deputy Prime Minister: That was another pitiful contribution from the right hon. Gentleman in his attempt to become the leader of his party. He does not have much to beat, I agree, but I do not think that he will do it with contributions like that.

First, I shall deal with the right hon. Gentleman's complaint, because I take these matters very seriously. I did not leak any of these proposals to the press. I have said that to the House time and time again. I make great efforts to come to the House to make announcements. No evidence was given to back up the right hon. Gentleman's claim. He quoted a Cabinet letter, which was leaked—a problem that plagues all Governments from time to time.

I heard that the right hon. Gentleman had made a complaint about information being given to the press, so I looked into the matter. I found that the only paper with any information about today's statement was *The Daily Telegraph*, where it appeared in an article by Charles Clover. I went through that article, and I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that every fact was wrong, except those concerning housing numbers, which I announced last year. Hon. Members may think that I have briefed on the wrong facts, but I like to think that as I know what is in the statement, they would have been the right facts. The right hon. Gentleman's allegation is untrue, and I hope that he will withdraw it or provide evidence of anything in the press today which shows that I leaked anything in this report. I give him the chance to intervene—does he want to withdraw or to provide evidence?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Deputy Prime Minister cannot do that.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I get used to allegations without substance, and I hope that people will note what I have said. I have the relevant quotes, and the answers to them, but I will not go into that.

The right hon. Gentleman made great play of my being vindictive about the right-to-buy policy. My point about that policy, which has continued under this Government, is that the £36 billion of subsidies, which is the cost of the discounts to promote home ownership, is an awful lot of money. If one wanted to extend the right to buy, there are other schemes that are less expensive and, much more importantly, they reserve the public housing for people who cannot afford to buy. Perhaps Conservative Members are not familiar with those schemes. A number of them give people money to subsidise a house purchase but they also return their previous property to the local authority, so they do not reduce public housing. Hon. Members may disagree with that, but it happens to be a fact. That is a difference of choice in our housing policy.

The right hon. Gentleman complained about other such differences. It is true that the provision of social housing has gone down 1 per cent. every year since 1980; that happened under our Government as it did under other Administrations. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members can go and look at the figures. I admit that social

housing has declined during my time in office, but in defence I would say, first, that we have spent a lot of time dealing with economic problems to bring about stability.

Secondly, we decided to put money that was lying idle in the banks into refurbishing houses that had been allowed to decline. All the time the Conservatives were promoting right to buy, they were forcing down standards in our public housing. I chose to make a difference. I chose to use that money to ensure decent housing for people who were living in deplorable conditions. Those conditions had declined not because the money was not available but because it was being used to reduce the debts caused by the failure of central Government at the time. That, I readily agree, is a difference of choice in our housing policy.

The right hon. Gentleman said that no improvements had taken place. He should visit the new deal areas and the coalfield communities. We gave them the money after the previous Administration implemented a vicious policy to destroy the coalfield communities. We invested nearly £400 million in developing them. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman might live near them but he obviously has not got his eyes open. If he visits the new deal communities, he will see the improvements.

It is important to take refurbishment and changes in finances into account. The right hon. Gentleman accused us of being five years behind the previous Administration. Yet we are spending £22 billion, which is double the amount that was invested in housing when we came to power. If the right hon. Gentleman believes that that constitutes being five years behind, he takes a "Back to the Future" approach to analysing figures.

We could argue money for transport, but we have invested £180 billion in it—far more than at any other time. As for transport failure, I inherited the failure of the financing of the channel tunnel link. We had to refinance it, and many of the areas that are affected by the announcement depend on the new transport link. I am therefore happy to compare our record with that of the previous Administration.

Let us consider the record on brownfield sites. Under the Tories, there were fewer such sites. We increased them because that was our policy. Hon. Members may well move their hands. Raising them means "up" and lowering them means "down". Brownfield sites decreased under the previous Administration and increased under Labour. Again, our record stands against the rhetoric of the previous Administration. I am proud of what we are doing.

As I said earlier, the right hon. Gentleman's speech will not help him in his leadership bid. He should ensure that his statements match the facts. Today, it did not.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Unlike the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), who speaks for part of the Conservative party, I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his important statement. I welcome the fact that housing, especially affordable housing, is at last getting the attention that it deserves. The proposed new build on brownfield sites in the Thames gateway is long overdue.

In proposing measures that go beyond tackling the problem of affordable housing in the south-east, is not there a danger of going too far and fuelling the flames of economic overheating in the south-east that caused the difficulties? Does the Deputy Prime Minister realise that many other parts of the country, including rural England, have similar affordable housing crises? Is he convinced that he has got the regional balance right, with the south set to receive more than four times the housing cash of England's five northern regions? Where is the strong regional policy that is rightly beloved by the Deputy Prime Minister? Why is he taking the slow train to regional devolution when that could help rebalance growth? Does not the statement show that the Government have given in to the north-south divide?

Although some development will be on brownfield land, much of the proposed new housing is on greenfield land. Why have the Government maintained the Conservative Administration's perverse VAT system, which penalises the repair and renovation of old housing stock and encourages greenfield development? How many more acres of countryside must be concreted over before the incentive for environmental vandalism is removed? Why does not the Deputy Prime Minister increase the target of 60 per cent. new build on brownfield land?

We agree with the Deputy Prime Minister that any new house-building programme must take account of the mistakes of the past. We must build communities and involve all Departments. Why is there so little evidence of joined-up government in the statement? Where is the related transport infrastructure around London and for the regions to support our communities? Why has the decision on Crossrail been shelved when it is central to the viability of development in the Thames gateway? Will the new Cabinet Committee, which the Prime Minister chairs and reports by May, specifically consider funding Crossrail and the Olympic bid?

Will the Deputy Prime Minister guarantee that the social infrastructure, for example, schools and hospitals, for proposed developments in other places such as Milton Keynes will be there in time to serve the new communities? Will he enter into a contract with the people of Milton Keynes, Ashford and south Essex so that they will not have to accept the homes unless the Government provide the cash for schools, hospitals and public transport?

The Deputy Prime Minister called his proposals "the communities plan". Will he assure us that it will be community led, not quango driven? Why are the Government so focused on the undemocratic Conservative model of urban development corporations, which the right hon. Gentleman rejected when in opposition?

The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned empty homes. Surely far more urgent action is needed. There are empty homes and homeless people in every region of the country. Why did not he announce the largest campaign ever to end the scandal of empty homes? Would not we make an impact more quickly on the affordable housing crisis, with much smaller environmental costs, by using the homes that already exist? Why does not the Local

[Mr. Edward Davey]

Government Bill allow local councils to keep the cash from ending council tax discounts on empty homes? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot hear the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Davey: Although the statement was ambitious, it was also a holding statement. The Government clearly have much more work to do. The jury is therefore still out. The affordable housing crisis continues almost six years into a new Labour Government. It is time for a timetable to end it.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I gave up after two pages of notes but I shall try to answer some of the hon. Gentleman's questions.

First, I welcome his comments that the statement is ambitious. That is true. He is also right that the plan is not completed. As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) also pointed out, sustainable communities include many elements, such as transport, education and health. They must be brought together. We achieved that in the millennium village at Greenwich by working across government.

Other Departments are responsible for most of the expenditure on, for example, education and transport. I have to argue my case for any extra money. The Prime Minister is taking charge of the Cabinet Committee because we have to work across the Government to ensure that we have the infrastructure for community investment and thereby sustainable communities. It is therefore true that other documents and statements will follow.

However, I remind the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that when I spoke in the House about the review of the Budget statement for the next three years, I emphasised that I would tell hon. Members how the money would be spent. That is why I have made a statement today. The amount was announced at the time, and I now have to apportion it.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether money would go into a balance of affordable houses and key homes. I have allowed the regions to determine the balance. When I receive their views, we can ascertain the total effect, which the 2004 expenditure plans will set out. I shall therefore have to come back to the House to report on those matters. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that much work remains to be done, but I have been trying to plan where the money should go.

The hon. Gentleman referred to brownfield sites. Many are in the Thames gateway, which is an important area that we can use. When we consider sustainable development, we are talking about people and families. Sons and daughters are being told that they cannot live near their mothers and fathers and that they must move elsewhere. I note that those who are firmly ensconced in their areas demand that the others should move.

We have a responsibility in sustainable communities to try to keep people together where they want to be. That is important. It has been suggested that keeping people together can lead to more land being taken. However, greater density can lead to more houses with the same land take. That is a fair point that I have made previously.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we would take more greenfield space for housing. The Council for the Protection of Rural England has been critical and almost suggested that all building could be done on brownfield sites. A representative said on the "Today" programme that 75 per cent. should be built on brownfield sites. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman supports that figure. He should consider the difficulties of achieving of that. Some areas of the United Kingdom do not have brownfield sites and I therefore have to strike a balance.

Nick Scone of the CPRE said on the "Today" programme:

"We accept that there's a need for more housing and we accept that some it will have to be in the south-east and we accept that some of it will have to be on green fields."

[Interruption.] That was on the "Today" programme. I have the exact quote. I know that the CPRE also seems to be sending other messages. It is headed by the former editor of the *Standard*, whose name I cannot recall. I agree with the statement that I quoted.

Building on greenfield sites happened even under the Tory Administration. They gave us no extra green-belt land. Conservative Members' rhetoric is not consistent with the facts. However, those who are critical must realise that although many hon. Members said that a target of 60 per cent. was impossible, we achieved it seven years ahead of time. Even if the target was 75 per cent., 25 per cent. would have to be built on greenfield sites. Let us show a bit of intelligence, and recognise reality.

As for joined-up government and transport policy, let me point out that the Thames gateway depends greatly on the channel tunnel rail link. We renegotiated the arrangements because we were spending so much. A modern transport system is crucial—and we rescued the system imposed by the last Administration from bankruptcy. We think that our approach is fair. As for the need for a proper balance, I agree that it is a matter of judgment, and I am here to answer for mine.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I ask Back Benchers to put only one question each to the Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I warmly congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on his statement, while acknowledging the challenges that it issues to communities such as mine, just north of Milton Keynes. Does he accept that such challenges are best met through innovative projects such as Lifespace in my constituency, which I know he has seen? The aim is to develop eco-friendly "green" housing on brownfield sites, while providing funds for the release of green space for local communities.

Can the Deputy Prime Minister assure those who say that we are destroying our green belt that English Partnerships will do all it can to support projects such as Lifespace, which are trying to set the Government's agenda and to make it work?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree with what my hon. Friend says, and I am grateful for his welcome. As

he says, the issues can be different in different areas. We want to see eco-friendly greenfield development, as we say in our report: my hon. Friend should read it. As the Select Committee has also said, energy efficiency and water resource efficiency are also crucial. That has already been achieved with the millennium village. I am not merely advocating a development; the development has already taken place. I initiated it back in 1997. I wanted to build something that we could remember—a village rather than a dome, perhaps. The village remains, representing an important step towards achieving the desired standards.

As for the green space argument, as I have said, more green-belt areas are available. We are ensuring that we can do more and more building on brownfield sites. Increasing the density of housing on such sites will take the pressure off demand for greenfield areas. Meanwhile, we shall see an increasing number of green spaces in our urban areas. Empty spaces will be turned into places that we can enjoy.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): My constituents will find the phrase "sustainable communities" a little ironic coming from the Deputy Prime Minister's lips. Already, with current growth levels, Ashford is short of GPs and school places. Its road network cannot cope, and it is building more houses than jobs are being created. Will the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledge that, in the real world, his statement means creating dormitory towns and condemning tens of thousands of people to a lower quality of life than they deserve because of an apparent bizarre obsession with crude house-building numbers?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about his constituency—although I think he advocated the building of the channel tunnel rail link, which has brought more and more housing to his area. In such cases, infrastructure is often slow to follow the development of sustainable communities: if we want sustainable communities, we have to invest. We are talking to Kent county council, and also working through the bodies that we have set up, to see how we can achieve what we want.

I was pleased that Kent county council endorsed our approach in growth areas, including Ashford. It is important to secure the co-operation of local people. Those in areas such as Ashford, however, must recognise that others also want to live in nice communities. We must create the necessary infrastructure and bring in more people in a sensitive way. We think Ashford is an excellent place—it is connected to the channel tunnel rail link—and we will do our best to allay the fears of people there.

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. He obviously listened to our representations, and learnt the lesson that infrastructure needs to be built alongside housing. He said that housing would be provided on a regional basis. The south midlands and Milton Keynes cover three regions. Can he assure us that cross-regional issues will also be dealt with?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. As he knows, I visited Milton Keynes quite recently. It had become a dormitory town for the London area because we had been taking people out of the slums and into greenfield areas, which was right at the time. There were about 12 houses per hectare. If we want to develop we will have to change the density levels, which will pose a challenge. As my hon. Friend knows from our dinner with local authority and regional development agency representatives, that involves two or three regional bodies. The same applies to the Thames gateway, which also covers two or three regions. We need all the co-operation of those bodies, so that they can help in the making of strategic decisions that affect them in the development of new growth areas and sustainable communities.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford): Many of my constituents in Bishops Stortford and east Hertfordshire will regard this plan, if it is imposed, as highly destructive. At the beginning of his statement the Deputy Prime Minister made a promise about the green belt. Can he confirm that no new houses will be built on the green belt in Hertfordshire—yes or no?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think that if the hon. Gentleman had asked the same question of his party's Administration he would have received a very dusty answer. The guarantee referred to the regions, and I think that it is necessary. It is like the commitment involving brownfield and greenfield sites. In some areas there is no brownfield, so there can be no 60:40 ratio. The calculation must therefore be made on a national or regional basis, and the guarantee about green belt was regionally based. There was no such guarantee under the last Administration. I know that the hon. Gentleman is fixated on a county issue, but we must take regional issues into account as well.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I congratulate my right hon. Friend both on his statement and on listening so carefully to the Select Committee. Notwithstanding all the whinges from Opposition Members and the "nimby", or rather "not in my constituency" attitudes, can he give us a time scale for the conversion of all these fine words into bricks and mortar? Could he also have another go at the Chancellor, and try to persuade him to come up with fiscal incentives to encourage people to move from the south-east and occupy many of the good empty homes that exist in the north?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful not only for my hon. Friend's support, but for the Select Committee's constructive and informed comments. I had a happier experience with that Committee than I had with the Transport Committee, and I look forward to a happy relationship with my colleague in the future.

We have committed ourselves to a three-year programme of expenditure. As my hon. Friend will see if he looks at regional planning guidance note 9, he will see some longer time scales for some housing projects—20 or 30 years on some growth areas. Once we have discussed the details with the stakeholders I will make another statement, but I expect to address the Select Committee before then, and I shall be open to examination then.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent): My constituency, next door to that of my hon. Friend the

[Hugh Robertson]

Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), contains 12 local pressure groups which are campaigning and complaining about the amount of traffic already on Kent's roads. Will the Deputy Prime Minister give the people of Kent an undertaking that the infrastructure improvements will be made before any new homes are built; otherwise a bad situation will be made immeasurably worse?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The commitments in regard to that area are already covered by transport expenditure, and Ashford's connection to the motorway is included in the plan. There are also other infrastructure investments for the area, which are quite considerable. We are discussing the plan with Kent county council, for whose support I am grateful. The council makes the point that I have been making: an increase in the number of schools and hospitals, more transport and indeed more river crossings are critical to the population increase that is being envisaged. That is why we have had discussions with the Prime Minister to ensure that resources follow our commitments to housing and growth.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): In Burnley empty homes are no longer a problem; they are a living nightmare. Many people will feel that the £500 million announced by my right hon. Friend, although welcome, may well not prove sufficient for the nine pathfinder projects. Will more money be made available, and does my right hon. Friend recognise that all the problems in those nine areas cannot possibly be solved in three years?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. Having visited his constituency, I was left with a powerful impression of the way in which such problem areas scar the whole community and give rise to economic and political problems. That is why we designed the pathfinder programmes. As he knows, we have already advanced £10 million in order to begin the preparations. We want to give comfort to those communities, but these things take time. He is right—we cannot solve all the problems in three years. We are making a start with £500 million for the three-year programme, which will concentrate attention. The problems in the areas in the north that he mentions are entirely different from those in the south-east, which is why we have had to design a separate programme. We hope to learn a great deal from it and to expand it, but it certainly will not be limited to three years.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): What would the Deputy Prime Minister say to the hundreds of my constituents who packed into Willingdon school hall last night, and who are concerned at the fact that their local council is being forced by him to find space for 950 new houses in that area—an area in which schools, the health service and roads are already under enormous pressure?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I assume that those people have children who, quite properly, want to live in that area. Before we arrived at those figures, considerable discussion revealed the level of housing demand. I told the House some years ago that we would not simply order people to predict and provide—there was some controversy about the figures—but that we would plan, monitor and manage, and see how things were going and whether demand was increasing. A number of local authorities decided not to accept the figure that they were given, and said that they could meet the demand. It became clear that they could not, and we are now telling them that they are behind with those targets, and that they must act to meet them. Of course, what they can do is to use the density figures that I require of them, and which I referred to. That way, they can meet demand—provided that they do not build four-bedroom executive houses, and instead make better designed, higher density accommodation available to people.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): There are thousands of rotten, empty, decaying, blighted properties in my constituency, and next door in Burnley. The Deputy Prime Minister has just told us that the £500 million over three years will be a first tranche. Can he give us some estimate of how much it would cost to bring properties in east Lancashire that are the worst in the entire United Kingdom up to a decent standard?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I believe that approximately 1 million homes in those areas are in various states of disrepair. Assessments are being made as to the exact cost of such repairs, but I do not want to have to wait for the consultant's report. If possible, I want to find some money now and start the programme, but I must establish the money with the Chancellor. He has given me £500 million, and I am very grateful. My hon. Friend's description of those areas is exactly right—the situation is desperate and something needs to be done. That is precisely why £10 million has been advanced: to begin the proposals and the planning, and to hold meetings with people to whom promises have been made. One factor characterises most of these homes. They have undergone various refurbishment schemes over the years, and people have become completely disheartened with those schemes. Many of those schemes were good at the time, but they did not last long, and something much more fundamental needs to be done. We are making a start with the £500 million. I know that this is a difficult problem, but if I can find more resources and the project proves successful, our efforts will have been worth while.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): People who live in the Epping Forest area will be very alarmed at what the Deputy Prime Minister has said today about green belt. In my constituency, it is simply is not possible to increase, or even to maintain, the existing green belt while also undertaking the amount of building that he said is likely to go ahead. Will he give an undertaking now to my constituents that he will not allow plans to build on the ancient forest of Epping forest to go ahead?

The Deputy Prime Minister: There in no plan to build on Epping forest. The hon. Lady must know that it is because of the very difficulty in finding housing land that she mentions that we have moved to a regional requirement, so that those at a regional level can decide that their housing demand be met on a regional basis.

If we simply leave the decision to local authorities, every one of them will give a reason why building cannot take place in their area. I hear such reasons from Members all the time, and no doubt I will hear more. They want houses for their constituents, but not built near them. It is a common problem, and it is called nimbyism.

Mrs. Laing: I am talking about a forest.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, I know it is a forest. The regions themselves will advise on these matters, but we should be clear: the demand from existing residents to live in the south-east needs to be met, and it can be met in an intelligent way without closing down all building in that region. I have given some indication of the Government's priorities, and they will guide our policies.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the shortage of affordable housing in London is holding back its economy, undermining our capacity to recruit to the public services, and blighting the lives of the soaring number of my constituents who are trapped in overcrowded housing. Unlike apparently every member of the Conservative party, I would very much welcome my right hon. Friend's building some more housing in my constituency. Can he assure me that, in addition to prioritising the key areas set out in his statement, he will ensure that resources are available to build and to maintain sustainable communities right across London, including in areas such as mine?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think that everyone wants to deal with the problems in the inner-city areas that she talks about, and it is clear that housing is needed in both the private and public sectors. My statement referred to the renovation of houses and to new forms of purchase, and more resources have been made available for that. I have reduced the discount on the right to buy in order to deal with precisely the problems that my hon. Friend mentions. All too often, the right to buy leads to the purchasing of more public housing than can actually be replaced. The question is one of balance: the problems in her constituency differ considerably from those in areas outside London. On identifying those areas with very high prices and levels of homelessness, it was noticeable that most are in London, and we intend to deal with that problem.

Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the Deputy Prime Minister give an assurance that he will persuade his Government colleagues to offload surplus land and properties as part of the release of land? At the same time, can he assure us that the definition of brownfield development does not include landscaped grounds and sports fields such as those in a former psychiatric hospital?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am not sure about the last point—I do not think that they are included, but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman on this issue, as there are some peculiar definitions. His first point is a serious one that has concerned me for some time. Many Government Departments have a considerable amount of land available, and to be absolutely truthful, the Treasury always require that such land be sold at the highest market price.

Mr. Edward Davey *rose—*

The Deputy Prime Minister: Don't get too excited. The market price is calculated in the Chancellor's settlements. I have argued that we are being rather silly, in that we are putting up house prices and giving bigger discounts so that people can buy. Surely it would be better to establish a priority policy for available Government land, so that it can be used as one element in contributing to a reduction in the cost of housing, including even the purchasing of housing. We could use land more intelligently than we currently do. I am having some success with certain Departments and less with others, but we are getting on with it.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): The Deputy Prime Minister announced a portion of funding to be spent in the north. The former mining communities in my constituency have old and poor housing stock, and the people there have difficulty finding jobs. Will those communities benefit from today's announcement?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, in the sense that the area will get a share of the funds to meet its priority housing needs. My hon. Friend has pressed me before on what we can do for the coalfield communities that were greatly affected by the collapse of the coal industry. Some £350 million is working its way through, but I think that they will still get their share of the normal national programmes. Such funding is distributed north and south, and none of the housing programmes in the northern areas are cut to pay for any sale: they still get that money, and more. However, as I explained in my statement, I have directed some resources towards the greater priorities.

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle): If the sustainable communities strategy represents a genuine step change in the amount of building on brownfield sites, will the Deputy Prime Minister take this opportunity to revise downwards the wholly unsustainable, massive house-building targets forced on East Sussex, which has neither the transport infrastructure nor the environmentally suitable sites to meet those targets?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I suspect that, if the infrastructure were provided, the hon. Gentleman would still complain about extra houses in his area. If his point were simply about infrastructure expenditure, I could accept it. However, his comments and many others that are made outside this House are more along the lines of, "We do not want any building in this area." I cannot make the promise that asks for, because I have a greater commitment to the homeless, and to the sons and daughters of families who already live in such areas.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): First, we in Thurrock welcome every unit of affordable housing that might come from this announcement. Thurrock has the most river frontage, the most brownfield sites and the most green belt of all the gateway riparian authorities, and we

[Andrew Mackinlay]

would welcome our own urban development corporation. Will those bodies address the fact that much of the railway network is to the east of the channel tunnel link and requires substantial upgrading owing to low capacity?

Secondly, our green belt has been taking in London's household waste. That is unacceptable and we do not want any more.

Finally, we need a massive boost to our health and hospital provision, which is wholly inadequate.

The Deputy Prime Minister: As on so many occasions, my hon. Friend points out the weaknesses and difficulties that are involved in the transfer that has been taking place in terms of the economic and industrial development of the Thurrock area. Traditionally, transport links have not necessarily developed in that direction or have suffered from underinvestment. We are discussing that with the Secretary of State for Transport, and some relevant proposals are already in his plan. Some areas of London will not be opened up to housing development unless there are connections to rail links. As usual, we have to set priorities, because demands are far greater than resources. As my hon. Friend knows, we have established an urban development corporation that will work in those areas with the authorities to achieve the measures that I have announced. As he says, there are a great many brownfield sites in his area. *[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions says that there are more in Greenwich. I will not dispute that both areas have many brownfield sites, and I very much welcome that because it will help us to keep on building.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): In Reigate and Banstead a regional daughter plan that contains the Deputy Prime Minister's house-building targets still looks like a top-down approach. Why does he know so much better than local politicians?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman's own Government were dictated to by their policy of predict and build. There is a long history of the previous Tory Administration imposing targets on local authorities, which did not like them. I said that that was unfair because central Government might be wrong. Central Government and local authorities must combine to agree on housing supply, and from time to time there is a great deal of disagreement. Our proposal to plan, monitor and manage was a way in which to decide who was right when demands for housing were made and how many houses were to be built. The areas that do not want any kind of housing will not be able to achieve what we believe to be the reasonable target set for the whole south-east region, which, with the change in density planning, can be met without new land take. That might mean that there will be fewer four-bedroom houses, but many more affordable homes for ordinary people to live in.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Following your strictures, Mr. Speaker, I have no time to say how excellent any of these proposals are, so I shall forget about that.

Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell me when, in practice, people might be able to buy affordable houses that do not deplete our housing stock, but maintain it? On a small point, will he assure me that when the Tories start bleating on about "poor people", he will continue to have regard to families in my constituency, where, for example, five people share one bedroom but cannot move because social housing stock was sold off under right to buy?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We conducted a survey on those matters to see whether any damage had been caused by right to buy, and we found that many abuses of the system had been taking place in my hon. Friend's constituency. For three years, it became profitable for tenants to exercise the right to buy and, following neighbourhood regeneration, to sell the house on for the full market price. That abuse of the system, where there is a desperate need for housing, means that those houses do not go to people who live in them as owners, but that they are rented out at a very high rent that people cannot afford. That has reduced the availability of housing stock. We are therefore taking a number of actions, one of which concerns right to buy and the reduction of discounts so that it is not so profitable for a tenant to do a deal with a buyer who persuades them to do so, then come back to ask for public housing having received the money. That is an abuse of the system that was never intended to take place, and I hope that the Opposition would agree that we cannot condone it.

As for the time scale to which affordable homes will be provided, the amount of money that is available is £5 billion, with £1 billion for key workers, and we are considering its regional distribution. The number of affordable homes will depend on how we calculate those figures. The cost of replacing a house in the north is very different from that of replacing a house in London, and we must take those factors into account.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): What specific policies does the Deputy Prime Minister intend to put in place to ensure that these new communities do not simply become four more dormitory towns for London, adding pressure to already congested roads? What ideas do he and his Department have as regards ensuring that the affordability element of any affordable homes to buy can be passed on to the second and subsequent purchasers?

The Deputy Prime Minister: On right to buy, we have made our proposals, but that is not the end of the matter—we shall want to consider exactly what our surveys show. Many local authorities are telling me that they believe that the measure should apply to them instead of the 40-odd that I mentioned. I will have to assess that further, taking into account the hon. Gentleman's point.

On sustainable communities, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning and Local Government Select Committee produced a report on new towns that showed that although they were excellent in their time, unfortunately they became dormitory towns as people moved from place to place. We have to ensure that jobs are provided, that the infrastructure is in place—whether for roads, hospitals or schools—and that houses are better designed than

they have been in the past and meet the energy and water resource requirements. I have seen all those things embodied in the millennium village concept, which will provide quite a contrast with towns such as Milton Keynes that were built to the old standards of the new towns: here are new requirements for a new millennium. That is what we intend to do, and that is what sustainability is all about. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the report, which will give him more information.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I welcome the extra funding that is coming to the growth area around Milton Keynes, but I remind the Deputy Prime Minister that it is the strength of our local economy that is causing house prices to rise and requiring additional housing. We are not a dormitory town—anything but.

I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Brian White) about the need to ensure that infrastructure is built at the same time as housing. My right hon. Friend proposes local development agencies in the Thames gateway to provide an overarching view on pushing developments forward. Will he consider such a mechanism in our area to ensure that development is delivered on time?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, I recently visited Milton Keynes and we had a good discussion about those problems with representatives from the local regional development agencies.

It is important that people in the community have some say about the priorities that are adopted. When there are three development agencies, all the signs may be that they will work together, but it is desirable to bring them together in one body to reach common agreement and to administer developments. We are doing that in the Thames gateway. I take on board my hon. Friend's point, and we will have further discussions with her.

My hon. Friend talks about more jobs leading to greater demand for housing in Milton Keynes. That is always a problem, but, at the same time, pockets of great deprivation exist in areas that are not normally associated with new towns. Although the general situation may appear to be good in such areas, we have to address the problems of social exclusion. That is important in the context of sustainable communities.

I say to my hon. Friend that in many areas different priorities will arise at different times. Milton Keynes is already a built-in community, and it is important that investment in infrastructure is expanded, but the Thames gateway faces a different set of problems. Given that it is a three-year programme, I had to decide on the main priorities in terms of how much money has to be put in now to create infrastructure prior to house building. We should not underestimate the amount of money that is needed—I do not want to mislead the House about that. We are back to the language of priorities. Over the next year or so, we shall try to ensure that we get the balance right—that we create sustainable communities that have the back-up infrastructure, as well as the housing.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): There is a huge unmet demand for affordable housing in the south-west, especially in Devonshire. Will the measures that the Deputy Prime Minister has announced lead to a reduction in funding for affordable housing in the south-west?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have already said that the amounts of money to be made available will be determined once we have assessed the pot of money for each region—in this case, the south-west. Key workers are largely found in the south-east, but I am sure that Devonshire might say that it has them too. The decision on the number of affordable houses to be built in the region will be based on the proportion of key workers there. I doubt that there will be any reduction in the resources in the hon. Gentleman's area: quite a lot of money is being proposed, but we must wait and see what happens. However, I remember that a number of local authorities in the south-west refused to meet the requirements, under regional planning guidance note 9, to build sufficient houses. Meeting need in an area is the way to provide enough houses.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): I welcome the £500 million being put into the housing market renewal fund. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that money has to be targeted and focused in the pathfinder areas if it is to be used effectively? What does he think of the Liberal Democrat-controlled Liverpool city council, which has spread the money over half the city, including areas that already receive funding under the new deal for communities? Most surprisingly, the city centre, a thriving housing market, is also included. Does my right hon. Friend consider that to be the best way forward for the pathfinder areas? Secondly, will my right hon. Friend say whether his Department has been party to the Treasury's discussions on housing tax credits?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My experience with Liverpool over many years is that one should not put a foot in the water without knowing what one is talking about. I readily accept that my hon. Friend may be offering a fair interpretation of what the council is doing, but I do not know enough to say whether it is right or wrong. We must look at the whole question of finance and housing credits, to which my hon. Friend referred. We might be able to get more money for developments in areas such as his than we do at present. We are actively involved in discussing a number of such ideas with the Treasury.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have let the statement run for an hour and 10 minutes. I have to move on.

Points of Order

1.41 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I realise that you are enjoined to confine statements to one hour, and that you ran the statement that has just ended for an hour and 10 minutes. However, my constituency is one of the growth areas that the Deputy Prime Minister described, as are the constituencies of my hon. Friends the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) and for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). I seek protection for Back-Bench Members like us, who had no opportunity to ask questions on the statement. Indeed, the first Back Bencher was able to ask a question only 40 minutes after the commencement of the statement. What can you do to assist those—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I shall have to cut the hon. Gentleman short. I ran the statement for 10 minutes over the hour to try to allow every hon. Member wanting to speak a chance to get in. However, I cannot get every hon. Member in: it is as simple as that.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I hope that it is not the same point of order.

Mr. Francois: No, it is different. The Deputy Prime Minister assured the House that this afternoon's statement had not been leaked in advance to the media. However, a quick check reveals that *The Sunday Times* of 2 February carried an article entitled "Prescott Fires Up Southeast Building Boom"—

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not speak to *The Sunday Times.*

Mr. Francois: Well, the article was written by the ironically named Jonathan Leake, the newspaper's environment editor.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not want to go through the article. I heard the Deputy Prime Minister say that he does not speak to *The Sunday Times. [Interruption.]* This is a serious matter. The Deputy Prime Minister gave an assurance to the House, and privately sent word to my office—to me—that the matter was not leaked. I take the Deputy Prime Minister's word on that, as I would take the word of every hon. Gentleman. I shall not pursue the matter further.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I wish to raise a point of the greatest seriousness. I believe that the House has been misled on a matter of prime importance. You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that on 24 September we were presented with a dossier, at three hours' notice, containing claims against the behaviour of Iraq. On page 34, the dossier stated that, before 1998,

"Iraq consistently refused to allow UNSCOM inspectors access to any of the presidential sites".

A lot of faith was put in that statement, which seemed to prove that the Iraqi regime had behaved in bad faith. Yesterday, the Foreign Office answered a question of mine by saying that UNSCOM inspectors did have access to the presidential sites, and UNSCOM has confirmed that it visited eight of the sites before 1998. The rest of the dossier is full of statements that have proved to be misleading or, in many cases, completely untrue. As we are going to make the most serious decisions on the basis of military intelligence and dossiers from the Government, is not it crucial that someone comes to the House to correct the gross errors in the dossier before we use such information to send our soldiers to Iraq, where they will kill and be killed?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair. It is a matter for debate.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I know that you are not responsible for answers given by the Prime Minister to oral questions, but in the past I have heard you chide him for straying into presenting Conservative policy as part of an answer. When he replied earlier today to a question about the change in policy on House of Lords reform after the 2001 election, the Prime Minister clearly told the House that the Conservative party sought to establish an all-party committee to decide the matter. I was shadow Leader of the House in the year prior to the 2001 election, and I was actively engaged in discussions about setting up such a committee with the then Leader of the House and the leaders of the other two parties in the Lords. That was a year before the 2001 election. The matter was not taken forward because the Government refused to allow the committee to discuss the composition of the House of Lords. That is an important point to make in response to the Prime Minister's answer.

Mr. Speaker: It could be that the Prime Minister will read the hon. Lady's remarks in *Hansard.*

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I seek your guidance. Given that the Milton Keynes and south midlands study envisages another 59,000 homes for the Aylesbury vale district area by 2031, and that there is a pervasive concern that the £8.5 million of infrastructure investment that is required will not be forthcoming—with damaging consequences for traffic congestion, air quality, school provision, medical facilities and so on—do you think that the Deputy Prime Minister will have taken account of the level of grievance felt by Opposition Members? Should not another statement, providing a further opportunity for detailed scrutiny, be provided in the near future?

Mr. Speaker: It sounds as though the hon. Gentleman is putting to me the question that he would have asked had I called him during the statement. Perhaps he can put it to the Deputy Prime Minister sometime.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I seek your advice. You may be aware that the elected Australian Senate has passed a vote of no confidence in the Australian Government's

line on Iraq. Can you advise humble Back-Bench Members on how they may be able to effect a debate to the same end in this House?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a very experienced and long-serving Member of Parliament. There were times when I used to go to him for advice and I am sure that he could tell me how to go about securing the debate that he wants.

Food Colourings and Additives

1.48 pm

Mr. Charles Hendry (Wealden): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the labelling of food colourings and additives which could have an adverse effect on the behaviour of some children and young people

The food that we give our children is becoming an ever more topical issue. Only last week, Jamie Oliver, who appears to be the Government's new school food tsar, said:

"Parents wonder why their children are hyperactive, have gut ache and stink when they come home. It's because the food they are fed is made of . . ." —

I regret to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that he then used a word that I should not be allowed to use in this place.

The reality, however, is that the problem is not only school food, but the food that children eat at home or buy from the local shop on their way there. I am introducing the Bill, which I am delighted has cross-party support, because like many colleagues I have been profoundly concerned by the problems facing hyperactive children and their parents.

Hyperactivity is a biological not a psychological condition. Children who suffer from it are often very difficult at home, at school and in their relationships with others. They are always restless, fidgeting and impulsive. Often uncontrollable, they can pose a serious danger to other children.

In one case in my constituency, a young boy—it is overwhelmingly boys who are affected—tied his younger sister to a fence with a rope around her neck. In another case, a young boy went on the rampage with a kitchen knife. The families of such children live in constant fear, not knowing how they are going to react at any particular moment. What often makes matters even worse for the parents is to be berated by others for being "bad parents" because they cannot control their children.

From our constituencies, we know, too, of the disruption that hyperactive children can all too often cause at school, making life difficult, sometimes impossible, for other students and for teachers. The tragedy is that often their actions are genuinely beyond their control, precisely because the cause of their hyperactivity is biological in nature. Hyperactive children are more likely than other children to be excluded from school, and as a result they are more likely to drift to the margins of society and into crime.

In trying to help those constituency cases, it seemed at first that almost every door was closed. But then came one bright beacon of light, when I found the Hyperactive Children's Support Group in Chichester, run on a shoestring for 25 years by Sally Bunday and her family, which has proved a lifeline to families who were absolutely at their wits' end. The group has helped to identify the link between children's behaviour and the food that they eat.

We all know that there has been a massive increase in the number of hyperactive children over the past 20 years. What has changed most in that time is the food that our children are given. Highly processed foods contain less than one fifth of the nutrients than similar foods a generation ago. Indeed, some food seems to contain almost no food at all!

[Mr. Charles Hendry]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you may not be familiar with raspberry-flavoured trifle. It may not be something that is often served in your home, but if it is, I suggest that one evening, you creep into the kitchen, open the cupboard and read the list of ingredients on the packet.

Apart from a small amount of powdered egg, the product appears to contain no food whatever. That is worrying enough, but the problem is caused not just by the nutrients that have been taken out, but by what is added. The packaging tells us that the trifle contains: sugar, carrageenan, dipotassium phosphate, potassium chloride, adiptic acid, trisodium citrate—described as an "acidity regulator". It also contains carboxy methyl cellulose—I have been practising saying that all morning; it is a bit of a mouthful, but probably does not taste so good—betanin, annatto, hydrogenated vegetable oil, propane-based emulsifiers, milk protein, beta-carotene and fat-reduced cocoa among other ingredients.

Professor Erik Millstone at the university of Sussex has done wonderful work analysing the studies from throughout the world to establish what connection exists between children's behaviour and the food additives and colourings they consume. For example, in the United States in the 1970s, Feingold found that between 30 and 50 per cent. of hyperactive children experienced a dramatic improvement in their behaviour if they avoided certain food additives and natural salicitates.

A decade ago, one UK study, undertaken through the Institute for Child Health, looked at 78 children referred to the institute because of their hyperactive behaviour. The behaviour of 59 of those 78 children improved when certain additives were removed from their diet. For 50 of them, additives were then re-introduced and 47 of them relapsed.

More recently, St. Barnabas Church of England first and middle school in Worcestershire removed 27 artificial colourings and preservatives from its school menu. After only two weeks, one third of parents said that their children were better behaved and one fifth said that their children were sleeping better. Teachers found that pupils who had trouble concentrating were calmer and applied themselves better to their work.

In Cornwall, Gordon Walker, head teacher of Tywardreath primary school, asked parents to give their children a diet free of 23 specific additives for just one week, and found children were calmer, less argumentative and more able to concentrate. As Mr Walker said:

"You would not feed your child chemicals, so why give them disguised as sweets?"

Other evidence from the Hyperactive Children's Support Group, in a study by Dr. Neil Ward from the university of Surrey, showed that as many as 87 per cent. of hyperactive children react to artificial colourings and that 72 per cent. react to preservatives.

The Food Standards Agency is also now taking seriously the idea that food additives have an adverse effect on the behaviour of children and, at the end of last year, it set up a panel of experts to examine in more detail the findings of Professor Stephenson in his study of children in the Isle of Wight aged three to five. The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment has also accepted the likelihood of a link. Indeed, few people now dispute that such a link exists. Those who do so should talk to a few of the parents of the children who are affected.

The Food Commission has set up a parents' jury. Reading some of the feedback from those parents is extremely traumatic. When asked about the effect of food additives, one parent said:

"My son was totally uncontrollable, flailing his arms around, and I was unable to do anything to stop it.

When we got home, I looked up hyperactivity in various books, and discovered that one of the common triggers was sodium benzoate. He had been drinking a lot of squash whilst on holiday which contained sodium benzoate. I eliminated sodium benzoate from his diet . . . These days he is a different child. He had always come out of nursery at a run, with his head down, and head butted me by way of greeting. Now when he comes out of school, I get a cuddle!"

That describes in human terms the transformation that can take place.

The number of additives is truly mind-boggling. There are 400 E numbers and more than 4,000 different flavourings. According to the Food Commission, 40 per cent. of children's food and drink contains additives. The commission has found more than 100 food products targeted at children which contain the main additives that it has identified as likely to cause behavioural change. They are tartrazine, sunset yellow, carmoisine, ponceau 4R and the preservative, sodium benzoate, which is even found in flavoured bottled water. We should certainly be in no doubt that those products are targeted at children, as we can see from the use of children's favourite television and film characters in marketing to promote them.

The evidence is clear. Part of the cause of hyperactivity is the presence of certain additives and colourings in food specifically targeted at children. It is not the only cause, it may not even be the main cause; but it is a contributory factor whose importance has been overlooked and ignored for far too long. As a result, parents, doing their absolute best to look after their children, unwittingly buy products that turn them into little time bombs—simply because they do not have the information to tell them whether the additives and colourings in a food product could change their child's behaviour. Even children's vitamins sometimes contain colourings, so, unknowingly, little Jimmy goes off to school ready to explode.

I hope that the food industry will itself help to deal with the problem. Some companies deserve specific praise, such as Sainsbury, whose Blue Parrot Cafe range tries to reduce or eliminate additives in products targeted at children. However, we cannot rely on voluntary action alone. That is why the Bill is important. Its aims are simple. It would require food containing specified additives and colourings to be labelled with the words:

"This product contains colourings or additives which may affect the behaviour of some children."

It would not state that the product would do that in every case or that all children would be affected; it would simply help people to know what to avoid. The Bill would set up a panel reporting to the chief medical

officer, which would advise on which additives and colouring should carry such a label, as that decision is not one that should be taken by politicians.

A hyperactive child, for reasons beyond his control, can cause danger to his family and disruption at school. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Charles Hendry, Mrs. Angela Browning, Mr. Vernon Coaker, Valerie Davey, Matthew Green, Miss Julie Kirkbride, Mrs. Eleanor Laing, Tim Loughton, Mr. Andrew Robathan, Alan Simpson, Dr. Howard Stoate and Mr. David Tredinnick.

Food Colourings and Additives

Mr. Charles Hendry accordingly presented a Bill to require the labelling of food colourings and additives which could have an adverse effect on the behaviour of some children and young people: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 March, and to be printed [Bill 54].

Orders of the Day

Police

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I remind the House that there is a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches in this debate and in the one following it.

1.59 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2003–04, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3rd February 2003, be approved.

I am afraid that I must begin by drawing the House's attention to an error in the schedule of grants on page 3 of the report. The provision for the Greater London Authority is given as £1,082,393,976; it should be £1,082,396,976—a difference of some £3,000. It is a typographical error and has no other effect on the report.

I shall be brief because I know that a substantial number of Members will wish to congratulate the Government on securing a 6.2 per cent. increase in police resources for the coming year, and will want, in their minds and speeches, to compare that with what their local police forces would face if there were to be a 20 per cent. cut in public expenditure, including on the police, as proposed by the Conservative party.

The Government are committed to reducing crime and the fear of crime. The British crime survey shows that overall crime has fallen by 27 per cent. since 1997. Crime levels last year were stable. The chances of being a victim of crime are at their slimmest for 20 years. In the past three years, the Government have increased police spending supported by central Government by £1.7 billion—more than 20 per cent. Under our expenditure plans for the next three years, the figure will increase by another £1.5 billion.

Following the cut in police numbers made by the Conservative Government, police numbers are now at record levels. I am pleased to tell the House that I am confident that we shall exceed our target of 130,000 officers in March 2003. Police training colleges remain full and we are moving rapidly towards the target of 132,500 police officers in 2004.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): The Government's record is a credible one and is well received in areas such as mine. As my right hon. Friend said, people should acknowledge the Conservative Government's failure to address crime issues. This Government sensibly introduced community support officers, who deal directly with the fear of crime and reassure the public, but funding for them is not secure and long term. Will he assure the House and the people of my city that there will be a review so that that worthwhile new initiative will translate into the permanent presence of support officers on our streets?

Mr. Denham: I am glad that my hon. Friend welcomes the introduction of community support officers. More than 500 have been recruited this year, and there will be well over 1,000 in about 27 police forces by the spring.

[Mr. Denham]

We hope, as I shall say later, that the resources in the settlement will help us to move towards the provision of 4,000 CSOs over the next two or three years. We have made it clear that funding for officers recruited this year will be at 100 per cent. of the costs for the current and following financial year, at 75 per cent. for the year after, and at 50 per cent. the year after that. We are considering the level of financial support to offer forces that want to recruit further CSOs next year.

When we discussed the Police Reform Bill, there was considerable debate, which we understood, about the desire to avoid ring-fencing CSO funding for ever and a day. We always made it clear that chief constables should decide whether to have CSOs. We also said, however, that we would not rule out pump-priming money to enable forces to employ CSOs for the first time, and that is precisely what we have done. We shall obviously need to look, probably in the course of this year, at what will happen following the first three years of funding to which we are committed, but forces now know their position on the officers they have recruited this year. I hope very soon to tell forces what level of support they might receive in each of the next three years if they wish to recruit further CSOs from the next financial year.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I want to make some progress, but I will take one further intervention for the time being.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I also appreciate that the Government's record is credible, but only in part. If the Government's generosity is to be believed, will the Minister explain to the people of Hampshire what the police authority could have done to prevent an increase in the precept of more than 20 per cent.? Many of the initiatives that it would have had to cut are the very ones that he and I as Hampshire MPs have advocated. The authority either had to increase the precept by 20 per cent. or cut police performance. How has the Government's generosity failed us?

Mr. Denham: Hampshire's general grant has increased by 3.1 per cent, and Hampshire has shared in the overall increase in finance made available to the police service. In addition, it will receive money from the crime fighting fund, which will help to support some of the officers recruited over the past couple of years. It will also receive £8.19 million for Airwave, more than £220,000 from the rural policing fund, and about £1.23 million from the funds allocated to basic command unit commanders. All those sums are in addition to the police grant.

The level of precept is a matter for the police authority. We expect police authorities to take a reasonable decision, having consulted local people on what they deem appropriate. As a matter of fact, the Hampshire precept is almost £9 less than the shire average in England and Wales. That no doubt reflects Hampshire police authority's previous decisions. Although Hampshire is not receiving as much as some authorities as a result of the formula, it has been fairly treated. The decision on precepts must be for the police authority.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I will take one further intervention from the Government Benches.

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way and for meeting me and a delegation from my constituency two or three weeks ago. I intervene on the issue of local democracy. There is a problem not just in rural areas but in metropolitan areas. West Yorkshire's precept, for example, is below average. As some members of the authority have complained about the average Government grant but have kept the precept below average, what message does he have for them?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister replies, may I also offer a message? The three interventions so far have been very long and this is a time-limited debate, so I hope that if the Minister gives way, which he is of course free to do, questions will be precise.

Mr. Denham: I give my hon. Friend a similar response to the one I gave to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock): the police authority is responsible for deciding the precept. We expect it to be reasonable, and that local views and policing priorities have been sought. I know that some police authorities intend not only to catch up with past underfunding but to expand services. I hope that people in my hon. Friend's area will take a reasonable decision. West Yorkshire received a funding increase of 4.9 per cent.—the ceiling of the funding allocation—so it cannot claim that it has not been fairly treated in the settlement. The final level of resources available to the police service will depend on decisions taken by the police authority.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Denham: Once I have made a little progress I will consider taking further interventions.

In November, following the passage of the Police Reform Act 2002, we launched the first national policing plan. It sets out a clear national framework for raising the performance of police forces, balancing national targets with local priorities. It is the cornerstone of our reform programme. Coupled with the investment that I am announcing today, the plan will help to deliver the results that we all want from a modern and effective police service.

The settlement underpins the four policing priorities set out in the plan: tackling antisocial behaviour and disorder; reducing the volume of street, drug-related, violent and gun crime; combating serious and organised crime; and increasing the number of offenders brought to justice. The settlement will allow all police forces to improve their performance and for the poorest performing ones to close the gap between themselves and the best. As part of that, better use will have to be made of the record and growing number of police

officers. We have introduced community support officers, and we are supporting through legislation the greater use of civilian custody staff and investigators to free police officers for operational duties. We have also set about cutting bureaucracy in the police service so that police officers' time is not tied up in unnecessary paperwork.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): On the subject of bureaucracy, does the Minister not acknowledge that effective and well-regarded police forces, such as the one in Surrey, are finding that they have less and less freedom to decide their priorities? The force in Surrey is constantly being hit with more targets and more paperwork. Funds that the Government provide are ring-fenced—but not for the things that the police authority, the chief constable and the people of Surrey want.

Mr. Denham: I am not entirely sure whether the hon. Gentleman is advocating having fewer police officers in Surrey; perhaps he will clarify that. We have been discussing with his chief constable ways in which the force can retain officers at the end of their service—for example, by extending the 30-plus retirement scheme to Surrey. We are also discussing ways in which greater use can be made of civilian staff.

I hope that I do not have to repeat this point, but before there was a crime fighting fund the aggregate effect of many individual decisions by individual forces was a sharp decline in the number of police officers. The crime fighting fund is ring-fenced, but it is ring-fenced to support the costs of recruiting and paying police officers where they are needed. I will defend that. I will also defend, on the subject of cutting bureaucracy, the fact that, in addition to the grant that we are discussing today, we are paying centrally for the cost of introducing the case preparation and custody scheme, which is an information technology scheme that has the most potential for reducing duplicate paperwork and avoiding people having to write out names and addresses 17 times. Police officers tell me and, I am sure, other hon. Members that that is what they have to do at the moment. I do not think that forces will object to the money being spent on that scheme, even though it is ring-fenced.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I need to make a little progress.

Better use of science and technology will improve policing still further. Last month, we published the first science and technology strategy for the police. We are investing in IT. There will be further funding for authorities taking up the Airwave radio communication service. We are supporting the Metropolitan police authority's command, control and communications information system, known as C3i. As I have already mentioned, we are paying for the roll-out of the case preparation and custody scheme, which will enable data on those in custody to be used throughout the criminal justice system.

I will set out the police funding settlement for 2003–04 and what I can reveal of our plans for the two subsequent years. As part of the consultation exercise on the funding settlement, I have received 33 representations covering 22 police authority areas. I have taken those representations into account in reaching decisions on the funding proposals that are being put before the House today.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am sure that my right hon. Friend has received representations from Gloucestershire, so we may as well get this out in the open now. Will he say something about the biggest problem facing police authorities—the police pension fund? That is subject to the biggest top-slice, preventing any real manoeuvrability in the way in which authorities operate their budgets.

Mr. Denham: I acknowledge that police pension costs are a significant part of the budget of police authorities. Police pension costs to the taxpayer and the Government are high because the scheme is good. It is one of the things that attract people into the police service and encourage them to stay. I do not know whether my hon. Friend is advocating cutting the police pension scheme.

Mr. Drew: No.

Mr. Denham: I did not think that he was, but it was important to establish the point.

When we consider different ways of dealing with police pension costs, I am sure that there will, as I said last year, be a case for bringing greater stability into the system. We have been working on that. Forces should not be hit heavily from one year to the next because they have a cohort of officers retiring in one particular year. However, I would not want to offer the possibility of pension costs not being met from the total pool of resources available to the police. Pensions cannot be shuffled off for somebody else to pay for. We must ensure that we have a modern pension structure for the future. We can give some planning assistance to police authorities, but it is an illusion to think that we can somehow magic away the costs of paying the pensions of those who have served the community well. We cannot say that those costs will not be any sort of burden on the police finance system.

The settlement for 2003–04 is a strong one that builds on our substantial investment in policing over the past three years. We are providing grant to support overall police spending of £9,683 million—an increase of 6.2 per cent. More than 90 per cent. of all supported spending is directly available to police authorities

The police grant report deals with Home Office general police grant for revenue expenditure, which amounts to £4,288 million in 2003–04. In addition, police authorities will receive revenue support grant as local authorities. The total general grant will be £7,312 million, which is an increase of 4.3 per cent. on the figures for 2002–03.

In addition, I am providing £600 million for a range of specific initiatives and £270 million to support police authority capital programmes. I will also spend £700 million centrally in direct support of the police. A further £51 million will be available from criminal justice service IT funds next year to meet the costs of rolling out the case preparation and custody scheme.

[Mr. Denham]

For 2004–05 and 2005–06, the cash provision will grow by at least 4 per cent. a year. By 2005–06, funding for policing will be up to £1.5 billion a year higher than in 2002–03, which represents a cash increase of 16 per cent.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): I welcome the general increases in police funding that the Government are making. My right hon. Friend will, however, understand the disappointment in Dorset that we are on the floor of the increase, receiving 3 per cent. Dorset is hit especially hard by the formula. We are a low wage, high house price economy, so we are hit by resource equalisation and do not benefit from area cost adjustment. Will he comment on that? I ask him to understand that, if a Division is called, I may have to abstain. I cannot support the formula, even though I support the increases in funding nationally.

Mr. Denham: I will come to the details of the police grant formula in a moment. The substantive issues that my hon. Friend raised in respect of the area cost adjustment and resource equalisation have been dealt with in the overall RSG settlements. I am confident that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions will deal with those issues in the debate that follows this one. I will be going through the funding issues.

Dorset has been protected this year through the application of floors and ceilings. A simple application of the formula would have led to Dorset having a lower level of resources. By capping authorities that might have received greater funds, we have been able to support Dorset. The settlement reflects that. For Dorset, as for other forces, there are substantial resources over and above the grant—funds for Airwave; support for the recruitment of extra police officers through the crime fighting fund; £440,000 through the rural policing fund; and just under £500,000 going directly to police superintendents in basic command units. There is a substantial investment in Dorset over and above the headline figure of a 3 per cent. increase in grants. I hope that my hon. Friend will feel able to support that, should there be a Division.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) *rose—*

Mr. Chope *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I will make a little further progress and then give way.

Before giving details of the funding, I should explain briefly the changes that have been made to the funding formula that is used to distribute general police grant. We reviewed the formula as part of a review of local authority funding formulae. We decided to consider two options that have widespread support among the police community.

The first option was that we should update information on policing activity that underpins 80 per cent. of the funding formula, replacing data that were collected in 1995; the second option, in effect, was that we should eliminate the "establishment component"—an old grant damping mechanism that was introduced in 1995. As part of the changes, we have introduced floors and ceilings to protect against grant instability from year to year. As I have already said, the floor was set at 3 per cent. and the ceiling, or maximum increase, at 4.9 per cent.

Floors and ceilings are not part of the local government arrangements that are operated by the National Assembly for Wales. I shall make separate arrangements from funds outside the grant to ensure that Dyfed-Powys and South Wales police authorities, which would otherwise receive a grant increase below 3 per cent., receive the same floor protection as police authorities in England. That additional support is worth £5.1 million to the police in Wales.

Mr. Chope: The Minister recognised in his answer to the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) that Dorset will have an even worse deal next year. One way in which Dorset could deal with that problem would be to have a freeze on recruitment, but the police have apparently been told that if they freeze recruitment they will lose moneys from the crime fighting fund. Can the Minister assure us in Dorset that we will not lose those moneys if our police authority freezes recruitment to achieve an increase of less than 19.6 per cent. in the precept?

Mr. Denham: I am sure that all the hon. Gentleman's constituents have noted his call for a freeze in police recruitment in Dorset. I strongly suspect that the average resident of Dorset would rather have more police officers than a freeze. We have not yet finalised the crime fighting fund arrangements for the coming year, but police forces must maintain the numbers for which they receive support under the crime fighting fund and recruit more police officers to access additional resources. The point of the crime fighting fund is to have more police officers, but the people of Christchurch will have taken note of what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Prisk: Seven interventions ago or perhaps longer, the Minister made a statement, which he has just repeated, about his pride in the increasing number of police officers. In Hertfordshire, however, we are 200 officers short. How can it be right that this year we also face a £5 million shortfall in what the force needs simply to stand still?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman will know that Hertfordshire will share in the increase of resources, as will other police forces. His police force will get sums over and above the 3 per cent. grant increase, including £3.14 million for the crime fighting fund. We did not receive any representations from Hertfordshire constabulary on the funding settlement that I announced today. The hon. Gentleman would perhaps have been wiser to acknowledge that in March 1997 there were 1,759 police officers in Hertfordshire, whereas in March last year there were 1,825—so the policies introduced by the Government have led to an increase in the number of police officers in Hertfordshire.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Will the Minister admit that there is a slight risk that he will be misunderstood? The police authority boundaries in

Hertfordshire are not the same as they were in 1997, so his comparisons are incorrect. He said that he had not received any representations from Hertfordshire, but will he confirm that his own Home Office officials met Hertfordshire police authority last week?

Mr. Denham: I will need to take advice on the latter point, but the information given to me by, presumably, the same officials, was that no representations had been received from Hertfordshire. If I have inadvertently misled the House I will seek advice and certainly seek to correct the record. Boundary changes have affected a number of forces on the outskirts of London, but the figures that I gave are those established for Hertfordshire.

As I mentioned earlier, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has announced wide-ranging changes to funding formulae that affect all local authorities in England, including police authorities. The area cost adjustment and resource equalisation are matters for him.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): While the Minister is checking what he has received from Hertfordshire, will he check something else? I have received a letter from the chief constable of Hertfordshire, who says:

"Dear Mr. Clappison

You will have received a copy of the letter dated 19 September 2002 sent by the Hertfordshire police authority chairman to the Minister of State John Denham about his concerns around the damaging effects of a poor financial settlement . . . on police in Hertfordshire."

Will the Minister look into that as well?

Mr. Denham: Will the hon. Gentleman remind me of the date on the letter?

Mr. Clappison: The letter is dated 11 November 2002, and the letter sent to him was dated 19 September 2002. A letter is also on the way to him from Hertsmere borough council—from all parties, I believe—complaining about the effects of the settlement.

Mr. Denham: The funding settlement was announced after 19 September. We received many letters from chief constables, police authorities and others who had been stirred up by Opposition Members into believing that there were going to be swingeing cuts in police officer numbers. I do not give credence to representations made before the funding settlement was announced. I have talked about the representations that I have received since the announcement of the funding formula, which, of course, gave the lie to stories that hundreds of police officers would be cut across the country. I am afraid that a little bit of dead horse flogging is going on among Hertfordshire Members.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh) *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I will give way in a moment to the hon. Gentleman, who has another Member's place. Someone has clearly left the Chamber to put out their press release, regardless of whether they spoke in the debate.

I have said that capital will increase. Capital grant and supplementary credit approvals will total £190 million. Once again, we are seeking to reinforce the police reform agenda by allocating £20 million for a further premises improvement fund. In many areas, the fund brought about much-needed improvements in police stations, working conditions and so on. In addition, we will support the Metropolitan police's C3i project, Airwave and the case and custody project. Police authorities will receive funding for specific initiatives—about £600 million will be used to back police reform and modernisation, including funding for special priority payments for police officers. Some grants will be available to all forces in England and Wales, others to help forces with particular requirements. We will make details available in due course. The crime fighting fund will continue, providing money towards a further 650 recruits in 2003–04, and continuing to sustain many of those recruited in recent years.

We must remain vigilant against the terrorist threat. Counter-terrorist funding announced in the 2002 budget for police forces will be maintained, and we are determined to make sure that the police service will continue to be resourced effectively to meet its counter-terrorist commitments. In addition to the £47 million funding being provided to the Metropolitan police, a further £12 million will be available to forces outside London, complementing existing funding streams for security and counter-terrorism activities.

The pay and conditions package achieved by the Police Negotiating Board is fully provided for in the settlement through general revenue grant and specific funding. A sum of £82 million is included in the general grant settlement, and a further £38 million is to be allocated as specific grant for special priority payments. A sum of £41 million will be available towards the costs of the community support officers who will act as the eyes and the ears of the police. The £30 million rural policing fund will continue.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire): I congratulate the Minister on his pronunciation of the Dyfed-Powys police authority, but not on the settlement that it received. A 3 per cent. settlement is on the table, leaving the chief constable to find an extra £5 million to maintain the status quo, which will mean a 28 per cent. increase in the community charge. People in Wales would like policing to be devolved to the Assembly. I am sure that the settlement will enhance that view.

Mr. Denham: On grant, the Welsh forces have been treated on the same basis as English forces, with the exception of the Welsh forces that have received additional funds not available to other forces to bring them up to the floor of 3 per cent. Therefore, I do not see how the hon. Gentleman can honestly say that we have treated Welsh forces unfairly. The truth is that everybody benefits from having a well-integrated police service in England and Wales—yes, with well-managed and accountable local forces, but co-operating together to fight those crimes, including gun crime, drug crime and organised crime, that persistently refuse to stay within national boundaries or police force boundaries. I believe that our constituencies in England and Wales are best served by building on the arrangements that we currently have.

I should like to run through a few more of the headline figures. The sum of £25 million is being made available to support continued police operations against

[Mr. Denham]

street crime. As I have just mentioned, the £30 million for rural policing will continue. Next year, we shall target £50 million of funding directly on basic command units in high-crime areas. The bulk of the money will be available to those units that are at the forefront of local policing in high-crime areas, working with crime and disorder reduction partnerships. The money is part of the £143 million funding for crime reduction to help to combat drugs, which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 21 January.

In the grant settlement we have once again taken account of the unique position of the Metropolitan police in carrying out national and capital city functions. A special payment of grant is made every year in addition to that provided through the funding formula. The grant has increased from £197 million this year to £202 million next year.

I have already talked about the support available for counter terrorism, for community support officers and for the C3i communications system.

Mr. Francois: The Minister will be aware that one of the particular challenges that the Essex force faces is the drain of officers to the Met. It also faces the challenge of additional national insurance costs from April, and additional pension costs. The right hon. Gentleman knows that Essex police authority had a very tough settlement this year. How does he expect the force to continue to fight crime effectively if he will not give it the resources to do the job?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman should consider what it would be like if his party were in power and were implementing a 20 per cent. cut in public spending. Police numbers fell when his party was in power, and they have increased under this Government.

Essex has been supported; it has the floor of 3 per cent. In addition, it is receiving £5.79 million extra to pay for the costs of police officers recruited in recent years. That is the sort of extra support, over and above the police grant, that we are giving to Essex, and that the hon. Gentleman would do well to welcome.

Finally, I acknowledge that forces in the south-east have recruitment and retention difficulties, on which we are working with the Metropolitan police and police forces in the south-east. A range of issues are under active discussion, and I hope that we shall be able to bring forward more details of some of the initiatives that we can take in due course.

In summary, I believe that the funding arrangements for 2003–2004 and beyond that I have described are a substantial commitment to policing and to combating crime. We should never forget that under the Conservative party crime doubled and police numbers were falling. Police numbers are now at record levels. Crime has fallen over the past few years. We need to do more, both in building up our police service and bringing down crime and the fear of crime, and it is our intention to do so.

2.33 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The right hon. Gentleman has a reputation in the House for being a very genuine and serious, as well as able, Minister. I was sorry, therefore, that in his opening remarks he seemed determined to stir up anger on these Benches—in my view somewhat unnecessarily, especially as I shall show that he was, to say the least, playing fast and loose with facts and figures.

I want to start by saying something with a personal touch, and I ask for the indulgence of the House. I want to put on the record my gratitude to the Government for the two special payments they have made this year to Cambridgeshire constabulary: £1.1 million towards policing Huntingdon Life Sciences and protecting staff, suppliers and so on who were under threat from so-called animal welfare activists; and, more important, £3.5 million made available towards the cost of Operation Fincham, which took place in my constituency, relating to the tragic disappearance and death of the two little girls last August. It was a huge financial strain on a small police force, and I am grateful to the Government for recognising that.

Before turning to the specific proposals, which even the Minister took some time to get to, I think we should look at the background to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. First, I remind the House that at the last general election there were some 1,600 police officers fewer than when Labour came to power in 1997.

James Purnell (Stalybridge and Hyde): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Paice: Not yet.

While it is perfectly true that police numbers have risen since the election, the fact remains that in the six years of Labour Government which we have now suffered police numbers are up by less than 3 per cent., assuming that the Minister is right and we meet the 130,000 target. That is an average increase over six years of just 500 officers a year. Throughout the 18 years of the previous Conservative Government, the average annual increase in the number of police officers was 850, and in the last year numbers went up, contrary to the impression that the Minister and his puppets behind him seem to wish to give. Of course, we welcome more police numbers, but the much heralded recent increase must be seen against the first four years of major reductions, which I remind the House were part of "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime".

My second point concerns bureaucracy. "Diary of a Police Officer", the study that the Government commissioned just under two years ago, produced some horrendous statistics and figures. They made horrific reading: levels of bureaucracy, form-filling and time-wasting keeping officers off the streets. That is common ground between me and the Minister.

I had hoped that the right hon. Gentleman would tell us a little more about what has happened since then. Last year he said that the roll-out of the computerised custody system was "imminent". How many forces now have the system and when is completion of the roll-out expected?Will the Minister also tell us what assessment he has commissioned of the effectiveness of that system in releasing officer time, which we all wish to see?

I come to the issue of the council tax precepts, which several hon. Members have referred to in interventions. The Minister avoided any reference to those precepts by saying that the matter is basically down to the local

police authority. Of course it is, but I cannot believe that the Treasury has not told the Home Office what it believes the average level of council tax precept increase should be based on this year's total standard spending settlement. The Minister does the House, not to mention police authorities, an injustice in not giving some guidance on what the Government believe should be the average increase in police authority precepts.

Mr. Challen: The hon. Gentleman and I both took part in consideration of the Police Reform Bill. I recall his saying then that there was far too much Government interference in the affairs of local police authorities. Is he now reversing his opinion and saying that we should have Treasury interference in them?

Mr. Paice: No. Either intentionally or unintentionally, the hon. Gentleman distorts what I said. I did not say that I wanted the Government to state what the council tax precept should be.

Mr. Challen: That is the effect.

Mr. Paice: Far from it. What I want to know is this: when all the figures were worked out, what assessment did the Government make of what they should mean for council tax precepts? Those are statistics that the Treasury always works out. I would not mind gambling, if I were that way inclined, that in the next debate, when we discuss the wider issues of council tax rises, we shall be given a statistic for the average expectation. I find it odd that we did not receive it for the police. Of course, the final decision must be for the local police authority, but I am surprised that the Government have not given us that statistic.

I am also surprised that the Minister included among the raft of figures that he read out—they were relatively meaningless towards the end of his speech, as he did not read out any comparators—the £30 million for rural areas, as though he should have been given some plaudits for retaining that provision. I remind the House that it was this Government who proposed taking that money away from rural areas. It takes some barefaced effrontery for the Government to seek credit for not doing something that they proposed and that would have damaged rural areas.

This coming year will be the first full year in which the impact of last year's police reforms can be felt, including those in the Police Reform Act 2002 and those carried out under the Police Negotiating Board. According to the Minister, those reforms are fully funded in the settlement. However, the Association of Police Authorities believes that, as a standstill budget, authorities needed an extra £482 million, compared with the £275 million that they are getting. It claims that £137 million is needed above the increase in TSS simply to cover inflation and pay pressures, plus a further £70 million for pensions.

Jim Knight: Given that there is some interest among Labour Members in what would happen if the Conservative party got into power, will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he would grant the request made by the Association of Police Authorities?

Mr. Paice: To my immense regret, we are not in power, and I do not envisage our being so in this financial year. It is this year's figures that we are talking about. However, as the hon. Gentleman raised the issue, I can tell him that when this party returns to power, we will seek to increase police numbers above whatever they are when we take office. What is more, we will ensure that the police have the appropriate funding.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House how it would be possible to increase police numbers while not only making a 20 per cent. cut across the board, but implementing the other policies to which his party has committed itself? It has already committed itself to matching Government expenditure on defence and international development. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh dear."] It is no good saying "Oh dear". He needs to explain to the House how he will increase the numbers.

Mr. Paice: Nobody speaking for the Conservative party has said that we will cut the totality of Government expenditure by 20 per cent. If the hon. Gentleman had read the article that gave rise to all the hype and hysteria, he would understand that the idea was to reduce by 20 per cent. most central Government costs and not total Government expenditure. Let us put that proposition to bed once and for all.

Although the 3.7 per cent. increase in total standard spending may sound generous, it is far from generous in comparison with the actual increases in the costs faced by forces. Many of those costs were imposed by the Secretary of State through legislation or because of his leaning on the police negotiating body.

I read the 2000 comprehensive spending review with some surprise, as it appears that the grand total in police expenditure for next year is more than that which the Minister has announced. Will he explain to the House why, when the Government have rightly taken the trouble to plan out expenditure over a period of three years, the figures have ceased to be correct and he has announced a police settlement of less than that given in the CSR?

The main figure to which the Minister referred is the 6.2 per cent. increase in police spending. Hon. Members who have not studied the papers may wonder about the difference between that figure and the 3.7 per cent. figure to which I have referred. Of course, the answer is the money, over which the Home Secretary wishes to keep control. Out of the total of an extra £543 million to be spent on policing, £268 million, or 49 per cent. of that total, will be spent at the behest of the Secretary of State. Some of it will go to police authorities, but only if they spend it as he dictates.

If that centralisation of control continues, ever more power will go to the centre. That continues the trend that I identified a year ago, as it provides the barest minimum to police authorities and keeps as much as possible for central control. However many reservations the Home Secretary may have about the ability of individual authorities to make effective decisions, the temptation to take central control should be resisted. He should be taking up the challenge of deciding how to improve local accountability and ensure more effective financial control locally, rather than taking things in the other direction and taking such responsibilities upon himself.

James Purnell: Is not the reason for ring-fencing money the need to ensure that it goes into increasing

[James Purnell]

police numbers? Is that not exactly the problem that the previous Administration had when they promised in 1992 to increase numbers by 5,000, although they ended up falling by 1,500? Will he not therefore congratulate the Government on having increased the number of police officers in my area by 100 since 1997? That would be entirely reversed if we cut public spending by 20 per cent.

Mr. Paice: I remind the hon. Gentleman that police numbers rose considerably in the last year of the Conservative Government, when we did not have a crime fighting fund. It was the Conservative Government who rightly gave chief officers and authorities discretion as to how their resources were spent. I believe that, prior to 1993, the Home Secretary decided on the establishment for every police authority. In my view, that sort of centralisation is wholly unacceptable, but I believe that we are heading back in that direction. Of course, I welcome extra police officers, but I also believe strongly in discretion for those at a local level to use resources as they think fit.

Mr. Denham: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify the position, as I am getting confused? A few moments ago, he committed his party, should it ever return to government, to having more police officers than the number at the time when it takes office, whatever that number is. As he has opposed using either of the mechanisms that have been used consistently to increase the number of police officers, how on earth does he intend to deliver that commitment? Is it merely an empty promise, because he has no intention of introducing mechanisms to fulfil it?

Mr. Paice: The Minister will have to await the detail of our proposals. I would not wish to spoil him by giving them all in one go. The basic thrust it that we should remove obstacles from police authorities that prevent them from making decisions on spending money on police officers, remove the reasons for police officers being locked up in police stations or courts and make the whole arrangement far more flexible and adaptable so that the police authorities and chief constables can use the extra resources to which they will be entitled. That should be done by devolving more to them so that they can maximise the number of officers on the beat. That would be the simple and obvious way forward if it were not for the demand on centralising control that the current Government have adopted.

On the crime fighting fund, we have debated the issue of centralisation, but will the Minister tell us a bit more about next year? I understand that he has decided to extend the fund, which is welcome in terms of extra money, although I would prefer it to be devolved. I also understand, however, that the Government now expect an underspend in the crime fighting fund within the existing provision. I am grateful that he has apparently decided that that underspend should be used to extend the fund—I believe that it will cover another 650 officers—but will he explain where the underfunding has come from? If the crime fighting fund has been a success and he has got the extra 9,000 officers recruited between April 2000 and this coming March for whom he has set out the funding, where is the underspend? Has it arisen because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) suggested, some police authorities have been so strapped for cash that they have been unable to retain all their crime fighting fund officers directly, or because they have dropped behind the criteria on maintaining their normal establishment? Will the Minister please explain to the House how he has arrived at an underspend on a very clearly and carefully calculated crime fighting fund?

I also understand that those 650 new officers will be funded at only 75 per cent. of their pay costs. Will the Minister tell us what are the implications of that for the future? How can an authority budget ahead without any assurance about whether the funding for those officers will remain at 75 per cent., or be cut to 50 or 25 per cent., or even increased to 100 per cent.? There is no continuity.

I welcome what the Minister had to say about the civilian support officers because he implied—he may wish to retract the implication—that he was taking seriously the point that the Opposition made during the consideration of the Police Reform Act 2002: whether to employ community support officers should be up to the discretion of local police chiefs and authorities. It is hardly surprising that he should have 1,000 or so CSOs in place and bids for many more if that is the only way to access money for any more officers of any description.

I remind the Minister and the House that, with the exception of the Metropolitan police, not a single chief constable said that, given the option, he or she would not rather employ regular police officers than CSOs. I am sure that my hon. Friends will recall that from their own discussions. If the Minister does what we exhort him to do—abolish the fund and put the money straight into the police—it will be interesting to find out how many forces decide to divert the resources back to regular officers.

Finally, I wish to say a word or two on the new formula to which the Minister referred and the floors and ceilings. Obviously, with a new formula for the police and the adjustments to the local government formula—the area cost adjustment—there will be gainers and losers and therefore the operation of floors and ceilings is perfectly understandable so long as it is transitional. There are 19 police authorities at the floor; 14 at the ceiling. The fact that that is well over half the totality of police authorities in this country demonstrates that considerable unevenness remains in the distribution.

Will the Government lay out a phased elimination of those floors and ceilings; or do they intend to leave them there for ever? If they have confidence in their new formula, surely they should have the confidence to pursue its introduction. How can any authority look forward and try to plan not just for the next financial year, but for years to come without having any understanding of where it will be in future with regard to the floors and ceilings policy?

The House has always made clear its support for the police, and I believe that the vast majority of the British public support the police, although, anecdotally, I fear that that support is reducing. However, that support will completely fail unless the police are responsive to local needs, and it defies belief that response to local needs is

more likely to be achieved by the Home Secretary in Whitehall telling them what to do than by local accountability.

The most reprehensible element of this package is that extra resources will continue to be kept to the centre. Police authorities get a 3.7 per cent. increase, but the Home Secretary gets a 20 per cent. increase on what he keeps to the centre. That belies all his protestations about centralisation; it is a command-and-control approach to policing, which is wrong.

2.53 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): It would be remiss of me, as a Nottinghamshire Member of Parliament, not to begin my speech without first paying further tribute to PC Ged Walker and his family. He was murdered very recently while on duty in Nottingham. As part of this debate, we should just pause for a moment to reflect not only on his bravery, but on the bravery of all our police officers and security personnel across the country on whom we all depend.

In welcoming my right hon. Friend's statement and discussing the grant, it is important to note that we have seen significant increases in support for our local police, not just this year or last year, but for a sustained period of improvement. That approach, in conjunction with police authorities, has provided significantly more police officers. The £5 million extra that we in Nottinghamshire will get next year will enable us to continue the improvements in police numbers that we have seen.

I want to place on record the fact that, in 1999–2000, there were 2,224 police officers in Nottinghamshire, but by March 2003, there will be 2,434—a 10 per cent. increase over that period. By anyone's calculation, that is a significant improvement in the number of available police officers. We already have 12 community support officers, but there will be additional CSOs because of the increase in grant. Despite that increase in grant and in the number of police officers, one of the common complaints that I hear—I am sure that all hon. Members do—is that people turn around and say, "Where are the extra police? Where is the increased police presence on the street? Why are their calls not being answered?"

I want to make a couple of points to the Minister about increased police funding. As well as talking about the amount of grant, we need to discuss how we can improve performance with the additional money that we make available to the police. As the Minister and other hon. Members will know, one of the things that we need to do is to make local police stations much more accountable with respect to the local basic command unit statistics.

I ask my right hon. Friend to consider another point about the police grant. Even in Nottinghamshire—a close-knit county—people in my constituency want the figures to be extrapolated so that they know what they mean for their local police station in Arnold or in Carlton. They want to know how much additional spending there will be and how it relates to fighting crime.

I ask the Minister to consider how the grant applies to different police forces, and we also need to make sure that we measure performance. One of the ways to do that is to ensure that the figures are considered at as local a level as possible so that we hold police forces accountable for the additional grant that they receive.

One of the things that is sometimes disappointing about debates on the police—this is a serious point—is that we inevitably get some to-ing and fro-ing about the number of police officers. We all want more police on the streets. This is a difficult point, but when we give additional grants to police forces, I ask the Minister to consider not only the number of police officers that they have on their books, but the number of operational police officers that the grant can provide. I suspect that, if different police forces were given the same amount of money, there would be significantly more police officers on the street in one area than in another.

We need to be intelligent about this issue and to take forward the debate, and not simply argue about raw statistics and raw police numbers. Of course that is important—we all want more police officers—but we also need to ask ourselves how one police force can get X number of police officers on the street, whereas another force cannot manage to do so even though it gets exactly the same amount of money. That may happen because of the way that different police authorities chose to use their money. That is a matter for local democracy and local accountability. However, it is incumbent on us to have a sensible debate on police officers and numbers on the street, otherwise, we will have a sterile discussion in which we bat things to and fro, which would not be particularly helpful to my constituents or the country as a whole.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I want to add a constructive suggestion. The other information that seems to be increasingly relevant is the number of new, probationary or trainee police officers. There is a huge turnover and we face an even bigger loss as people are coming up to retirement age. Many police managers—commanders—will not allow young police officers in their first two years of service to do the jobs that the others do. If we could have that profile, we would be able to see the pattern and picture of policing in each local borough command unit.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. My police service in Nottinghamshire often tells me that even though it may have more officers, they are not seen on individual patrol if they are new recruits because, as part of their training, they are teamed up with other officers. That creates problems, as he says.

May I raise a specific point with the Minister? He will know it from Nottinghamshire police's point of view, but, as a local Member of Parliament, I also want to make it. Nottinghamshire police faces metropolitan crime levels—he knows that Nottinghamshire is one of the 10 street crime initiative areas—but it is funded as a shire service. Will he respond on that particular problem and put on record the Government's view on that point, which is often made from Nottinghamshire?

I appreciate that the Government have given extra money—nearly £1 million under the street crime initiative and £4.3 million under the crime fighting fund. I say to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), who spoke for the

[Vernon Coaker]

Opposition, that the Minister made a good point on the crime fighting fund. If we want more police officers, one way to achieve that is through central pots of money that are granted only for spending on additional officers, although that would remove local discretion to use the money differently.

That returns us to the point about having a sterile debate on police officer numbers. In a sense, we cannot have it both ways. People say, "Money should not be held centrally if it is to be used to provide more police locally." However, if the Government devolve the money to the local level, the police authority may choose not to spend it on police officers. When that happens, Members say that police numbers are not going up. That is a difficult circle to square, although the point is an interesting one to make. I should add that the Airwave project is receiving an additional £1.13 million. There are additional moneys over and above the core budget, which is important.

The Minister knows, however, that I receive complaints that the problems in Nottingham with shootings, drug problems and so on suck in officers from the surrounding areas. That is understandable, but sometimes it means that officers who should be deployed in my area—the suburbs and elsewhere—perhaps have to be deployed to deal with more serious crimes. Will he comment on that?

I want to make a couple of other points about the grant and the debate on policing. There is a further debate to have on paying special constables. Will the Minister comment on special constables, who make an important contribution? Furthermore, community support officers, who tackle low-level antisocial behaviour, will also make an important contribution to policing in each area.

I am pleased with the additional grant that has been made available to Nottinghamshire police, as it has allowed the growth in police numbers to continue, which is to be welcomed. I pay tribute to the work done by the chief constable and his officers across the county in trying to reduce crime and to the police authority chair, John Clarke, for the work that he is doing. I wish them well with the increased resources that they have to tackle crime. There are real issues as to how we get more police officers on the street to reassure people and to tackle crime.

I hope that we can debate police numbers without concentrating only on that in absolute terms. If we can do so, we will make a greater contribution to tackling crime and disorder in our communities.

3.4 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In opening the debate, the Minister repeated a truism that is worth repeating—that we are dealing not just with crime, but with the fear of crime. Many factors underlie criminal behaviour and there are many causes of crime that we are not properly tackling. Adequate and effective policing is one way to combat not only crime but the fear of crime. And part of the answer is not only bobbies on the beat but the fear of bobbies on the beat: no legislation or exhortation from those on the Government Benches will have half as much effect on criminal behaviour across the country as the reasonable expectation of being caught and of there being the police officers on the ground who can do the job and ensure that criminals are apprehended.

One problem when times are hard in the police service is that, inevitably and rightly, resources are focused on areas of major crime and major visibility. As a result, we lose first what chief constables, but not those whom they serve, often consider a marginal activity—the patrol function. That is why it is so important that we get the policing formulae right and that we give adequate resources to the police authorities and chief constables to enable them to make the decisions that need to be made in local areas.

Let us be clear about the fact that the settlement is an awful lot better than some we received before 1997 under the previous Government. I have experience of that. As the Minister knows, I was on the receiving end as chairman of a police authority in those years. I remember going each year to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who was then Home Secretary and is now Opposition spokesman on Treasury matters, to ask for more officers for Avon and Somerset. Every year, I was told, "No, not a single extra officer will you get." So, I take the views that are sometimes expressed by Conservative Members with a serious pinch of salt.

The settlement is also much better than those we came to expect in the early years of this Labour Government. One of the enduring failures of the new Labour Administration is not dealing adequately with policing and home affairs during their first few years of tenure. The belief that one could provide an adequate policing service within the constraints of the previously decided Conservative budget figures was hugely mistaken and it cost us dear in terms of its effect on our police forces up and down the country.

I do not argue with the Minister saying that some things are sensibly top sliced from the overall policing budget to provide for central expenditure. I am a great believer in local determination and allowing local police authorities to set their budget, but I cannot see a great deal of sense in disbursing money only to collect it straight back for national procurement programmes. Therefore, there clearly are areas where the Home Office is right to retain control.

There is a present need to respond to the threat of terrorism. I applaud the Minister for continuing to make more moneys available for that purpose, but I ask whether similar funds are made available through other Departments to other law enforcement bodies to meet that threat. He may not be able to give me an answer now, but I am concerned. Indeed, at the end of last year, I expressed my concern about the position of British Transport police, which is funded through the rail companies, and whether it has adequate funds to meet the threat of terrorist action on the tube. I have a continuing fear that Her Majesty's Customs and Excise is not being funded adequately to allow it to do an important job in protecting our borders. There is in any case a strong argument for reconstructing our border forces to make them more effective and more efficient.

The point at which I start to argue with the Minister is when he asserts—not boasts, because he is not a great boaster as a Minister—that in the 6.2 per cent. increase

to which he has alluded he has scored a major success in police service funding. That is fine and good—it represents a success against the Treasury to some extent, because at one point the expectation was that the increase would be far less than that. However, the Minister must not confuse the British public or undermine the position of chief constables and local police authorities by pretending that that is what will go to local authorities and police forces throughout the country.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr Paice) noted the disparity between that which is distributed through the police grant formula and the needs of police authorities. We know that the total increase in revenue funding for police authorities from central Government is about £275 million, which is an increase of 3.7 per cent., not 6.2 per cent. as was mentioned. That sum has to cover the results of the police negotiating body formulae, so a large part is, in effect, already taken before the money reaches the police authorities. We know also that, in the light of a reasonable and sober assessment on the part of police authorities, they need £482 million simply to stand still. My experience is that police authority treasurers and chief constables are not ones to over-egg the pudding and overstate their case: they tell it like it is. The fact is that, given an inflation and pay gap of £137 million and the £70 million pensions gap, they have some difficult sums to do.

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that Dorset police authority faces increasing its share of council tax by 20 per cent. against a background of its expenditure per head of population being the second lowest among English authorities and its council tax the fourth highest, and the authority being a beacon of efficiency? What is my local police authority meant to do in the circumstances?

Mr. Heath: I will talk about the circumstances of specific authorities and the results in terms of council tax later. I assume that my hon. Friend does not subscribe to the rather odd view entertained by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), that one of the answers is to send the funds back and not recruit extra police officers. I understand my hon. Friend's point of view, but if Dorset has spare police officers whom it wants to return to sender, let it send them just across the county boundary to Wincanton in my constituency, where I will be extremely happy to welcome a few extra police officers to Somerset.

Mr. Chope: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will admit that what he just said is a misrepresentation of my remarks. I was referring to an option that the police authority was considering, and the implications of following that option through.

Mr. Heath: I have to say that the hon. Gentleman gave every indication of supporting that option. Perhaps he could have phrased his intervention a little better.

Pensions are a huge problem that has bedevilled police authorities for more years than we care to remember. The Minister says that he is struggling with it and hopes to find a solution, but does he realise that I had precisely that response from the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (David Maclean) back in 1996, when the right hon. Gentleman was a Home Office Minister? He told me then that it would all be over by Christmas—that by Christmas we would have a paper on police pensions that would deal with the problem. Yet, as the decades pass, the problem worsens. Unless someone grasps the nettle of future pensions contributions at least to stem the tide, pensions will continue to be a huge problem for chief constables and police authorities in managing their affairs.

Among the great problems that police authorities face we find not only the 3.7 per cent. overall increase, but the peculiar way in which it is distributed throughout the country. The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire referred to the number of authorities that are on the floor and are to receive only a 3 per cent. increase. Goodness knows what they would have received had the floor not been in place; presumably, they would have had to cut their police establishment left, right and centre. However, a curious feature of that list of local authorities is how localised they are. Every single authority in the south-west is on the floor—Avon and Somerset, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, and Devon and Cornwall—as is every authority in the south-east. Nottinghamshire, represented by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), might have escaped, but a fair proportion of authorities in the east midlands are also on the floor.

It is as though the Government decided that there are enough police south of the Wash and that there are enough police to deal with crime in the home counties and the west country. However, it is not the perception on the ground that we have sufficient resources and sufficient officers patrolling our towns, cities and villages—quite the reverse. Every single one of the authorities on that list will be extremely disadvantageously affected and will face having to impose extremely high council tax increases just to stand still. We have already heard Dorset Members from all the major parties making points on behalf of Dorset, and the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) spoke on behalf of Gloucestershire.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge): Is my hon. Friend surprised to learn that Devon and Cornwall has the fewest police per head of population, but still finds itself on the floor? Is something wrong?

Mr. Heath: I am not surprised, because I know that several of the authorities in which we have an interest are in exactly the same position.

There is no objectivity in the formula. It might appear to be based on objective measures, but in terms of relating it to population or to police activity, it is grossly deficient.

Mr. Denham: It might help the debate if the hon. Gentleman reminds me of the main points made by the

[Mr. Denham]

Liberal Democrats in their response to our consultation on the formula. Which objective measures did the Liberal Democrats suggest during that consultation?

Mr. Heath: First, to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), the effect of the area cost adjustment on police authorities is extreme.

Mr. Denham *rose—*

Mr. Heath: The Minister intervened, so he must give me a chance to respond. He brushed his hon. Friend's point aside, saying that it was not a matter for him, but one for Ministers at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Well, it matters a great deal to those who are trying to operate a police service, whether police authorities or chief constables, because it affects not only the funds available to them but the way in which they attract and retain officers in areas that are marginal to areas of high housing costs and high wages. Those are real problems in large parts of the country.

I do not want the House to think that I am speaking only for the people of the west country. Let me give an example of another authority that has done badly out of the formula—Derbyshire.

Mr. Denham: I do not want the hon. Gentleman inadvertently to fail to answer my question. What proposals regarding their preferred formula did the Liberal Democrats make?

Mr. Heath: The Minister knows that we approach local government funding in a totally different way from the Government, so I will not respond on that basis, although it is a serious point. We could turn over the entire debate to the different ways of funding local authorities, including police authorities, but I do not think that that is the purpose of today's debate, so I will not be drawn down that route. The right hon. Gentleman has proposed this formula, and he has to answer for the effects on local authorities and police authorities throughout the country.

The chief constable of Derbyshire, David Coleman, describes the increase as "extremely disappointing". He says:

> "The constabulary and the Police Authority will now be faced with some very difficult decisions as to how we maintain existing services and the potential for further growth and development in community beat policing is severely restricted . . . . I believe that the communities of Derbyshire will regard this as a bitter blow in light of the substantial progress we have been able to make in the last two years."

That is a police authority and a constabulary that has been making huge progress in turning back from quite difficult times not so long ago. They have tried to do their best in policing a diverse area in Derbyshire and are now being hit by this hammer blow of simply not having the resources that they need to do the job. For authorities to be on the floor is not without a cost to other authorities, because the money comes not from central resources but from effectively withdrawing funds from other areas.

One point that needs to be made, which comes back to a point that was made earlier, is that we do not at the moment have objective tests of local policing need to which the formula can respond. That is the case in shire authorities and in London. My hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) has experience of identifying policing need in his constituency to which the Metropolitan police cannot respond.

Simon Hughes: To reinforce my hon. Friend's point, we have put to the Government a helpful suggestion that would not divide parties, which is that there should be some objective impartial advisory body, such as a standing conference on policing, or any formula that the Government would wish, whereby people throughout England and Wales could determine, separately for Wales and England, and then across the forces in each country, what the communities, on advice, believe that they need. In Southwark, three Members of Parliament—two Labour and one Liberal Democrat—the local authority and the police, came to the view that we needed 1,000 police. We have about 750. How can we go from 750 to 1,000 if we are never given the ability to negotiate with the Government on that basis?

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In response, I offer another, which concerns the balance between urban and rural areas—the point made by the hon. Member for Gedling. That happens when we have joint force areas. The problems of policing big cities are obvious. The chief constable makes perfectly rational decisions about the deployment of resources within his area to fight big crime, but the effect of that is to reduce to almost nothing the visibility and presence of policing in the rural and peripheral areas. That also happens in smaller shire forces, where there is a central city with a crime profile such as there is in Nottinghamshire. We have not yet adequately addressed that. That is why it is so difficult for local populations to accept huge increases in council tax for the police as a result of the formula.

The Minister says, "It's nothing to do with me, guv. It is for the local police authorities." It beggars belief that anyone would be taken in by that. It is as if all the police authorities had suddenly taken collective leave of their senses and decided to inflict huge council tax increases for no good reason.

I do not want to embarrass the Minister with his own Hampshire police authority, but in a letter to the Home Office the Treasurer of the Hampshire police authority says:

> "The Authority faces yet another difficult budget year, with the council tax likely to increase by over 20 per cent. if it is to avoid cutting current policing levels, primarily as a result of the Government's extremely damaging funding settlement."

There has been an increase of 20 per cent. in Hampshire, 20 per cent. in Dorset and 22.9 per cent. for the Metropolitan police area. In Avon and Somerset, my own authority, the increase is 30 per cent.

How do I explain to a person living on a fixed income, perhaps a pensioner, in a village in my constituency that they are paying 30 per cent. extra but they will not see any extra police officers because they are all going to Bristol because that is what the chief constable and the Home Office have decided is the priority? Bristol is an hour and a half's drive away and, frankly, pensioners in

villages in my constituency could not give a damn what is happening in Bristol. What they want to see is police officers in their villages and streets.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman by suggesting how he could give comfort to constituents who face a whopping great rise. He should just tell them that they are lucky they do not live in Surrey where we are facing a 46 per cent. increase.

Mr. Heath: This is like an auction to see who can come up with the biggest, most extraordinary and ridiculous council tax increase.

That clearly illustrates the problem with the settlement. It prefaces increased police resources in general and is better than the worst that could have been provided, but it suggests huge increases in council tax for very little benefit for large swathes of our population. It is lacking in transparency, fairness and real improvements and it is increasing costs. An awful lot of people will be paying a great deal more for not a lot.

3.25 pm

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey): I can appreciate Ministers' temptation to turn off their hearing aids when they hear the equivalent of special pleas for particular organisations or authorities, but I have two to make in respect of West Yorkshire police authority and the West Yorkshire police force. The first relates to the huge and continuing additional costs incurred by West Yorkshire police authority as a result of the disturbances in Bradford 18 months ago. I fully recognise that my right hon. Friend has already assisted with a special grant of £2.2 million, which was very welcome, but I hope that he will not regard me as too churlish in coming back once again, in Oliver Twist fashion, for some more.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware of the overall costs of policing the disturbances, but I will remind him of them nevertheless. Policing the incidents themselves and the immediate aftermath cost £3.4 million. The costs of policing the investigation, public reassurance and contingency arrangements for possible recurrences have also been substantial. They have been estimated at £4.3 million up to August 2002, and they continue to rise at a cost of around £246,000 a month.

In addition, the police authority faces damage claims of about £7.5 million. I appreciate that the figure may reduce as a result of the usual legal and cost adjusting processes, but it still represents quite a drain on the authority. In that respect, although the £2.2 million special grant was welcome, I urge my right hon. Friend to give active and enthusiastic consideration to the case that has been put forward by West Yorkshire.

I can accept, as can the West Yorkshire police authority, that budgeting for services such as the police, where the unexpected can and frequently does happen, requires contingency funding. It is not the Government's automatic role to ride in over the horizon with bags of money to bail out authorities that have not been prudent in budgeting for such contingencies. However, the costs to which I have referred associated with the Bradford disturbances could not reasonably have been met by even the most prudent of authorities.

In tribute to my right hon. Friend, he has already recognised that to a degree, because £2.2 million was a significant contribution. It was not a sum that the Government were obliged to pay, but it was based on good government. He saw that there was a problem and intervened to do something about it. But that problem continues. The financial cost of the disturbances has not been contained in the period immediately following them. As I say, they are continuing.

In West Yorkshire we are certainly not blind to all the extra funding going into the police nationally and in the county itself. We have benefited from crime-fighting moneys. This year we will receive a budget increase of 4.9 per cent., which is well above the rate of inflation. Basic command units in West Yorkshire are to receive £3.2 million, and the two divisions that serve my constituency will receive a share of about £374,000. West Yorkshire will receive £1.8 million as part of the street crime initiative; previous sums given under that initiative have helped to halve the amount of such crime since March. The force is also being funded to the tune of 60 community support officers.

I should also like to acknowledge the grants that West Yorkshire has recently received, such as the £550,000 that was made available to the Leeds distraction burglary project, which targets the villains and conmen who callously prey on the older members of our community. We have received funding for CCTV. My constituents in Horsforth are benefiting from that, and hopefully the technology can be rolled out to other communities. That is welcome additional money in the battle against crime, and it demonstrates the Government's commitment.

As I said, however, there is a dark lining to the silver cloud in West Yorkshire. The funding must be viewed not only against the backdrop of the pressures caused by the Bradford disturbances but against the historical funding position in the county. I have to say that unlike many other forces West Yorkshire is not enjoying a record number of officers, far from it. The authority's projected figure for the end of March is 5,080 officers, which is more than 150 below the number on the establishment in March 1997. Before Conservative Members welcome that admission, I should say that according to the police authority, the short explanation is that, first, in budgeting terms, the peak 1997 figure was not sustainable. Secondly, and here I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), the Government took the ill-advised course of keeping to Conservative spending plans for two years.

This year, the West Yorkshire force will recruit about 420 new officers. However, that will not represent a net increase because the figure will have to be offset against the natural wastage that occurs in so many different ways. We will still be left perilously short of the number of officers that we had in 1997. Again echoing the hon. Gentleman's remarks, as well as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), I point out that new officers recruited at that level may represent a net loss to the force because trained, experienced officers are tied up accompanying them and are thereby diverted from the front-line presence.

[Mr. Paul Truswell]

Two other statistics bear mention. The first is that West Yorkshire receives below average funding in metropolitan terms. The average figure for metropolitan forces is £156 per resident; in West Yorkshire the figure is £146 per resident. The force has fewer officers per head of population than any other metropolitan force. The metropolitan average is one officer per 363 people; in West Yorkshire we have one officer for every 426 people. That is quite a disparity.

In a nutshell, I urge my right hon. Friend to recognise further West Yorkshire's position as regards the continuing costs of the Bradford disturbances and to view that position in the wider context that I have briefly described. It is important that the number of officers continues to grow and that resources are not diverted or distracted from front-line policing throughout West Yorkshire, including my constituency, by the continuing financial black hole created by the Bradford disturbances.

My right hon. Friend will know that the police authority has a relatively new chairman, Melvyn Smith, and a new chief constable, Colin Cramphorn. I hope that he will see fit to greet them with a golden hello. He could dig into some of the sums available to him this year, or the many sums that he has said will be available next year, to give them a cash boost and make their job a little easier, because they face great challenges in their new jobs. I know that my right hon. Friend will do his best on that score.

3.33 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): This police settlement is grossly unfair, unaffordable and unacceptable to the people of Dorset. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), who is no longer in his place, told the Minister, in his very mild manner, that he found the settlement unacceptable and would abstain in a vote, and I commend him for that principled stand. I wish that he would go further and vote against the Government because that is the only language that they understand. Surely the Minister realises that when one of his colleagues, who won his seat at the last general election, is absolutely dismayed by the way in which his constituents, and my constituents, have been treated by what is supposedly his own Government, it is time to take note. Indeed, when Dorset Members of Parliament complained bitterly to the Deputy Prime Minister's representative about the injustice of the new system, the hon. Member for South Dorset asked how any of the authorities in Dorset could be blamed when they were commended on their efficiency. Despite that, increases of 19.6 per cent. for the police and 16 per cent. for the county council have been set. The hon. Gentleman said that he would have to blame the Government for imposing that burden on the people of Dorset.

People in Dorset are fed up to the back teeth. The outrage is not synthetic because a high proportion of the population is on fixed incomes. Unlike us, they do not enjoy the luxury of annual increases. They have to put up with small increases in their pensions. The Minister, in a rather cavalier fashion, said that a 20 per cent. increase in the police precept in Hampshire, where his constituency is based, was perfectly affordable. How can it be affordable? He explained that it was only £9 a head.

Mr. Denham: I am sure that the record will show that I made no comments on the Hampshire precept or what it would cost.

Mr. Chope: I hope that the Minister will have an opportunity in his short winding-up speech to explain what increase he would consider acceptable in the police precept in Hampshire and whether he believes that a 19.6 per cent. increase is acceptable in Dorset.

The people of Dorset earn some of the lowest average wages in the country. Dorset is 25th out of 32 county council areas, yet the people face the highest per capita contribution to the costs of policing and highest percentage of police costs in the country. That is why there is so much pressure on them. They want to know why they have to finance the increases when they already pay more than the people of London towards the costs of policing. They are told that they live in a safe area, are responsible, participate in neighbourhood watch and support the police. The police tell the people that they need to increase the precept by 19.6 per cent. to maintain the service.

At a meeting with the chief constable, I asked how pensioners could cut their expenditure to afford such increases. She was unable to answer the question. Perhaps the Minister will explain how ordinary residents in Dorset can cut their living expenditure to afford the extra charges to which Government policies lead. Through a stealth wealth tax, the Government are redistributing resources from areas that have high house prices and low wages to other areas where the needs do not warrant such redistribution.

What does a council or police authority do when such circumstances arise? A business would examine its costs and consider what could be cut. As I tried to say in my intervention on the Minister, one of the options for Dorset police authority is to consider staffing. Its additional costs include the 1 per cent. increase in employer's national insurance contributions and a substantial increase in pension requirements.

The police authority could cut all overtime; that might save approximately £1.7 million. It could freeze recruitment. If it did that, it would suffer double jeopardy, because the Minister would withdraw money from the crime fighting fund that had previously been given to Dorset. He confirmed that in his response to my intervention.

Far from giving police authorities freedom to determine matters for themselves, the Government bind them completely. If they try to exercise freedom to reduce their costs and thereby the burden on their local population, they get a double penalty from the Government, who will withdraw specific funds that they had previously made available.

All that reinforces the strong argument advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) for our belief that it would be much fairer for the Government to decide how much to allocate to police authorities and then let them decide how to spend it. At present the Government are giving more and more money to themselves, withholding

police authority money and then handing out that money in donations for which they expect local people to be grateful. They are distorting the balance of police expenditure, and imposing on police authorities an enormously wasteful process of bidding for the available funds. We in Dorset are notoriously unsuccessful in securing the extra money.

We are in a desperate situation. I hope that when the Minister visits Bournemouth for his party conference he will see at first hand local police officers' dismay at the intolerable pressure to which they are subject. They are having to tell local people "We want more money". The people say "We cannot afford it". Meanwhile, the police are under enormous pressure to provide and improve services. As a result, disillusionment with the police is increasing phenomenally.

The Minister will have seen the latest Home Office figures. They reveal that public confidence in the police is declining rapidly—public confidence in their ability to control the yob culture, and in their ability to clear up crime. The fact that the police are being required to increase local taxation to such an extent while not being able to improve services will only increase the disillusionment that I have described.

Today the Government produced a report entitled "Sustainable communities in the South West". According to page 5,

"The South West suffers the double impact of higher than average house prices and lower than average incomes in the region. This creates particular difficulties for key workers and young people starting out—particularly in hotspots such as . . . East Dorset . . . the average house price in . . . the South West . . . was the second highest for any region in England, and the cost of housing is higher, in terms of percentage of income, than anywhere outside London and the South East".

Below is a diagram showing that in my constituency the ratio of lower quartile house prices to regional lower quartile income is more than 7.5 per cent. That is the problem we are experiencing in Dorset, and despite the strongest possible representations to the Government they seem unwilling to listen or respond in any positive way.

We are angry in Dorset. We want to do more than just vote against the grant settlement. I am delighted that an all-party group of MPs is campaigning for a fair deal for Dorset.

3.43 pm

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly): I welcome this positive statement, but as a Gwent Member I must express some disappointment. For some time Gwent has been disadvantaged by the funding formula, and Gwent police and Gwent Members had hoped for a significant improvement in 2003–04. Gwent's chief constable agrees.

Gwent's police force, like others, faces a number of unavoidable cost increases. Increases related to pension requirements, larger pay awards and larger national insurance contributions loom on the horizon. Moreover, Gwent wants to introduce a new communications system for its officers, which is bound to prove expensive. However, it is important to stress that, in addition to such costs, Gwent police will face new demands as a result of the introduction of the Government's legislation. We all welcome that legislation, but nevertheless it has severe cost implications.

We also need to acknowledge the fact that Gwent faces considerable social deprivation. Some 60 per cent. of the Gwent area is classified by the European Union as objective 1: in other words, its gross domestic product is less than 75 per cent. of the EU average. That means that much of that area has acute social problems. Unfortunately, antisocial behaviour is increasing dramatically, and there is an increase in drug-related crime. For example, in certain communities in my constituency, as many as 90 per cent. of house burglaries are related to drugs and the need of those who are dependent on them to have the income to fund their habit. The Minister must take these problems into account in coming to a fair and just settlement.

For many of the people whom I represent, increasing the number of police on the streets is the acid test of whether the fight against crime is succeeding. Extra resources are needed, and if they are not forthcoming, there will be no alternative to a very large increase in council tax precepts. The figure of 26 per cent. has been mentioned, and it is unrealistic. It is an unacceptably large sum to ask of council tax payers in an area such as Gwent. Moreover, such a scenario is doubly unfair on Gwent police authority, because it is one of the best performing authorities in the country. I believe that success should be rewarded, not penalised—an argument that is strengthened when we consider the authority's success over the past couple of years or more in tackling crime and improving efficiency levels.

I want to take this opportunity to highlight a particular demand that is being placed on the police. Torfaen is inside the Gwent police area, and its MP is my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), who is also Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We all welcome that fact, but being an extremely conscientious constituency MP, he rightly spends a fair amount of his time there, which has policing implications. The Gwent police force has made representations to the Home Office on that very point, but they seem not to have been taken into account in calculating resources for the area.

As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams) said, certain quarters in Wales—significantly, that includes all four of its chief constables—are demanding that policing become a devolved responsibility: in other words, they are arguing for a major extension of the devolution settlement. Personally, I have an open mind on the matter. We need to look at the pros and cons in an objective and detached manner, and to work out what is the best way forward. However, it is worrying to note that the four chief constables are now in favour of an extension of devolution so far as policing is concerned because they are not satisfied with central Government's funding arrangements. That issue has to be addressed.

There is no doubt in my mind that policing is becoming more effective throughout the country, and particularly in Gwent. Crime detection levels are improving, and the problem of high absenteeism is being tackled firmly. Savings are also being made in other areas. The Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent divisions are being successfully merged, which is freeing up resources and, in effect, allowing seven extra police officers to go on the beat. That is warmly to be welcomed.

[Mr. Wayne David]

I return to the point that I made earlier. We can talk about statistics and trot out figures, but many people come to a judgment on whether policing is improving on the basis of what they see happening in their local communities, and the perception in many of the communities that I represent is that crime is still a problem and that antisocial behaviour, in particular, is increasing. The Government are focusing their legislative programme on tackling those problems. However, it is not just about having the laws or the willpower—we need the resources to back them up. That is why, although there is much in the settlement that I welcome, there is certainly room for improvement as far as Gwent is concerned.

Finally, will the Minister look again at providing extra resources to allow for adequate policing to take into account the security of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he is in his constituency? That is a justifiable demand, and I hope that he will take it seriously and consider it carefully.

3.51 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I listened with great care to what the Minister had to say in the hope that I could tear up this speech, but unfortunately, I heard nothing new. His comments this afternoon and the figures that he finally produced this week are exactly the same as those that he used when he launched his consultation exercise. It is now crystal clear that all the representations made by my community, all the meetings that we held and all the pleadings that we made have been ignored. It is now crystal clear that screwing Surrey is Government policy. What is going on as far as my county is concerned is a disgrace, and the Minister should be ashamed of himself.

Surrey has the worst settlement in the country. I am not going to get into a bidding war, because we just went down that route. The new system of which the Minister is so proud has savaged Surrey's grant. Without the floor of which he is so proud, we would have lost £14.6 million. That does not mean that we would not have got an extra £14.6 million, but that we would have got £14.6 million less than we are getting in the current year. Let me spell out to the Minister what that means. My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) said that in due course the Minister will phase out these transitional arrangements. If he does not implement the new formula, what is the point of having it? When the transition ends, the £14.6 million savaged from Surrey's budget means—I am quoting the chief constable—that there will be between 450 and 500 fewer police officers. That is a 25 per cent. reduction in the police officer strength of the Surrey police force. If the Minister wants to dance to the Dispatch Box now or when he winds up to say that Surrey has more police officers than they used to have before his dreadful Government came to power, let me remind him that that is because of the addition of one whole division from the Metropolitan police. So he cannot crow about extra numbers. If he carries out his policy, we will lose 25 per cent. of our police officers. That is what his new grant system means.

Mr. Denham *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Wilshire: The Minister might well shake his head, because he ought to be ashamed of what he has done over the past five years. The threat to cut a quarter of the strength of my county comes on top of a cut in real terms of 14 per cent. over the past five years. At least the Minister is consistent—he is continuing to savage Surrey police, and I hope that he is ashamed of himself.

The Minister does not like it and will try to dispute it, but I am only giving him the facts. Even if he wants to ignore all that, let us talk about his wonderful, generous 3 per cent., of which he is so proud and wants people to think is helpful. It is not. Let me tell the Minister what that really means in Surrey. Again, I quote the chief constable and the police authority. Earlier, the Minister said that all the wonderful new conditions and pay are fully funded. Not in Surrey, they are not, according to the police authority. The authority has additional costs of which the Minister has not taken account. The national insurance increase is not funded either.

Moreover, I am told that, in Surrey, the increase that has been agreed for next year will amount not to 3 per cent. but to 1.4 per cent. only. That 1.4 per cent. will have to cover the national insurance increase, the extra pension costs, and inflation. I am not a maths genius, but funding all those costs with a 1.4 per cent. increase seems to me to amount to a real-terms cut in the money that the Government give to Surrey police.

Even that is not enough to get the Government to see sense. Police forces in the south-east face cost of living problems that the Government refuse to acknowledge. In the current year, Surrey will lose 14 per cent. of its police officers.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman says that the Government refuse to acknowledge problems with the cost of living, but what is the additional cost of living allowance paid in Surrey today? What was it under the previous Government? I think that he will find that there was no such allowance previously.

Mr. Wilshire: The Minister goes round and round that particular course. I have been in a meeting with him when I and other hon. Members explained that no account was being taken of the fact that the Surrey force and other forces in the south-east were losing officers to the Metropolitan police, and elsewhere.

This year, Surrey police will lose 14 per cent. of its officers to other forces. That will cost another £14 million on top of all the other problems that it faces, and the Government will do nothing about it. The cost of the formula change, of the underfunding of the increased costs, of inflation and of losing staff—which the Government do not acknowledge—adds up to a problem for the Surrey police authority. If the authority is to deliver exactly the same service that it delivers at the moment—and whether that is adequate for the community's needs invites a range of questions—it will cost £13.7 million more than it gets from the new grant and last year's precept.

When the Minister replies to the debate, will he tell my constituents which course of action he prefers? Should Surrey police authority cut the service that it gives because the Government will not fund it, or should it raise the precept by 46 per cent.? That is what it will cost to maintain the status quo.

The Minister looks glum: well he may, but I sincerely hope that he has the guts to give my constituents the answers that they want.

I am a realist. I know when I am screwed by the Government, as do my constituents. We understand that the Government could not care less about Surrey, and that they will make the cuts whatever we say. However, does the Minister ever have a pang of conscience in a quiet moment? If so, I have a few suggestions for him as to what to do.

Let the Minister prove me wrong about his not wanting to help with costs in the south-east. Let him stand up and say that he will do something about the matter. Let him stand up and say that he will use some capital money to make it possible for us to make loans to police officers, so that they can buy houses that they otherwise could not afford. Let him say that he will help us to make transport freely available to police officers, as happens in the Metropolitan police. Let him say that he will impose disincentives on other police forces that raid the Surrey strength for their own ends—that is, saving on training costs.

For my constituents, the statement is catastrophic. It contains nothing to be pleased about at all. It means one of two things: a cut in our policing or a 46 per cent. increase in the precept. If the Government do not repent, it will, in due course, mean 25 per cent. fewer officers, in addition to the present cuts.

The reality of the settlement is the opposite of Labour's slogan, "Tough on the causes of crime"; the settlement is tough on the Surrey police and even tougher on the victims of crime.

4 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I am glad to have the opportunity to take part in this short debate.

Crime and antisocial behaviour are overwhelmingly of priority concern to my constituents, as was shown by a survey that I carried out recently. My constituents, like people throughout the country, were horrified and appalled by the new sentencing policy for so-called first-time burglars. My constituents have strong views on such issues, as well as an unshakeable belief that greater numbers of police officers on the beat are a major way of tackling crime and antisocial behaviour.

I am participating in the debate mainly because on 20 January I asked a question at Home Office Question Time, but received such an inadequate response from the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Hilary Benn), that I immediately made a point of order recording my intention of raising the matter on the Adjournment of the House. As I have been unsuccessful so far, I thought that this debate would be a good opportunity to make the points that I wanted to make.

The Government are, in essence, giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Whatever the figures for extra funding, they are totally dwarfed by the £9.6 million loss that the Sussex police authority calculates will arise from the changes to grant distribution and calculation. That will make an enormous difference to policing in Sussex and the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety should be aware of that. Perhaps he cares as little about Sussex as he does about Surrey, but he should be aware of the consequences of the settlement.

The non-answer that I received from the Under-Secretary on 20 January obviously so embarrassed him that he wrote to me on the very next day to try to set out the figures for grant and other funding for the Sussex police authority. To be fair, there will be additional moneys for Airwave, capital funding and other things that have already been mentioned in the debate. The Under-Secretary informed me that the Sussex police authority

"will receive £153.10 million in general grant . . . an increase of £4.5 million or 3 per cent. over 2002/03".

I shall deal with that point in more detail later.

The letter ended, however, by complaining that the precept level in Sussex

"remained one of the lowest in England and Wales".

In other words, there was a clear invitation to the Sussex police authority to make a sharp increase in its precept for the coming year—as if the local government settlement was not enough to contend with.

We have already heard that, because of the so-called ceiling, about 17 police authorities received less funding than would have been allocated under the needs-based formula. More than half the mythical 6.2 per cent. increase in funding will be allocated by central Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) pointed out. It is appalling for the Government constantly to mouth the words "decentralisation" and "devolution" while, in reality, through the Home Office, they are centralising more and more power over policing in Sussex and elsewhere.

Revenue funding from central Government for investment by individual police authorities will increase by only £275 million, or 3.7 per cent.—which is somewhat lower than 6.2 per cent. That £275 million includes the money that the Government are making available for implementation of the Police Negotiating Board agreement. We know—because the police authorities tell us—that their revenue expenditure will have to increase by more than £482 million just to stand still.

There is a real funding gap. It is driven by inflationary and pay pressures, which alone produce an actual requirement of £137 million more than the increase in total standard spending, and by the rising cost of pensions, which will add a further £70 million to police costs.

In a letter of 10 January, David Rogers, the chair of Sussex police authority had this to say to the Deputy Prime Minister:

"It is ironic that for the new round of the Crime Fighting Fund, the Authority is expected to meet 25 per cent. of the costs of extra police officers from a core funding increase that cannot support the cost of existing levels of staffing."

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

He goes on to say that things are made more difficult for Sussex because the authority has taken on board the views of my constituents and other residents in Sussex and decided to respond to those concerns and increase the number of officers.

It was not always thus. The previous chief constable had other priorities, but Ken Jones has made it clear in his relatively short time as chief constable that he believes to an extent in what I call—this is not his phrase—old-fashioned policing and certainly has a view about the number of police officers enforcing the law. The view of the residents has been reflected in the actions of the police authority, yet as the letter from Councillor Rogers says:

"Sussex only received the minimum increase of 3 per cent. This undervalues and undermines the role of police authorities in tackling crime and the local contribution made towards the achievement of government targets."

He is saying that the Government are hampering Sussex in trying to meet the Government's targets.

Councillor Rogers goes on to say that the methodology will

"have a severely damaging impact on Sussex Police. The underlying impact of the grant distribution changes is a loss of 6.4 per cent. or £9.6m compared with the average funding increases for all police authorities."

He concludes:

"The problems being experienced with the settlement this year are likely to worsen in 2004–05 and 2005–06, given that the national spending increases are estimated to be lower and the transitional protection from grant losses will be phased out."

Perhaps even more pointed are the comments of the chief constable, Ken Jones. He said in a letter to me of October last year:

"At a time when there is a clear public demand for more police, we will need to recruit in the region of 250 new officers over the next three years, just to replace those that are due to retire. Sussex Police is on course to achieve our target of 3,100 police officers by the end of this financial year"—

I might point out that that was the number of police officers in 1997—

"but any standstill in our funding would be extremely damaging and set back the gains that we have made as a Force over the past year."

The chief constable of Sussex says that his target is to return to the number of police officers that we had when the Conservative Government left office. One might think that that is a modest target, but at least it is a target. He also says that his ability even to reach that modest target is being significantly hampered by this settlement.

The other day, I went out on patrol with the community street wardens who were introduced in Eastbourne under the initiative—I welcomed it at the time—of the then Conservative-controlled borough council. I was very impressed by their dedication and local knowledge, but coverage of the patrol in the local newspaper provoked quite a lot of mail from constituents. Most of the comments were along the lines of "We never see them", "There should be more of them" and "Why don't we have them in our area?" The key was always to avoid raising expectations about what a difference those wardens could make to tackling criminality and antisocial behaviour. They do have a role, but my constituents are bright enough to recognise that such wardens are no substitute for the real thing: plenty of trained police officers on the beat.

4.9 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): At its conference in Bournemouth last year, the Police Federation told me in no uncertain terms that one of the police's biggest problems, which has been mentioned already, is the endless paperwork. I urge the Minister and his officials to work closely with the Police Federation to cut the amount of needless paperwork that prevents police officers from doing what they do best out on the beat. I understand that the statutory requirements in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and elsewhere are unavoidable, but much of the paperwork could be done away with. That should be a priority.

Not so long ago I had a meeting with the Minister. One of the main points that I made was about the rural grant remaining at a standstill this year. Standstill is not acceptable to police forces that have to rely on the rural grant. The grant does not take into account inflationary rises, fuel price rises—the current ones and the drastic ones that we are likely to face in the coming months—the added cost of servicing high-mileage vehicles in rural areas and the huge insurance hikes since 11 September. All those factors are relevant to the rural policing grant, yet none of them has made any impression on the Government.

This is one of those areas of financing in which sleight of hand always appears. In some areas, the 6.9 per cent. comes down to 3.3 per cent., and in other areas, such as north Wales, to 4.65 per cent. We have already heard about the 3 per cent. floor; in north Wales, the net amount being announced is less than the 3 per cent. floor. Central grants are insufficient to meet even standstill costs, and will inevitably result—as we have heard from Members on both sides of the House—in high council tax increases. We all know, however, that the demands on policing activity are increasing. There is a strong—and correct—demand from the public for community-based policing. That, too, is not recognised in the central funding.

There are faults in the North Wales police authority settlement. For example, security measures for Holyhead and Mostyn ports—PFI costs have been incurred—have not been included in the figure. The authority's increase is, in effect, only 2 per cent. Any fool can see that that is well below the 3 per cent. floor figure.

Mr. Denham *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Llwyd: The Minister shakes his head. I do not want to bandy figures in the Chamber, as that would be inappropriate. Undoubtedly, he will write to me at some point. If I am wrong, I will accept that I am wrong.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman is right in one part and wrong in the other. If I can, I will deal with his points when I sum up; otherwise, I will write to him.

Mr. Llwyd: Okay. I am a living curate's egg.

My point is that grants are insufficient. A complication with the Welsh police forces is the interaction with the National Assembly for Wales. That may be where the grey area lies, I know not.

The position in north Wales is serious. As I say, the grants are insufficient. Nationally agreed pay rises will amount to £3.1 million; police reform costs—imposed on the police authority by recent legislation—will amount to £1.8 million; national insurance increases will amount to £600,000; increases because of general inflation will amount to £300,000; and pensions will amount to £800,000. All in all, an increase of 8.4 per cent. is required just to stand still. When that is compared with the 4.6 per cent. that is being offered, anyone can see that there will be a squeeze somewhere. The likely impact of trying to stand still will be a rise of 23.9 per cent. in council tax precept. That will come on top of recent increases.

North Wales is a very good police authority that performs very well. Arrests last year increased by about 20 per cent. and detection rates and public satisfaction also increased significantly. It is a good police force and it wants to continue to police well, but it does not see how it will be able to do so if that means having to slam the council tax payer with an inordinate demand year on year.

There is a high demand for community policing. The crime fighting fund has been useful; it would be churlish of me to say otherwise. A total of 103 community beat managers are in post. I hope that that will continue. However, that would probably mean an increase in band D levels of about 31.5 per cent. That is a staggering figure, although not as bad as some that we have heard today. I urge on the Minister root-and-branch reform of the way in which police forces are financed.

The Minister's announcement about the recent increases for the Dyfed-Powys and South Wales police forces is welcome. I am sure that the increases will make a significant difference for those authorities, but I again plead the case of the North Wales force. According to my figures, it will receive well below 3 per cent. If I am right, there is a case for taking a similar approach towards the North Wales police. Perhaps we can discuss that at another stage.

Dyfed-Powys police will be satisfied, to a certain degree, with today's announcement; it goes part of the way to addressing its problems. The implementation of the Police Negotiating Board agreement will cost the authority £1 million, and the cost of police pensions in Dyfed will increase by £590,000—a substantial sum. It is probably the same for every authority, but a standstill grant under the rural policing fund hits a rural authority such as Dyfed-Powys a bit harder. I met the chief constable of Dyfed-Powys on Monday, and he was very concerned. I am sure that today's announcement will allay some of his fears.

South Wales police force says that it has fallen below the figure of 3 per cent., and the Minister has recognised that today. It was talking of a 15.2 per cent. increase in police precepts, but I hope that that will not now have to happen.

The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David) referred to Gwent police. To say the least, he was not exactly jumping for joy at the settlement offered to his authority, which will receive an increase of 4.86 per cent., or 3.8 per cent. in real terms. It will face unavoidable increases in costs of 9.3 per cent. and they will probably result in an increase in the band D charge of 26.23 per cent.

The argument runs that, if we want local policing, we must be prepared to pay for it locally. However, I am afraid that that argument is somewhat disingenuous, because all these costs are being slammed on the council tax payer at the same time as UK-wide initiatives are being thrust on authorities. We also know what costs have been incurred as the result of recent legislation. I urge the Minister to reconsider the way in which local authorities are financed. It is done by sleight of hand, and it is unfair for council tax payers to have to bear all the burden if extraneous factors mean that added costs are thrust upon local authorities.

I refer to what was said by the hon. Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams) and for Caerphilly. I am the son of a police officer and the brother of a serving police officer and I know that they are perhaps not the most radical people; they are sometimes conservative. However, when four chief constables from Wales say that it is now time to devolve responsibility for policing to the National Assembly for Wales, that means something. They do not normally man the barricades and protest with we mad nationalists, but they have come to the conclusion that the present position is unsatisfactory. There is always this sleight of hand and a time-consuming struggle between one authority and another and between local authorities and the central authority. The National Assembly has also been introduced into the formula.

If chief constables are making that argument, there must be reasons for it. I fully endorse their view, and not just for political reasons; there are common-sense reasons, too. With respect to the Minister, the settlement that has been announced bears no relation whatever to the way in which it has been spun.

4.19 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Almost annually, major criminal justice Bills occupy much of the House's attention. In fact, this week, a Standing Committee is debating this Session's Criminal Justice Bill, the purpose of which is to add to sentencing policy and to reform it.

I entirely agree with my constituents. They regard the achievement of greater success in the fight against crime and in providing reassurance to the public as resting to a greater extent on the level of local policing and on the effectiveness of local police forces than on the criminal justice system and the level of sentencing. They probably attach more importance to criminals being caught than they do to the length of any sentences that may be imposed. The issue therefore does not deserve scant parliamentary attention. It deserves substantial attention, if not today, then as we proceed.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) talked about our policy, to which I shall return in a moment. When we consider policy in future, I hope that we will not talk about criminal justice policy primarily in terms of sentencing policy but in terms of policing policy and the effectiveness of policing.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

When we debate the police grant report, we tend to focus on financial matters, and I am afraid that I am no exception. Like my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire, I do not want to pass up the opportunity to express Cambridgeshire's appreciation for Home Office support. The costs involved in Operation Fincham and dealing with animal rights protests are ongoing, and I hope that Home Office Ministers will continue to be helpful in meeting those costs. If the university of Cambridge was permitted after a planning appeal to go ahead with the construction of a neurological and behavioural centre at 307, Huntingdon road in my constituency, the Cambridgeshire police would, I suspect, have a job maintaining public order, which would be expensive without Home Office support. There has been full support for their efforts at Huntingdon Life Sciences, and I hope that there will be similar support at the new centre if required.

One thing I do not want to be in this debate and the following debate on local government finance is churlish. When I came to the House in 1997, my first Adjournment debate was on the area cost adjustment, and I bored for Britain on the subject until we got this year's settlement, when Cambridgeshire was finally included in the area cost adjustment. It is simply not the case that the Members speaking in the debate are those whose police authority has received a grant increase at the floor—Cambridgeshire has received a grant increase at the ceiling of 4.9 per cent. or £3.4 million, which is a direct consequence of the change in the distribution formula and the inclusion of Cambridgeshire in the area cost adjustment, even if it is offset by the changes in resource equalisation and so on.

Curiously, that demonstrates the effect of distributional factors. Last year, Cambridgeshire police authority was at the floor, but is at the ceiling this year. The way in which the Government distribute grant has a substantial impact on our ability to fund local policing. I am afraid, however, that we need to consider more than just the distribution of grant, welcome as the change in the area cost adjustment is. We must also consider the costs that must be met. By way of illustration, in the coming financial year Cambridgeshire police must meet increased costs of £665,000 on pay; £908,000 in relation to the changes in the Police Reform Act; £1.472 million in pension changes; and £676,000 in costs for support staff, pay, allowances, national insurance and so on. Those sums total £3.7 million, including £500,000 for the increase in national insurance alone. That £3.7 million is more than the increase of £3.4 million in Government grant.

One or two Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), alluded to the curious fact that, in response to parliamentary questions put to Ministers since the announcement in early December, the Home Office claims to have made no estimate of the impact of pay and pension changes on police authorities and the police service when deciding the level of grant.

It is as if the Home Office were operating in a vacuum, where its decisions in respect of pensions or the Police Negotiating Board are extraneous to the distribution of grant. They should not be; they should be integral to it.

Police numbers, of course, are what this is all about. In Cambridgeshire, the police authority will have to absorb all those costs and make substantial savings elsewhere in order simply to maintain the level of policing. I should say "the number of officers" rather than "the level of policing", because one reduction may well be in police overtime.

Maintaining police numbers is definitely what it is about. What is frustrating me and others in Cambridgeshire is that last year, for example, the Government would have claimed that they were adding police officers there, because the crime fighting fund was funding a specific level of officers; but in practice the only way in which the number of police in Cambridgeshire could be supported last year was through a 40 per cent. increase in the local precept. If there had been anything less, not only would the money not have been available to support the number of police, but the position would have been worsened, because the Government would have started taking money away from the crime fighting fund, so there would have been a progressive deceleration in funding but for that increase in precept.

The idea that local representatives determine the level of resources devoted locally to policing was a complete fiction last year. Such resources were essentially determined by the structure of the Government's support and the structure of the crime fighting fund. Even this year, in the light of the increases in costs, and notwithstanding the reductions in expenditure, including reducing overtime, deferring capital expenditure, not replacing vehicles and so on, we are looking at a precept increase of perhaps about 16 per cent. simply to retain the present level of policing.

I said that I would return to the question of future policy. In the country areas, including parts of my constituency, which has part of the city of Cambridge but consists substantially of country areas, we pay a great deal for policing. We understand that because of the relative levels of policing a great deal of the effort goes into Cambridge city or Peterborough, and not necessarily into the country areas. We have 16 more community beat managers, but we are still paying much more for policing than for anything remotely approaching the level that we see.

We do not begrudge the amount that follows intelligence-led policing, which seeks to identify where crime is and addresses that problem. At the same time, we want reassurance for people who are paying an increasingly substantial proportion of the total police budget, paying absolutely higher levels of precept to their police authority, and who are looking for something to be provided in their area. I want them to have that provision.

If my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire is contemplating policy changes in the future, he should consider, building on the present level of policing provided by the police authority directly to the chief constable, an additional level. Through a local precept, local communities could provide for a parish constable who would meet their area's policing objectives, while not always being operationally available for the rest of the police service. That would not detract from what is available to the chief constable, but would add to it. It might cost no more than £10 or £20 per household.

Frankly, when it comes to it, we in this place and locally are about priorities. This is a priority. We must be prepared to find the resources, even if necessary through local precepts, in order to make that happen.

4.29 pm

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said that policing was a priority. It is certainly a priority for my constituents. Crime and the fear of crime are one of the most important issues facing hon. Members. It is significant, too, that in a short debate three hon. Members from Wales have wanted to take part because of the concern about the settlement in Wales. The headline figure of 6.2 per cent. seemed very encouraging when it was announced, but the average figure of 3.7 per cent. for police authorities is not so encouraging. The base figure of 3 per cent. for, I think, 19 authorities was very discouraging.

The Minister announced today that there would be some added support for the Dyfed-Powys and South Wales police authorities. That is very encouraging, but we will have to consider the detail of that announcement. Before Christmas, we were encouraged when he announced that he had saved the rural policing fund. He is now trying to claim credit for retaining that fund, but the Government's initial intention was to lump it in with all the rest of the funds so that the money would be distributed by the same formula. At the time of the announcement, I said that the money would improve funding in Dyfed Powys, but that we did not know whether it would solve the problem. It certainly did not do so.

Three hon. Members from Wales have contributed and all of them mentioned that the four chief constables in Wales have concluded that there is an argument for devolving police powers to the National Assembly for Wales. That surprises me, as I first mentioned the subject about a year ago, but at that time, none of the chief constables took that view. There is an argument for devolving the powers, but operational issues should be taken into account as well as funding ones. There is great co-ordination among the different police authorities in Wales, as well as across the borders with authorities in England. In the Dyfed-Powys police authority area and my constituency, relationships with West Mercia in particular are very good.

While my constituency and Dyfed Powys generally are not a high crime area, people have concerns about crime. It is estimated that more than 12 per cent. of crimes in the area are committed by travelling criminals. Such people travel a long way to reach the area because it is isolated and sparsely populated and they see opportunities to commit crimes that they think would be more difficult in other areas. However, the clear-up rate of the Dyfed-Powys police authority is absolutely superb. The fact that that rate is so good is a huge deterrent for criminals who believe that they can commit crimes in the area.

Before the funding announcement was made we were very concerned, as the initial 3 per cent. increase would not have covered even the Police Negotiating Board agreement, the pensions issue and national insurance, all of which have been dealt with in great detail in this debate. There was a clawback of £21 million from the Assembly in the Home Office Welsh policing fund transfer. Although that was mitigated to some extent by the transferral of £8 million from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, it meant that police authorities in Wales were receiving considerably less from the Assembly this year than they received in previous years.

The costs of pay and price inflation, increased superannuation and increased insurance, which have all been mentioned, as well as statutory compliance issues and the fact that we live in a nation that is obsessed with litigation and taking action against public authorities, would have meant that the authority needed to raise £5.4 million to maintain the same standard of service. It would have wanted to improve services. Indeed, it sought more resources to combat drug and gun crime, domestic violence, child abuse and child pornography. It appears that those services will be on standstill this year, instead of making progress. In terms of personnel cuts, that deficit would have resulted in the loss of more than 200 officers. Obviously, no police authority would countenance such a situation.

Mr. Denham: I must make it clear that the £5.1 million that I have announced today is exactly the same money that I said before Christmas would be provided to ensure that the floor was 3 per cent. I do not want to give the impression that there is an additional announcement today because I would get into deep trouble later.

Mr. Williams: I am very glad that the Minister made that clear because he certainly would have been held to account later, but the points that I am making still stand very strongly.

The hon. Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger), who is sitting with the Minister, is involved in the Dyfed Powys area, and he will be pleased to know that our constituents will face a 28.2 per cent. increase in their council tax police precept. Council tax is a very nasty, regressive form of taxation that bears more severely on the poor and less well off in our society, so they will bear the cost not of improving policing, but of maintaining the same policing as before.

I recently joined some of the police in my constituency in Knighton—a relatively remote community. Two policemen were on duty, serving a 20-mile radius where two public events were held that night at different locations. I went on to Llandrindod Wells, and was present when the shift changeover briefing took place. I was very impressed with the policing, but there were no policemen on duty in another community about 20 miles away, where another public event was taking place. So we cannot say that we are over-policed, and we will certainly want to return to that issue.

In the past few years, we have seen an improvement in the service that we receive, but I am sure that this settlement and today's announcement will do nothing to increase people's confidence that that improvement will continue.

4.36 pm

Mr. Paice: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the debate. I am glad that all those hon. Members who wished to speak could do so and that we find ourselves with plenty of time. I will give the Minister

[Mr. Paice]

plenty of time, so that he has no excuse not to reply to all the issues raised during the debate. I am surprised that there was rather a dearth of Labour Members speaking. *[Interruption.]* The Minister holds out his hands as if to accept that they are all happy. One would have thought that they could have found two or three from their vast ranks to say that they were happy; or perhaps they have all been lent on so much that, with a few notable exceptions, they were persuaded not to express their concerns about the proposals.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) said, quite rightly, that some top slicing is acceptable—of course it is. Giving out money simply to take it back for central services, such as the National Criminal Intelligence Service, is clearly sensible. The concerns that I expressed in my opening remarks were very much aimed at those areas where money is kept back by the Government to be sent down the line, but only if it is strictly spent according to the way that the Home Secretary wishes it to be spent.

Mr. Lansley: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the legitimate purposes of top slicing expenditure and holding it at the centre might be, for example, so that no ceiling has to be applied to grants? Some £2.3 million extra would have been available to Cambridgeshire police service—this affects him and me—if the ceiling had not been applied. Top slicing would have allowed that to happen without necessarily prejudicing the position of those who are subject to a floor, thus protecting them.

Mr. Paice: As my hon. Friend knows, speaking from the Dispatch Box slightly constrains one from going too far down the road of one's self-interest, but I understand, and of course support, the point that he makes. In fact, it reminds me of another concern.

Much of today's debate has been about the council tax rises, which the Minister studiously avoided, although I hope that he tells us in his concluding remarks the Treasury's expectation of the general council tax rise resulting from the settlement, notwithstanding, quite rightly, that the final decision must lay with individual police authorities in terms of their precept. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) in particular, there are those that face swingeing penalties or cuts in their money. People may also face a 46 per cent. council tax increase. Increases of 10 to 20 per cent. seem commonplace to me, and there are certainly several above that.

Such increases, if we are to face them, will build on last year's similar increases. Indeed, last year there was an increase in my authority area of about 39 per cent., and if that continues it will represent a significant shift in police funding from central Government to the council tax payer. I was going to make the point later, but I shall make it now: that, of course, may all be part of the Government's conspiracy to increase taxes without it being so obvious—the stealth taxation to which my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) referred.

There is a more serious point. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's local government department is carrying out a study of the funding balance in local services between locally and centrally raised moneys. I would be grateful if the Minister told us whether police funding is included in the study, which is clearly relevant to police force funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne also referred to the problem of recruitment around London, as did one or two other Members and the Minister. A few weeks ago, I was encouraged to discover that the Minister himself has been involved in talks aimed at resolving it, and I can say only that I hope he succeeds. It is a serious issue, and to underplay it at any time or to pretend that it can be resolved only locally would be a mistake. In that context, I am pleased that he is taking an interest in trying to find a solution that is acceptable not just to all the police authorities around or close to London, but to the Met, which could suddenly find itself disadvantaged by the very changes he advocates.

My hon. Friend mentioned the business of the transition, to which I also referred, as to whether the floors and ceilings are to be phased out and whether police authorities will have to comply with the new formula. I hope that the Minister responds on that. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), made the critical point, which no one else had made, that April's national insurance contributions rise will hit the police force, and hit it hard. There is no reference in any document that I have seen to the Home Office paying any regard to that in its decisions on totality of support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) referred to the perversity—I can put it no differently—of a Minister complaining about an apparently low precept as if there was something wrong with levying a low precept. That reminds me of my district council. When the Liberals took control, they decided as a matter of policy to raise council tax to the average of that of all other districts. Regardless of whether that was necessary or wise, they thought that they should raise the council tax. It is a perverse approach to managing public moneys.

It is clear that council tax payers across the country now face another series of rises in police precepts far in excess of inflation. Few of the increases will be in single figures—almost all will be 10 per cent. or more, and many will exceed 20 per cent. That represents another increase in the remorseless pressure on the council tax payer. By intent or by accident, the Government are shifting the burden on to local people, and the more that burden is shifted, the more local people will demand of what they believe they are paying for.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire said, people who live in rural areas accept—probably rightly—that it might be their lot not to get the number of police officers that they see in city centres. However, whether people live in urban areas or in rural areas, if in their council tax they pay more and more towards the police, they will expect to see more for the money. They will expect to see more police officers on the beat. They will expect a police officer to appear on their doorstep if they phone to say that they have been the victim of crime; they will not expect merely to be given an incident number over the phone, as is sadly commonplace now.

That is the reality—that is what will happen as a result of the Government's changes, and as it happens, so the Government as its architects will become ever more

unpopular. That prospect pleases me no end, but it does not mean that the Government's approach is right. It is clear to me that the public are beginning to lose confidence in the quality of their policing. The problem extends way beyond the issue of money, but the more the public are asked to pay for their policing, the more they will expect to get in return. So far, we have seen little to suggest that the Government are able to deliver something meaningful to the people on the ground—more visible policing, better rates of detection, and increased general acceptance by the large numbers of people to whom the sight of a police officer is a rare event.

I cannot support a set of proposals that shift the burden so far on to the local taxpayer while retaining ever more to the centre for central command and control. That is why the Opposition will oppose the motion.

4.47 pm

Mr. Denham: Let me deal first with several themes that have run through the debate. Then, if I can, I will reply to more detailed points made by individual hon. Members.

As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams) said, what I will call the Welsh theme has been a feature of the debate. Let me make it perfectly clear that there is no substance to the suggestion that Welsh forces have been disadvantaged by the grant settlement. The formula approach has applied to those forces in exactly the same way as it has applied to English forces. The only difference is that, as I announced before Christmas, additional funds of slightly more than £5 million were found to top up two Welsh forces that would otherwise have fallen below the floor. We will have to discuss these points with those who feel that Welsh forces have been disadvantaged in some way.

There is a complexity in that in Wales the local government element of the police settlement is paid by the National Assembly for Wales, whereas in England it is paid from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Therefore, while in England the effect of having the crime fighting fund and so on top-sliced is seen in the English local government rate support mechanism, in Wales it is seen in the National Assembly funds. As I have acknowledged and discussed with Edwina Hart, the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities in the National Assembly for Wales, that arrangement leads to a lack of transparency in the system. I am certain that there has been no disadvantage to Welsh forces' finances as a result, but in the coming year we can work in partnership with the Assembly to ensure that the system is as transparent as possible.

The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire strongly suggested that at a time when we are dealing not only with street crime and antisocial behaviour, but with organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism—several Welsh forces play a key role in that respect—we should not be complicating lines of co-operation and accountability, and I agree. On financial issues, we need to ensure that the system is transparent and clear to everyone.

The second theme that ran through the debate, which was dealt with by a number of hon. Members and on which the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) ended his remarks, was the twin theme of accountability to local communities and the balance between ring-fenced funds and the money that goes out in top-sliced funds. The hon. Gentleman talked earlier about a 20 per cent. increase in central funds, but he acknowledged, as did the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), that some items require central funding, which has undoubtedly increased during the past few years.

Just two years ago, funding for the National Crime Squad and the National Criminal Intelligence Service was top-sliced from the grants made to police authorities. The police authority grant was bigger, but we raided it a few weeks later for those two key organisations. We fund them much more honestly now through direct grant. The proportion of central grant paid by the centre looks bigger, but it is simply a better way to fund such bodies.

The important expansion of the DNA database is also centrally funded, and I would justify central funding of the Airwave procurement programme, although not everyone would. It is to our advantage to have a single integrated radio communication system for all our police forces, because the net result of 43 separate procurements would have been to continue what we have always had in the past—police forces and police officers who cannot talk to each other. We have done that through central funding and that has been the right thing to do. But it undoubtedly enables people to say rather glibly that all the decisions are being taken at the centre. Decisions such as the one on Airwave and others were taken in conjunction with the police service. That was the best way to deliver those services.

On the particular issue of the crime fighting fund, I believe that we have taken the right approach. As I said earlier, the aggregate effect of a lot of individual force decisions was to leave the number of police officers in England and Wales falling, and that was a bad thing. We could not reverse that immediately when we took office, and my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell) referred to that in his speech.

However, we can today commit to a growth in cash terms in police spending not just this year but of at least 4 per cent. next year and at least 4 per cent. the year after. Our ability to do that was based on the difficult decisions that we took to sort out public finances during our first two years in office. In the long term, the stability that forces will have to plan will be worth those difficult times. Therefore, we have done the right thing both in terms of resources and in having a central crime fighting fund.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire made an important point. I think that, irrespective of what happens to precepts, local communities will demand greater accountability for their police service. That is why we are doing the right thing, with the police service, in making public an increasing amount of information on the whole range of police performance—effectiveness in tackling and reducing crime, visibility, public reassurance and helping the public role of the police service as well as its economy and efficiency. During the next two or three years, through the police performance assessment framework that we are about to introduce, more and more of that

[Mr. Denham]

information will be available. I hope that that will also enable the debate to focus on what is being achieved by the local police service.

In many ways, we are all at one in this Chamber in that we all want more police officers and we all want them to be more visible. But we should not just be debating the inputs into the police service—how many of this and how many of that—we need to focus on the quality of the service to local communities. That is what we seek to provide information on, I hope in a way that makes sense not just at force level but at command unit level, because that is where people see their policing activities take place.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), said that there is no objective basis to the formula, although he implicitly acknowledged that the Liberal Democrats have not put forward alternative proposals. There is an objective basis, but we do not use crime rates, and I shall explain why by responding to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David). He said that we need to take account of the type of crime, such as drug-related crime, that takes place in Gwent, but we also need to reward success.

Our dilemma stems from the fact that if we gave out the main grant according to crime rates, we might be giving money to the areas with the greatest problems or we might be giving it to the worst police forces. We might take money away from a force not because the area had low crime but because the force was very good at detecting crime and convicting people. We therefore use surrogate indicators, which are meant to give a measure of the underlying policing challenges in an area. We are always open to suggested improvements in that approach, but I have not yet heard a proposal for a better approach.

My hon. Friend asked about security costs. Each year a number of forces face increased security costs for one reason or another. The normal pattern, which we intend to follow with Gwent, is to include those costs in the calculation of the formula the following year. It is not always possible to make last minute adjustments. If there has been a change of the sort suggested by my hon. Friend, next year's grant will give us an opportunity to address that.

I was left unclear as to whether the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) was advocating the return of the crime fighting money. No doubt his colleagues from Dorset will continue to press that matter with him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and other Members spoke about the operational presence of police officers. My hon. Friend will be aware that under the public service agreement that the Home Office has as part of the spending settlement we are under an obligation to improve the availability of police officers for front-line policing. This week we have been discussing with the police service the best way of measuring that. It is important that, as we bear down on bureaucracy and cut red tape, the public can see how that is being translated into effective front-line policing. I add the caveat that a police officer who is investigating internet paedophilia is, in my view, a front-line officer doing a vital investigative job. Measuring front-line policing is not simply a matter of counting the yellow jackets on the streets, but we do need to show what we are doing.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire asked about the case and custody programme. We hope and intend to complete the roll-out of that across all 43 forces during the period of the current spending review, which begins in April and runs for three years. We will shortly publish our overall plans for IT investment.

This has been a useful debate. Like all such debates, it has been attended by those who feel hard done by rather than by those who feel that they have done well. Against the current rate of inflation, a 6.2 per cent. real increase in police resources is a good one, and I hope that the House will recognise that.

Question put—

The House divided: Ayes 345, Noes 197.

Division No. 80] **[4:58 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*

Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, rh Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and Derek Twigg

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul

Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and
Mr. Laurence Robertson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2003–04, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3rd February 2003, be approved.

Local Government Finance

[Relevant document: The First Report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee, HC 164—1, on Local Government Finance: Formula Grant Distribution.]

5.13 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance (England) Report 2003–04, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3rd February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the Local Government Finance (England) Grant Report 2001–02: Amending Report 2003, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3rd February, be approved.

Mr. Raynsford: I should like to draw Members' attention at the outset to a typographical error in annexe F, on page 83 of the report. A number of scaling factors are shown in that annexe, but the one for debt charges, which appears about two thirds of the way down the column, should read 0.96345941120985. I should add that that amendment has no effect whatsoever on the grant distribution to any local authority, as the calculations in section 3 of the report are fully consistent with the value that I have just given to the House, as are all the grant figures provided in the supporting documentation. I apologise for bringing this error to Members' attention at this very late stage, but it came to light only this afternoon.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I am grateful to the Minister, whom I know to be a man of great integrity. He may like to draw the House's attention to another typographical error. It appears that Leicestershire LEA is to receive the lowest amount of central Government money per pupil of every LEA in the entire country. That is presumably a typing or a printing error, as Leicestershire should not be the bottom county, but well up the list. Can the Minister get the printers to do it again?

Mr. Raynsford: That is a good try, but I have to tell the hon. and learned Gentleman that the only typographical error is the one to which I drew the House's attention. The document sets out the distribution of grants correctly. I shall come in due course to the individual issues, including education elements.

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): The Minister says that the figures are accurate. Durham county council's social services department originally received an awful settlement that was totally inadequate to meet its needs. Now, Durham county council's formula spending share for 2003–04 is to be set at £447.129 million, which is £0.114 million less than the provisional figure. Moreover, rate support grant has been reduced by £0.198 million. The end result is that Durham county council has lost £0.198 million just like that. Will the Minister tell us why?

Mr. Raynsford: I have to tell my hon. Friend that he is incorrect. There is no loss. Durham county council has received a 6.8 per cent. increase in its grant, and most people would regard that as a very good settlement by any standards. I shall deal with individual issues in due course, but I should like to make a little progress and to talk about the principles behind the settlement.

On 5 December, I announced to the House our provisional local government settlement, incorporating a series of proposals for changes to the way in which formula grant is distributed. The settlement that we are debating is only part of the wider picture. It is part of a sustained year-on-year increase in funding for local authorities. That sustained core funding provides the base on which councils can build better service delivery. Over the past 18 months, I have heard a good many representations about the pressures that authorities are under and the difficulty of coping with the grant increases that are available. I understand that local authorities must make difficult decisions—it has ever been thus—but I have some difficulty with the proposition that the settlement is inadequate in general or for any particular authority.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I shall recall a few basic facts, then give way, but it is important that the hon. Gentleman should hear those facts to start with.

First, I am confirming the overall increase in formula grant of 5.9 per cent.—more than double the rate of inflation. That is only part of the picture. The total formula grant for 2003–04 will be £43.9 billion, including police grant, which the House has debated. On top of that, there will be increases in specific grants. Overall, Government grant going to local government will be £51.2 billion, an increase of no less than 8 per cent.

Secondly, that means that for the first time ever, every local authority in England will receive a grant increase that is more than inflation.

Thirdly, that real terms increase for every council contrasts starkly with the position before 1997, when the total amount of formula grant could, and did, decrease from one year to the next. In those days, individual authorities often expected substantial cuts in grant—actual cuts, not the entirely misleading and false cuts claimed by some councils in recent weeks.

Finally, the effect of the settlement, building as it does on what the Government have achieved over the past five years, is that local government in England has benefited from a 25 per cent. real-terms increase since we came to power. That contrasts with a real-terms cut in grant of 7 per cent. over the last four years of the previous Conservative Government. If anyone asks for a single indicator of the difference that this Government have made to local government finance, those figures—a 25 per cent. increase after a 7 per cent. cut—speak volumes.

[Mr. Raynsford]

On that note, I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin).

Mr. McLoughlin: When the Minister started the consultation process, he said that the Government intended to try to make the new grant formula system more understandable. Will he help me make it more understandable to my constituents? Why will the people in Tansley, part of the area covered by the Derbyshire Dales council, get an increase of £1.91 a head, when the people a mile away in Lea in Amber Valley borough will get an increase of £7.50 a head, and those who live a mile away in the opposite direction, in Ashover, will get an increase of £6.78 a head? There is some confusion about that.

Mr. Raynsford: I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not mention his county council, the body responsible for social services and education. I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman what his constituents already know—that this Government are giving his county a 7.8 per cent. increase. It is not surprising that he did not want to mention that. All the districts in his area, including the ones that he mentioned, are getting an increase of more than 3 per cent. There will be an above-inflation increase for every person in Derbyshire, and a 7.8 per cent. increase for the county council.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: Yes, I am very happy to take more interventions from Opposition Members.

Mr. Brazier: Does the Minister accept that, before the changes were introduced, elderly people in homes in Kent were resourced by London to an extent that was up to two and a half times as much as Kent was given to pay for them? Now, however, the settlement being given to Kent is, at 3.9 per cent., one of the lowest in the entire country. The pensioners and schoolchildren of Kent are being robbed by a settlement far below the national average.

Mr. Raynsford: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will return to the real world. He may have heard the radio debate that I had last week with the leader of Kent county council, Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, for whom I have great respect. The impression that Kent is being robbed is complete nonsense. Under this Government, Kent has received an average increase each year of about 5 per cent. This year the increase is slightly lower, at 4 per cent., but it is still well above inflation. In the last four years of the previous Conservative Government's period in office, Kent received grant increases of less than 2 per cent. That is the difference between a Labour Government who resource local government properly, and a Tory Government who cut local government resources in real terms—and, in some cases, in actual terms.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I give way to another Kent MP.

Mr. Gale: The Minister talks about Conservative Members not living in the real world, but he is living in fantasy land. A granny in Kent is worth one third of what a granny in Islington is worth. Our ratepayers must top up the school bill by 2.5 per cent. because the Government have short changed them. That is the reality.

Mr. Raynsford: The reality is that Kent county council has £31 million more this year, as a result of this Government. I am afraid that those Opposition Members who try to pretend that night is day and that an increase in grant is a cut are the ones who are not living in the real world.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): If the Government are being so generous, why do figures from his Department show that assumed council tax yield for next year will go up by 9 per cent?

Mr. Raynsford: The figures do not show that. The documents make assumptions for the sake of calculations. They do not imply that any assumptions are being made about council tax levels. However, if the hon. Gentleman bears with me, he will hear me explain about the adjustments that we have made, as part of the new system, to the level of council tax and the formula spending share. Assumptions have been made as part of that process, but they have no implications for the future. The hon. Gentleman's authority will receive an increase in grant of 4.9 per cent. I hope that he is grateful for that, and that the authority appreciates that it is a decent above-inflation increase and that we are putting in place an arrangement that will ensure that every authority can budget sensibly, with the confidence of floors and ceilings. They will not be subject to the huge increases or reductions—mostly reductions—that applied during the years when the Conservatives were in power. All too often, authorities found that their budgets were cut, whereas this year, in every case, they are receiving an above-inflation increase.

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): I do not envy my right hon. Friend many aspects of his task. My local authority, Gateshead, hoped for great things under the new system, as for several years it had done badly under the previous one. Our settlement is the lowest in Tyne and Wear and has recently become even lower, so I need to give my electorate an explanation. Can my right hon. Friend provide one?

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend visited me, on behalf of her local authority, and we discussed that matter. In the light of the representations that we received from her and her colleagues, we looked carefully at the figures. The overall increase of 4.3 per cent. for Gateshead is above inflation, even if it is not at the same level as for other north-east authorities. That is one of the consequences of a major change in the funding system, whereby the effect of a large number of different factors feeding into the final conclusion produces results that are not wholly consistent from area to area due to the weighting given to those individual factors. We have examined the figures for Gateshead closely and are satisfied that there is no mistake in the calculation, but I understand my right hon. Friend's anxieties and will be more than happy to

hold further discussions with her and her colleagues in the months ahead about the impact of the new formula on her authority.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), but then I want to make some progress.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): On behalf of Cambridgeshire county council, may I express our extreme gratitude to my right hon. Friend for the high increase that we received this year? At 11.5 per cent., it was one of the highest.

Will my right hon. Friend explain clearly to the Liberal Democrat leader of Cambridge city council that a 3 per cent. increase does not represent a cut and that he was not promised 4.6 per cent., as he claims? The leader of the council seems to have translated an average increase in the 2000 spending review into a promise. Can my right hon. Friend set the matter straight?

Mr. Raynsford: I am pleased to confirm that the settlement for Cambridgeshire county council is indeed a good one, as my hon. Friend says. Cambridge city council is receiving an above-inflation increase of 3 per cent., guaranteed by the floor. That is certainly not a cut and the council was certainly never promised any other figure. If the leader of the council believes that there was such a promise, he is deluding himself.

I understand that the difficulties in Cambridge are attributable to the census, which has affected several authorities, and that representations are being made to the Office for National Statistics. If the ONS were to take a different view, we should take that into account, but while it continues to hold that the census figures are robust we have to be guided by that—as we were in the settlement.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): I have given the right hon. Gentleman notice of my question. I entirely agree about the problems caused by the census. However, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee recommended that in such circumstances we should be able to look at electoral registers or school rolls and check service use. The Office for National Statistics seems to be unwilling to give information and to justify the figures. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us what representations he has made to the ONS to try to sort things out? We should base the calculations on proper statistics.

Mr. Raynsford: We have discussed with the ONS not just this year's census figures but those that it provides for us otherwise, which are always the basis for settlements. When we have evidence that there might be questions about the validity of some of the data, we always ensure that they are passed to the ONS, although it is ultimately for it to reach a judgment. I know that the ONS is considering such factors. I have personally spoken to the Treasury Minister responsible for these matters and have been assured that the ONS is giving them serious consideration. As I said, while the ONS remains confident that the census figures are robust, we must apply them and there can be no question of us substituting our judgment of the appropriate figures for theirs.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I shall take one more intervention and then I must make progress.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the two boroughs in my constituency, Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea, both suffered as a result of a sharp discrepancy between the census and the previous population estimates. Does he accept that there might now be an argument that a door-to-door head count in inner-city communities is no longer the most appropriate way of measuring population and making decisions on service allocation, and that it is time to move to a more flexible and meaningful way of assessing population?

Mr. Raynsford: I am not responsible for the census or the ONS and therefore cannot give my hon. Friend the assurance that she seeks. However, I can assure her that her comments will be relayed to the ONS, which as I have said, has given a lot of thought to the matter. It is right that representatives of local authorities who are concerned about the implications of the census data should continue a dialogue with the ONS.

Mr. Brazier: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I need to make a little progress.

The application of the floor in my hon. Friend's case has properly protected both her local authorities. Under the system operated by the Conservative party, those authorities would have suffered serious, genuine cuts in grant rather than receiving an increase of 3 per cent., which is above inflation.

I have referred to floors and ceilings, and those have two main uses: they help to phase in the system changes, and in any year bring a degree of predictability and stability to a system under which previously there could be large swings in grant allocation from one year to the next. That continues to be generally welcomed by local government, and that is why I intend that such a damping mechanism should continue to be a feature of the grants system indefinitely.

For 2003–04, I can confirm that, for authorities with education and social services responsibilities, the floor will be 3.5 per cent. and the ceiling 8 per cent. For police and fire authorities, the floor will be 3 per cent. and the ceiling 4.9 per cent. For shire districts, the floor will be 3 per cent. and the ceiling 12.5 per cent. As I have made clear, every council in England is guaranteed an above-inflation increase.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the Minister acknowledge that in the wider world the use of terms such as "a floor increase" and "real terms" suggest that a local education authority will receive an increase in grant of at least 3.5 per cent. However, when one expresses the grant in terms of grant per pupil educated in Leicestershire, for instance, where there has been

[David Taylor]

substantial growth in the number of three-year-olds, one sees that the grant can fall beneath the floor into the cellar, where the increase is 2.5 per cent. or less. Is that not a possibility?

Mr. Raynsford: Leicestershire is receiving a 6.6 per cent. increase in grant, which is significant. That represents very many millions of pounds. It is for local authorities to work out how they set their budgets in the light of the increases. As I said at the outset, I do not for a moment deny the pressures with which local authorities must work. It was always thus. That applies everywhere in our world—to businesses, public authorities and the Government. Hard decisions have sometimes to be taken. I once again stress that every local authority in England is receiving an above-inflation increase, and that is the first time that that has happened.

Since 5 December, I have had the benefit of views on the provisional settlement both in writing and in meetings. The Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), other ODPM Ministers and I have met 55 delegations to discuss the proposals. I have considered carefully all the points made. For the most part, I have decided to confirm the proposals that I made, with one substantive modification to the area cost adjustment, to which I shall return. In addition, as usual, the final figures reflect the more accurate data and resource totals that have become available since we published our proposals, and also data corrections to reflect errors discovered by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or notified to us by local authorities.

I shall deal briefly with certain points made during consultation. On resource equalisation, our proposals to take more account of the ability of councils to raise council tax attracted a lot of comment, much of which was based on a misunderstanding of our aims. Resource equalisation is not new; it has been part of the grant distribution system for decades. Nor are our proposals radically different from what went before. Like previous arrangements, we take account of a council's ability to raise council tax—our estimate of the national average band D. As under the old standard spending assessment system, we are doing just that. However, because the assumptions underpinning the old SSA had been allowed to slip behind changes in the real world, its calculations were based on an unrealistically low council tax figure. We are therefore bringing the data up to date to reflect today's realities. That is why the calculations that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) has seen are in the report.

Matthew Green (Ludlow): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I must make progress.

The report, however, makes no assumption whatever about what would be an appropriate council tax increase for individual authorities. That is a matter for them to decide. We are bringing the data up to date to reflect today's realities. I should emphasise that we are not seeking to reflect individual authorities' spending decisions. That is rightly a matter for them, and it should not, and indeed does not, influence their grant entitlement.

The new level of resource equalisation has distributional consequences, giving lesser increases to those authorities with a low formula spending share and a high council tax base, and larger increases to those with a high formula spending share and a low tax base. I make no apology for that; it is quite deliberate. It makes the system fairer.

Greater resource equalisation means that the formula totals also increase, from the historic level that SSAs had reached to something much closer to actual average figures.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): The Minister has said that what he has done is quite deliberate and he makes no apology for that. The people of Essex will have heard clearly what he has just said. Our county council received the worst grant settlement of anywhere in county and many people in the county will suffer as a result. The Minister has said that that is deliberate and he has made no apology for it. The people of Essex will be very angered by what he has said.

Mr. Raynsford: I am astonished that the hon. Gentleman should be angry that his county council should receive an additional £27 million. I hope that he will reflect further on what he has said. Given the increase that we are giving to every council in the country—that did not happen when the Conservative party was in power—he should reflect on the fact that the Government are funding local authorities and giving them a greater ability to respond to local needs.

Matthew Green *rose—*

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I will give way once more.

Matthew Green: Will the Minister confirm one point about resource equalisation? Before he quotes the figures back to me, I point out that Shropshire has had above inflation increases in grant and, for the first time, the formula spending share reflects some of the real costs that the SSA did not. However, the increase in the formula spending share over the previous SSA is far greater than the increase of the formula grant. The result is that the Government's figures suggest that the council tax should go up by at least 12 per cent., which is more than twice the increase in the grant level. We welcome the extra money, but will he confirm that what I have said is true?

Mr. Raynsford: There are no assumptions in the system; I have just been saying that. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not been listening. We are setting out a system that is designed to distribute grant fairly between authorities. There is no assumption in the system, as there was under the old SSA, about what the Government—*[Interruption.]* No, I hope that he will listen. I have already had to say this twice, because he did not listen the first time. We are not making any assumptions about what individual authorities should spend other than in the one area of education to which I shall turn shortly. Decisions are for the authorities themselves to take. We are putting in place a fairer system to distribute grant. If he has considered what

happened in the last years of the Conservative Government, he will know that Shropshire received an average increase of 2 per cent then. It has had an average increase of 5.5 per cent. in the years that we have been in government. As in virtually every other part of the country, it has received significant increases compared to what happened under the Conservative party.

Mr. Pickles *rose—*

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles).

Mr. Pickles: I merely wish to tell the right hon. Gentleman that one of his colleagues has been trying to get his attention for some time.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's self-sacrificing response, and shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore).

Mr. Dismore: On education, schools in my constituency have been told that they will receive a passported 7.6 per cent. increase at the ceiling, without which they would get more, as school rolls are rising. At the same time, however, the amount in cash terms is £2 million less than the local authority has been told to pay. I know that my right hon. Friend has talked about the census before, but school rolls are rising. With the best will in the world, the sum passported by my education authority will be at least £2 million light.

Mr. Raynsford: I shall deal with education funding in a moment, but my hon. Friend should reflect that in the last years of the Tory Government, Barnet council— *[Interruption.]* I know that Opposition Members do not like it, but it is the truth, however unpalatable they find it, and I shall make sure that they hear it.

Barnet only received an average grant increase of about 1 per cent., well below inflation, during the years of the Conservative Government. By contrast, under Labour, Barnet has enjoyed an average increase of about 5.5 per cent. over the past five years. This year, it received an extra £7.3 million. I accept entirely that there are important issues to do with education, and I shall come on to them in a moment.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I shall never get to education, however, if Members continue to try to intervene. I believe that most Members would like me to make a bit of progress.

The total for formula spending shares—FSS—is therefore some £4 billion higher than the total for standard spending assessments, purely because of greater resource equalisation. That does not mean that local authorities should increase their budgets by this amount. FSS figures are not spending targets, and with the exception of education, to which I shall return in a moment, they do not imply an overall Government judgment about the spending levels of individual councils. In that respect, they are quite unlike the old SSAs, which were originally designed to represent appropriate levels of spending across all council services. That was the product of an era in which the Government thought that they knew best and could dictate to councils what they should spend. We do not agree. A council's budget decisions are for it, not for us.

Turning to education, the Government do, of course, have a long-standing interest in the increases of schools' spending from year to year, which authorities with education responsibilities will want to take into account when setting their budgets. I readily accept that that is the one exception to the principle that I have previously outlined. I understand that almost all authorities have notified the Department for Education and Skills of their proposed schools budget. A substantial majority intend to pass to schools at least the target amount suggested by the Department for Education and Skills. I know that a number of authorities have considered making representations and discussing those matters with my colleagues in the Department for Education and Skills, who have told me of their willingness to consider such representations.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): My right hon. Friend has received my colleagues from the county of Durham and myself very courteously. He will tell me that Durham will receive an increase in grant of 6.9 per cent, but we come to the nub of the problem in education. As the majority of the education budget is passported, there is very little flexibility for councils on other services. In the county council, the budget for social services is under great pressure, as it has had an increase of only 4.6 per cent., following two or three tight settlements in recent years. My right hon. Friend will understand the dismay and disbelief in the county of Durham at the settlement.

Mr. Raynsford: I say to my right hon. Friend, as I did when I spoke to him about these matters, that the overall increase for Durham county council of 6.9 per cent. is a good settlement. I understand the pressures the county faces with regard to social services. Many other authorities face similar or different pressures in particular service areas. I am sure that Durham county council, which has a good record of meeting local needs in a cost-effective way, will do everything it can to respond very positively. I am also sure that my colleagues in the Department of Health, who have a particular interest in these matters, and whom I suspect my right hon. Friend will probably approach, if he has not already done so, will be only too happy to discuss the specific implications and working of a number of the elements in the settlement that relate specifically to social services.

I turn now to the environmental, protective and cultural services. This too has been a controversial block. The difficulty with EPCS is that it is a complicated area, covering many services. Research showed that it was not possible to construct a meaningful formula from a bottom-up analysis of the cost of all those services. It was simply too complicated. We instead used the available evidence to inform the most appropriate choice of factors and ratings for the service area as a whole. We accepted the arguments put forward in the summer that the costs of many of the

[Mr. Raynsford]

more important EPCS services, such as waste management, fall relatively evenly on councils. The new formula, therefore, has an enhanced per head allocation.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I appreciate the points that my right hon. Friend is making about the overall level of settlement and how it compares with what we had to deal with for many years before the present Government came to power, but there are authorities facing serious problems. My own authority, Waltham Forest, as a result of the area cost adjustment, is at the floor: 3.5. per cent. Yes, it is an above-inflation increase, but the authority also has to cope with increased national insurance payments and the passporting of money to education, which means that other services face serious problems, because the money is simply not there to passport to education and avoid cuts elsewhere. It will be extremely difficult to explain to people in that borough why they are looking at a possible council tax increase of 20 per cent. at the same time as cuts of £7 million or so will be made in EPCS and social services.

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend recognised that there is an overall 3.5 per cent. increase for Waltham Forest. I hope that the authority will do its best to manage its affairs efficiently. The comprehensive performance assessment has suggested that there is scope for improvement. I hope that the authority will be able to work positively based on the Audit Commission's findings and with the help of our Department. We shall be more than happy to assist in this—

Mr. Iain Coleman (Hammersmith and Fulham) *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I am trying to respond to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard). It will be difficult to make progress if I constantly have to deal with interventions.

We hope that the authority will do its best. As I have said, I understand the pressures, but by no stretch of the imagination can a 3.5 per cent. increase, an above-inflation increase, be treated as a cut.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who has been pressing for some time.

Mr. Beith: The Minister is talking about the services that district councils provide. Does he not realise that their provision is very expensive in areas which have a very sparse population and where the population multiplies many times over during the tourist season? Those are the very factors that have been either taken away or reduced in significance, leading to floor-level increases for district councils like Berwick and Alnwick in Northumberland.

Mr. Raynsford: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, but this is the first year in which all district councils have been guaranteed an above-inflation increase. That is a step in the right direction. We have included in the formula a factor to take account of the particular problems facing small authorities, because the cost of being in business was not previously reflected. It now is. While I understand that the right hon. Gentleman is disappointed that his districts did not do better, they have at least had increases of at least 3 per cent.

Many respondents argued for more consistency—

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the Minister confirm that half the 5.9 per cent. increase is to be taken up by the imposition of national insurance contributions, pension fund payments and an above-inflation local government pay settlement?

Mr. Raynsford: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is making rash assumptions. It is for individual authorities to decide on issues such as pay settlements. That is a matter not for the Government, but for local authorities. We take account of the pressures on local government—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: We do not have a choice.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman parrots that phrase, but I am afraid that he is wrong. Local authorities have a choice and they must live with the decisions that they take. We expect them to act responsibly. We do our best to look at and reflect the pressures that individual authorities face. There is an allowance for increases in national insurance, but I am afraid that his figures are wrong, as is the concept behind his question.

Many respondents argued for more consistency across service areas in the measures of deprivation used in the formulae. There was not, however, broad agreement on which measures to use. In any case, I do not think that that would be the right course of action. If the system is to be based on the costs and pressures that authorities face, as local government has consistently said it should be, it follows that the indicators that are used should be reasonably related to the particular service that the formula is concerned with, instead of being a broad generalisation. The factors that are relevant for social services for the elderly are not the same as those that apply to education or highways maintenance.

The more discriminating approach proposed for the area cost adjustment, which better reflects local evidence on pay costs, was broadly welcomed. Of course, those who benefited more from the old and much cruder approach argued for its retention. Set against that is the argument that the ACA should be based only on the actual pay costs of employing staff. However, I am clear that there are recruitment and retention issues that justify setting the ACA differential higher than the level that would derive from the direct costs of local authority pay alone. We have set a threshold to the ACA that explicitly recognises that many local government employees are on national pay scales.

I have made one substantive change to my original proposals and decided that the Isle of Wight should receive the same area cost adjustment as Hampshire. I have accepted the argument that, on balance, the new earnings survey sample size for the Isle of Wight is such

that its labour costs cannot be estimated with the same degree of precision as those of other more populous areas.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): Where is he?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend asks where the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) is. I am sorry that he is not here to hear the good news about his local authority.

The Isle of Wight's sample size is no larger than those of other unitary, metropolitan or London boroughs that we have combined with other authorities for the purposes of the ACA in order to avoid small samples. By making the change, I believe that we are treating all authorities more consistently.

Mr. Chris Mole (Ipswich): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. In the past, we in Suffolk have had to accept a funding discrepancy of about £180,000 between a high school in south Suffolk and one in Essex. The changes that he has made to the area cost adjustment approach in spreading it out more gently outside London has gone some way to reduce that disparity. I am sure that colleagues in Suffolk and beyond will welcome that change.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his entirely sensible observations. I am pleased that we have been able to assist and I am sure that he is extremely pleased with a settlement that ensures an increase of more than 6 per cent. for Suffolk county and more than 11 per cent. for Ipswich district.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. When Enfield's three Members of Parliament visited my right hon. Friend in a delegation, we told him that Enfield was directly affected by its being placed in east London, rather than west London, and said that that had gone down very badly locally. We also pointed out that, as a result, Enfield had received an overall increase of only slightly more than the floor level. That has left the borough in a very difficult position in managing its budgets. Even at this late stage, will he look again to see whether the Government can do something in that regard?

Mr. Raynsford: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's concerns about the impact of the changes in the area cost adjustment. As I said, the authorities that benefited from the cruder previous system were obviously unhappy about the change. Following the representations that he and his hon. Friends made, I looked closely at all the factors affecting Enfield. I am afraid that I could not justify making a change simply because, looking at the evidence, there was no objective basis to justify a different allocation of authorities in the various blocks. Of course I should be happy to have further discussions with him about future years' settlements, but I am afraid that I cannot change the settlement that has been presented to the House today.

There has been much lurid publicity in recent weeks about the claim by certain councils that I am robbing the south-east or cutting the amount of grant received by councils in the south. That is simply untrue. The whole south-east will receive an extra £255 million—4.5 per cent. more grant in 2003–04 than in the current year. That is not a cut by any stretch of the imagination.

Mr. Brazier: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I will not.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar has been sounding off in recent weeks to the effect that I am mugging middle England. May I ask him therefore when he last came across a mugger who not only gives his victim a sum equal to the entire contents of his wallet, but adds an interest bonus of at least 3 per cent. on top? He has not encountered any mugger like that in the past; I hope that he does in the future, and his authority should be grateful for the increase that we are paying it.

As we said in the December 2001 White Paper, we do not expect to make major changes in the formula grant system again for a time—at least not in 2004–05 or 2005–06. We will however make adjustments where necessary to incorporate the latest data, or to reflect changes in the function or funding of local authorities. This period of stability will make it easier for councils to plan ahead. I recognise that it will not be popular with those who think that their efforts are better directed at continuous attempts to change the formula in their favour, but I do not share that view. Stability and a degree of certainty are vital to enable councils to plan ahead with confidence.

As councils now finalise their budgets, I suppose that it is only to be expected that some will seek to deflect criticism by claiming that the Government are responsible for large council tax increases. I have no doubt that we will hear exactly that refrain from the Opposition, so I pose three simple questions to Conservative Members. First, when in all their 18 years in office did they deliver a settlement that gave an above-inflation increase to every council in England? I suggest that the House will wait a very long time for an answer.

Secondly, if the Opposition believe that the settlement is inadequate and claim that council taxes will rise unduly as a result, how much more money do they believe should have been provided by the Government on top of the £51.2 billion that we are making available? Thirdly, where would that money come from? Without an answer to those questions—again, I suspect we will wait in vain for one—their rhetoric and posturing will be rightly seen as just that.

This year's grant settlement is excellent. It continues a sustained and consistent improvement in local authority funding under this Government. It removes the anomalies that undermined confidence in the old SSA system. It takes account of today's circumstances and, indeed, brings the whole process up to do date. It gives proper emphasis to the needs of deprived and disadvantaged communities. It gives an above-inflation grant increase to every council in England. In sum, it is a much fairer system, which underpins the delivery of better performance from local government in future years. I commend the settlement to the House.

5.58 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The right hon. Gentleman spoke for nearly a third of the time allocated to the debate. I make no apology for saying

[Mr. Eric Pickles]

that, and I have no complaint about it. Clearly, he was dealing with an important matter and he was his usual courteous self, but I tell the party managers that the amount of time allocated for the debate is inadequate. We have often had to return to the House to get additional time, and additional time should be allocated to something as important as the settlement, bearing in mind that it involves a change in the formula. I make no personal criticism of the Minister as I have a great deal of time for him, even though, on such occasions, he has more front than Woolworth's.

The Minister has done a remarkable job with his homework. He has memorised his tables and each intervention contains a reassuring rebuttal—everything is okay, everything is hunky-dory and the Member of Parliament has nothing to worry about because the settlement is so magnificent. It is the memorising that is impressive and not, sadly, the content. The Minister might well have learned the periodic tables or an Esperanto primer for all the help he is in determining the value of this year's settlement.

The Minister is right about one thing: this is a place where two worlds collide. In the one that he and his compliant friends occupy, a contented local government receives the Government's largesse with open arms and enthusiasm—let us call it planet spin. In the other world, there is loss of grant, slashed services, populations losing tens of millions of pounds and soaring council tax—let us call it planet earth.

Let us judge the Minister by the simple test of rhetoric versus reality. Last December, he chided my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Mr. Hendry) for standing up for East Sussex county council. The Minister boasted of a 3.8 per cent. grant increase; the reality is that East Sussex is one of the 13 authorities, now 12, where the grant increase for all services is insufficient to meet the Government's prescribed education increase. East Sussex will lose more than £25 million on top of a loss of £8.5 million since 1997.

During December's announcement, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), the Minister said that children in Devon had benefited from the education spending increase under the Government and that Devon county council had received a "good" increase. According to the Local Government Association, a good increase means a funding gap next year of £800,000.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: In a moment.

Again in December, responding to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), the Minister claimed that Kent would also receive a good sett'ement. Mr. David Lewis, finance director of Kent county council, says that the settlement will have a real effect on Kent's ability to deliver services and on council tax.

Last week, the Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), said in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack):

"There can be very few excuses for excessive council tax rises."

However, his parliamentary colleague, the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), said that Lancashire county council would have

"either to cut services or to make an unacceptably high council tax increase."

Andrew Bennett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: In a moment.

Today, we heard from the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who put some reasonable points to the Minister. Again, he said what a marvellous settlement this is and, to paraphrase, that the hon. Gentleman would have done much worse under the Tories, or Lloyd George or Lord Palmerston, had they been here.

I have a contemporaneous note—this will interest the hon. Member for Hendon, I suspect—of the meeting between Barnet council and the Under-Secretary:

"I have now met with Chris Leslie and David Miliband but, apart from tea and sympathy, got nothing. They all acknowledge that Barnet had received the worst settlement and have indicated that they will not use their reserve powers against us if we do not passport the total amount."

It goes on to say something that I also regard as very interesting:

"They have also said that the 7.6 per cent. is just a formula and that the schools have misread his letter. There is no actual money."

Andrew Bennett: I have a great deal of sympathy, of course, for the point that the hon. Gentleman is making and for all those hard-pressed councils, but is he suggesting that they would all get extra money under a Conservative regime, or is he saying that all those people who have done quite well would get further cuts so that their money could be taken away for all the basket cases he is talking about?

Mr. Pickles: What I am saying is that there would be a much fairer and more understandable formula, free from political interference. It would not be a case of rewarding our friends and punishing our enemies. No, it would be a fair formula.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Pickles: I shall give way in a moment. Let us deal with the 12 authorities that experienced the gap in education funding. The Government seem to be confused about whether the Secretary of State will exercise his powers under section 42 of the Education Act 2002 to passport the expenditure.

I am concerned because during last week's Question Time, in reply to a question I asked, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions said that there would be a

"willingness to be flexible where there are genuine pressures."

I think that he said something similar today. Yet a few short questions later, the Under-Secretary of State,

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Shipley, returned to the same old tired mantra:

"In reality, all councils, including Essex, will get a real-terms increase in grant."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 863–69.]

How can Essex be receiving a real-terms increase, when the increase in grant for all its services is insufficient to meet the Government's prescribed increase in education? Essex has a funding gap of £7.5 million, Kent one of £3.7 million, and Hampshire one of £3.1 million.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Will my hon. Friend revise his definition of the Minister for Local Government and the Regions from a mugger to a rogue bank manager, who gives higher-than-inflation interest on one's account, but tucks away bank charges so high that they swallow it and more?

Mr. Pickles: Yes, the right hon. Gentleman has—in his professional capacity as a Minister, not in his personal capacity—the characteristics of a loan shark.

As the Local Government Association's briefing for this debate says:

"If they were to passport the full increase through to schools, this gap and all the other pressures on local services, for example on social services or environmental management, would have to be funded from the council tax increases."

Delegations of councillors visiting the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have been unable to get a straight answer to the problem of the education gap. Initially, they were told blandly that the FSS was not like the SSA, and that there was no requirement to spend up to the level of the FSS. When it was politely pointed out to Ministers that the Secretary of State for Education and Skills was offering to penalise authorities that did not passport the full amount, blandness was transformed into a blank look.

Ministers should, however, take heart—they are not the only ones who are confused. The whole Government machine is in disarray. The local government world was amazed by the performance of the Minister for School Standards at the Department for Education and Skills councillors' seminar on 29 January at Local Government House, where he appeared not to understand the impact of settlements on authorities penalised by the funding gap. Perhaps the Minister for Local Government and the Regions should tell the House what discussions he has had with the Minister for School Standards—and let me say frankly that I am not referring to the confused briefing discussion that I witnessed in the Lobby after the December statement.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: I find the new formula much fairer than the old one, which was devised under the Conservative Government. I have been pondering on the fair formula that he says the Conservatives would introduce if they took office again. Will he explain which authorities would gain and which would lose under the new fair formula that he presumably has at the back of his mind?

Mr. Pickles: I will go further than that. Here and now I make a pledge, to which I am prepared to be held, that we will change the formula, but we will not do so on the basis of party advantage. Furthermore, I give a clear undertaking that we will work towards a general consensus and agreement on funding. I will go even further and say that it might have been possible for the current Government to have obtained consensus on their proposals had they not chosen to adopt such a confrontational attitude. It is an opportunity missed. The reason we have a problem is that people have no confidence now—because of the degree of discretion, they believe the figures to be fiddled. The consensus is broken, and that is damaging to local authorities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Pickles: I will give way to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), but I hope that he is not going to talk about local income tax.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that education passporting is affecting councils such as East Sussex, Kent, Cumbria and my own council of Kingston upon Thames, and that the Government are effectively forcing them to raise their council tax? If so, does he further agree that, if councillors react by putting up their council tax, they still deserve our full support?

Mr. Pickles: Again, I can go further than that, because it is the knock-on effect that I am about to come to, which will have a serious effect in respect of social services.

David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: In a moment.

If the Government think that it is a simple choice between Mr. Nice and Mr. Nasty, they are missing the point: choose one and the impact is on school children; choose the other and it is on care for the elderly. The Government had promised a big increase in social services funding, but that will be impossible for authorities to deliver without a substantial council tax increase or a drastic reduction in other services. In many cases, there will be a straight, stark choice between the young and the old.

By a cruel twist of fate, the very authorities that the Government have chosen to take money from are those with the highest proportion of elderly people. Bearing in mind that we are talking about a county function and about specific districts in which there is a high proportion of elderly people, the list is not extensive, but it includes areas such as Arun, North Norfolk, West Somerset, Rother, Eastbourne, Tendring, Christchurch and East Devon, all of which will suffer from the settlement.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): To that list, my hon. Friend can add my borough of Surrey Heath, where I have a large number of retired people or people who are about to retire. When he talks of fiddled figures, will he recognise that one thing that has caused outrage is Ministers coming to the House and announcing a 3.2 per cent. increase. Independent, non-party political borough treasurers then get in touch with Members of Parliament such as me to say that that figure has been arrived at only by fiddling this year's figures, and that the actual increase is 0.8 per cent. which is more than

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

wiped out by the increase in national insurance. My independent officers are very angry and they know who is to blame—this Minister, this Government and their fiddled figures.

Mr. Pickles: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I could not put it better myself.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Pickles: I give way to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) but then I will have to make some progress.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): May I bring the hon. Gentleman back to his commitment to a fairer and less party political distribution system? One of the fundamental ways in which the new system is fairer is that it seeks only to distribute grant. The hon. Gentleman may have a different view on whether it is a fair system of grant distribution, but that is all it seeks to do. Under the Conservative Government, the system also set arbitrary spending limits for every council and imposed penalties and capping to force local authorities to comply with the Government's diktat. That was a completely unfair, arbitrary political system, which is why this system, having got rid of that element, is so much fairer.

Mr. Pickles: If the hon. Gentleman is applying to serve on the Conservative commission on the reform of local government I shall certainly consider it and let him know in due course.

Make no mistake, the crisis in social care will get worse because of the settlement.

There are concerns about the shortfall in grant for services transferred to local authorities—for example, for funding preserved rights.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is always courteous in giving way. He has just made a rather important statement. The Conservative party is apparently launching a commission to consider local government funding. When will the commission start its work, and what will be its composition? Will Lady Porter be a member?

Mr. Pickles: I do not want to disappoint the right hon. Gentleman, but I am afraid that his behaviour over the last year has rather ruled him out from joining. However, one never knows. When he leaves ministerial office we may think about calling on him.

Already there are indications that the proposed transfer of residential allowances will have a significant impact on authorities' budgets, particularly the requirement to undertake a financial assessment of all clients by 1 October 2003. The legislation on delayed discharges currently in the other place will increase burdens on local authorities and will only add to the crisis. Care for the elderly and vulnerable children will be squeezed both ways by the pressure of increased demands and the rising costs of providing services.

When the Minister came to the House to give a statement in December, I made two predictions. I said that the following week the comprehensive performance assessment would be produced and that it would take away tens of millions of pounds from excellent authorities and give poor-performing authorities tens of millions as some kind of reward. That proved to be the case. All the new powers and flexibilities promised in the Local Government Bill, which is currently going through the House, will not compensate for those missing millions. It is ironic that the Government offer flexibility and freedom to high-performing councils and at the same time place them in a straitjacket by taking away that money.

Mr. Love: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: Not for a while.

My second prediction was that within two years we would see council tax increases of 16 per cent. Here, I am afraid, I have come horribly unstuck. It looks as though figures close to that will be achieved this year. It seems certain that, for the first time, ordinary families on ordinary salaries in ordinary homes in band D will receive council tax bills of £1,000. Throughout the counties, southern England and London there will be massive council tax rises, and London will see increases of over 20 per cent. Council tax has become the ultimate stealth tax. The Minister is right to say that we should judge the Government on council tax rises. The accountants Tenon calculate that the increases since 1997, not including any resulting from this settlement, are the equivalent of adding 2p to income tax.

We now have a chance to consider the formula. There is nothing fair or, for that matter, radical about it. After all, there is nothing radical about pork-barrel politics: to punish one's enemies and reward one's friends is a concept as old as time.

David Taylor *rose—*

Matthew Green *rose—*

Mr. Pickles: I shall give way first to the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) and then to the hon. Member for Ludlow (Matthew Green).

David Taylor: The whole House and the few hundred people scattered around TV sets will be grateful for the Conservatives' Pauline conversion and will look forward to a politics-free grant formula when the Conservatives are next in power. All the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues may be in residential care by then. Will he confirm that the policy is a permanent and major shift from the arrangements that were so generous and friendly to authorities such as Wandsworth and Westminster and so harsh to many authorities in the midlands and the north?

Mr. Pickles: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that I am feeling pretty sprightly, and we look forward to our return to power very soon. What is so unusual about this Government taking on Conservative policies? After all, yesterday our options for the reform of the House of

Lords received the closest vote, so I would not mock if I were him. The hon. Gentleman seems to think that this is the only method of allocating funds, but there are plenty of examples throughout the world of grant distribution formulas in which the political system is not involved.

Matthew Green *rose—*

Mr. Pickles: I promised that I would give way to the hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* No, I promised that I would.

Matthew Green: We clearly agree that some councils will be forced into high council tax rises or cuts in their services. Will he guarantee that where councils choose to increase council tax, the Conservatives will not campaign against them on that basis at the next set of local elections?

Mr. Pickles: I realise now that I have given way too many times. My hon. Friends were right. I shall give way no more and conclude my remarks quickly so that my hon. Friends can make their points.

This system has taken most of the worst features of the old system and made them vicious. One expert on local government finance put it to me:

"Isn't it a marvellous coincidence that 5 years of planning can produce a system that takes away from Conservative authorities and gives to authorities represented by Labour Cabinet Ministers?"

The Government have not spent five years carefully deliberating. They sat on their hands for four and a half years before plunging into a hectic round of "What do we do next?" The Select Committee noted that in its critical report on the new formula. The shires have been slaughtered at a time when the rural communities wanted the Government to reassure them that they understood and wished to help. They have received a resounding kick in the teeth

What have the councils done to offend the Government? Have they challenged the Government's right to govern? Absolutely not. Have they failed to co-operate with the Government's economic policies? Again, absolutely not. Some councils, such as Kent, adopted the Government's anti-poverty strategy and were making it work.

Why are the Government punishing councils such as Kent, Dorset and West Sussex, which the Audit Commission rated as excellent authorities? They do not fit into new Labour's projects and therefore their political influence will be marginalised. The things that they hold dear will be bulldozed and built over, as we heard earlier. In the next few years, as the funds slip away, their efforts will be diverted from innovation and improvement to the survival of their services.

The Government may hold up their hands in horror and say that the formula has unintended consequences in the shift from county to town, and that they are blind to councils' political colour. Let us put that to the test. Let us ignore the fact that all but one of the 12 councils with a deficit in their education funding are Conservative. Let us put aside the fact that Conservative authorities are losers from the formula whereas Labour authorities are gainers. Let us use the Government's figures and compare London authorities. The increase in grant for London Labour authorities is 5.6 per cent. whereas as that for Conservative authorities is 3.7 per cent. The Minister may claim that that is because of the nature of the authorities. Let us consider some comparable authorities, for example, Harrow and Enfield. They are similar, yet Harrow gets 6 per cent. and Enfield, a Conservative authority, receives 3.9 per cent. Merton and Bromley are also similar, yet Labour Merton gets 6.2 per cent. and Conservative Bromley receives 3.5 per cent. The boroughs are similar but the outcomes are different. I should be interested in convincing, rather than party political, arguments about the differences between those pairs.

Mr. Raynsford: Instead of making selective comparisons, will the hon. Gentleman compare like with like? Will he compare Enfield not with Harrow, but with the adjoining borough of Waltham Forest? What are the percentage increases for both boroughs? Will he compare Bromley not with a south-west London authority, but with the adjoining borough of Croydon? If he makes fair comparisons, he will find no political bias. Does he agree that Conservative authorities such as Wokingham, Cambridgeshire and Cheshire received huge increases? Will he therefore put an end to an outrageous political slur?

Mr. Pickles: I think that I have touched a raw nerve and that the right hon. Gentleman has been rumbled. The people of London understand that places such as Bromley and Merton, and Harrow and Enfield are comparable. The statistics that I cited are correct.

The settlement fails in many ways. It is unjust and unfair. It is also politically partisan and partisan between town and country. It ignores the growing crisis in local authority pension schemes, which will require a massive injection of cash. It fails to acknowledge that councils will have to pay the national insurance jobs tax in April. It does not take account of the unfunded element of national negotiated pay bills. Above all, the Government have forgotten whose money we are considering.

It is foolish in times of economic uncertainty to increase the tax burden on the part of the country that generates our prosperity. To hit it simultaneously with a vicious redistribution of resources is provocation. As the council bills hit the mat in April and the full impact of the Government's actions is literally brought home, Ministers should not be surprised at the growing chant of, "Give us back our money."

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Mr. Speaker has imposed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

6.25 pm

Mr. Iain Coleman (Hammersmith and Fulham): I promise to speak briefly, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that many others wish to speak.

I want to concentrate on the specific problems affecting my local authority, the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, as a consequence of this

[Mr. Iain Coleman]

year's local government finance settlement. I am sure the Minister will realise that my comments should be seen in the context of a high-performing local authority with a wide reputation for providing good services for a diverse and very mobile population.

A week after the Minister announced the details of this year's settlement, he gave details of the Audit Commission's comprehensive assessment investigation of the workings of local authorities, which he mentioned earlier. My borough emerged as one of the best performing councils in London, and was awarded "excellence" status. The settlement is all the more disappointing in the light of that independent assessment.

Under the new grant distribution system, it is even more important to distinguish between movements in formula totals—known as formula spending share—and actual grant, actual cash. In that context, the settlement contained very bad news for the people of Hammersmith and Fulham: a 10.5 per cent. increase in FSS; a 3.5 per cent. increase in cash owing to the application of the floor, without which it would admittedly have been only 2.6 per cent.; huge losses from the methodology changes, £19.9 million in cash terms; an increase from resource equalisation of £5.4 million in cash terms; and a very small increase from data changes, amounting to less than £1 million.

If we subtract the £5.4 million increase provided by resource equalisation from the massive loss caused by the changes in methodology, we find that the council has made a net loss of £14.5 million, or 9.7 per cent., as a consequence of the revenue grant distribution. That is easily the worst of the percentage losses experienced by inner-London boroughs, although the council has just been recognised as a high performing, high-quality authority.

Early analysis shows that Hammersmith and Fulham has done extremely badly in comparison with virtually all other London boroughs in all three of the major services blocks: education, environmental protection and cultural services, and personal social services. The only explanation seems to be that the council is considered to be less deprived relative to other boroughs, presumably because of the indicators used by the Government to determine deprivation. In other words, a number of indicators favourable to Hammersmith and Fulham have been removed from the formula, and replaced with less favourable indicators. For example, census indicators included in the previous deprivation formula—such as the number of children living in flats, which is very high in my borough—have been replaced by

"households where the head of the household is in semi-routine or routine occupation".

Such an indicator, relating to the nature of the employed occupation that a head of household might have, is very bad for Hammersmith and Fulham.

The deliberate decision—all these were deliberate decisions—to simplify the formula and, for instance, to rely on fewer deprivation indicators means that complex and multiple deprivation in boroughs like mine simply is not detected.

Hammersmith and Fulham benefited to some extent from the resource equalisation element of the grant distribution system, which takes account of the relative tax-raising abilities of boroughs before determining the amount of cash they should receive. That benefits councils whose need is great in relation to their tax base. Hammersmith and Fulham has a high tax base, based on the value of properties and a high council tax banding, and—because of the new formula to which I have referred—a relatively low recognised level of need. In the case of many inner London boroughs, losses related to methodology have been largely compensated for by substantial gains from resource equalisation but, as I have said, that does not apply to Hammersmith and Fulham. The double whammy for the borough is the over-simplification of the formula, and other reductions in weighting applied to deprivation and density factors.

These are obviously highly complex matters with which few residents in my constituency will wish to be bothered. However, the reality on the ground is that last week, the one remaining social services nursery in my constituency was peacefully and highly responsibly occupied by parents, in protest at its impending closure. The one remaining sports and leisure centre and swimming pool in Hammersmith and Shepherd's Bush is also now set to close. I must advise my right hon. Friend the Minister that the leader of the council informed me this morning that council tax payers in Hammersmith and Fulham face a local taxation increase of at least 12 per cent.; indeed, it could be as much as 15 per cent. At the same time, millions of pounds worth of cuts will be made in the valued and much-needed services that are often directed at some of the poorest and most vulnerable of my constituents.

I was a councillor in Hammersmith and Fulham for many years under successive Conservative administrations, and every year we faced cuts and reductions in services. Local people, particularly council staff and committed local councillors—again, I emphasise that it is an excellent local authority—cannot understand why we face a similar, if not worse, scenario under a Labour Government, and nor can I. That picture has emerged not because of uncontrollable data changes, but because of political decisions taken by Ministers. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to look again at the practical, and in my judgment disastrous, effects that this settlement will have on the people of Hammersmith and Fulham.

6.31 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The Minister is highly respected throughout the House—*[Interruption.]* I believe that he is, and the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman actually said as much. The Minister wears a pained visage throughout this debate, and particularly when various Members criticise his settlement, which he seems genuinely to believe is very generous. He should be frank with the House about the fact that many councils, particularly those at the floor, are having serious difficulties as a result of this settlement, and he should realise that the many council tax payers out there who will face the consequences of this settlement will be wearing expressions rather more pained than his own.

There are many problems with the settlement. The first problem is that it will result in the highest ever rise in council tax. The second problem is the education passporting issue, on which we have heard a lot of double-talk from Ministers. The third problem is the underlying cost pressures in respect of national insurance and the local government pay settlement, which various Members have already talked about. Fourthly, there is the effect on pensioners. In some boroughs and local authorities, pensioners face the double whammy of high council tax increases and cutbacks in care services. Finally, we need to look at the long-term implications of the settlement, which are very worrying.

Mr. Bennett: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will answer the question that the Conservatives failed to answer. Would his party deal with the problem of the authorities at the bottom of the pile by putting more money in, or by taking money away from those that have done slightly better?

Mr. Davey: As the hon. Gentleman knows, my party has a long-standing commitment to increasing funding in education. That would be achieved through the local government grant settlement, so the answer to the first part of his question is yes.

On the passporting of education increases, the Government are completely unjoined-up. In the past five years we have heard much about how the Government intend to act in a joined-up way, but to be frank, Mars and Venus are more joined up than this Government in this settlement. The Minister said on one day that there will be a reduction in ring fencing, but on the very next, head teachers up and down the country received a letter from the Minister for School Standards saying that there will be passporting of the education settlement. Indeed, the situation was worse than that. In addition to the Minister's letter, officials wrote to councils up and down the country setting out the calculations used by the Department for Education and Skills in determining whether the block formula spending share increase is deemed as having been passported to schools. So the whole of Whitehall has been putting pressure on the passporting through of the education settlement. Indeed, the Select Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett), who has just intervened, criticised the Government on this very issue.

So a major problem is caused by education passporting requirements, and it is hitting councils hard. There are, I think, 12 councils among those on the final list that the Government published on Monday where the total increase in the total revenue support grant is less than the education increase that the Minister for School Standards is telling councils to passport through. Those authorities are in real difficulty. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) said that they are Conservative councils. I can tell him that a number are Liberal Democrat councils such as mine, Kingston upon Thames, and councils such as Cumbria which are run by Liberal Democrats with Conservatives.

Mr. Francois: The hon. Gentleman knows that Essex is also on the list of councils that are suffering. I want to play back to him the question that he asked earlier. As he is setting out policy from his Front Bench, can he tell the House whether, if councils have to increase their council tax because of the lack of support from the Government, the Liberal Democrats will not campaign against those councils? Yes or no?

Mr. Davey: We will not campaign in many areas. A lot depends on how such a council has run its affairs. Unlike Conservative Front Benchers, we believe in local democracy.

Not only for the list of 12 councils that I mentioned but for a long list below that, the increase in education grant as a percentage is still less than what the Minister for School Standards is requiring them to passport through. I worked out that there are 51 local authorities which, if they do what the Minister requires, will have £3 million or less to spend on all their other services. That is bizarre, and it will be very difficult for many councils to do.

Matthew Green: Is not the reality that any authority that has a grant increase of less than 6 per cent. will find the settlement difficult? The education grant—two thirds of such an authority's budget—will be passported, so the remaining services will be squeezed in areas that have a settlement of less than 6 per cent.

Mr. Davey: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is why I want to ask the Minister a question that the Local Government Association has been asking him. He will know that the chair of the LGA, Sir Jeremy Beecham, wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills asking him to give a guarantee that the reserve powers recently taken by the Government to intervene on local councils if they did not passport the education spending increase through would not be used this year, especially given the special circumstances of the major grant review. The Secretary of State refused to give that assurance, and the LGA wants to know whether Ministers will now do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): The hon. Gentleman has clearly given a Liberal Democrat spending commitment to give more money to education. How would he ensure that that money is spent by schools without requiring a passporting arrangement?

Mr. Davey: The Minister failed to answer a very basic question, which is being asked not only by Liberal Democrat Members, but by the chair of the Local Government Association, who is a Labour party member. The LGA has written to the Government, but they have failed to give an answer. Until they respond to an issue that is affecting councils all over the country, the Minister should not be asking me such questions.

Mr. Betts: May I ask the hon. Gentleman a direct question in the light of the question that the hon. Member for Ludlow (Matthew Green) asked a moment ago? Would the Liberal Democrats solve the problem of councils that have a less than 6 per cent. increase owing to passporting by asking for less passporting, so that

[Mr. Betts]

schools would get less, or by proposing that every council should get an increase of at least 7 per cent. in grant?

Mr. Davey: We say that there should not be so much ring fencing or passporting—that it should be a matter of local democracy. We are asking the Government for some honesty on the issue. We want them to admit that the implication of their spending settlement is that council tax will have to go up by huge amounts if the money for schools is to be secured. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not recognise that.

I want to refer to my authority of Kingston upon Thames, whose provisional grant was £730,000 less than the education passport. Subsequent data changes meant that the final total grant settlement for Kingston council announced on Monday is £1,059,000 less than the Government are asking the council to pass on to schools. That is a huge problem, and it is shared by many councils up and down the country.

The grant increase for non-education services in Kingston is a staggering negative 22 per cent. Many other councils, such as the one in Essex covered by the constituency of the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois), are in the same position. If councils are to pass through the education spending, as Ministers intend, they will have to make huge cuts in all other services, or impose a large council tax rise. The Under-Secretary failed to be honest with the House on that very significant matter.

We have many problems with the way in which the Government have gone about the settlement, above and beyond education. They seem unable to see what is obvious to everyone else—that there are huge cost pressures on local authorities. We have heard about them already. They include the 4 per cent. increase in local government pay, and the 1 per cent. increase in employers' national insurance contributions. That alone will cost local authorities £280 million and, as the LGA has said, the Government should have provided that money.

Service pressures also exist. Ministers have trumpeted a rise of 6.3 per cent. for personal social services, but many of the special grants that previously existed have been taken out. Stripping out that figure leaves the rise at a level that does not even cover demand-led pressures, especially on social services for vulnerable children. Service pressures are also evident on pensions, and many London boroughs have to meet expanded requirements stemming from new waste disposal services, additional licensing duties and increases as a result of the freedom pass.

A floor of only 3.5 per cent. does not begin to take account of such increased service pressures. The Minister has said that we should not worry, because every local authority is being given an above inflation rise, but he fails to take account of service pressures way above inflation.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but I am tempted to use his analogy and say that people on other planets should not throw meteors. He has challenged the Government to meet the £200 million cost of increased national insurance contributions, for which his party voted. He has challenged the Government about the extra costs of pensions owing to the pensions raid enacted by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for which his party also voted. He has also asked for extra spending on education, which his party also favours. Where is the money to come from?

Mr. Davey: My party, unlike the hon. Gentleman's, has always produced costed manifestos and alternative Budgets. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members may laugh, but I have been involved in the painstaking research that was required. We shall listen to the hon. Gentleman when he tries to do the same. He failed to vote for the extra money for the health service, and he should be ashamed of that.

Local government faces the pressures that I have described, and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary should acknowledge that they exist. Councils around the country will not understand that he has failed to do so.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the hon. Gentleman advise the Liberal Democrat group on my local council, whose members complain that the council tax will go up by too great a percentage but who at the same time want more expenditure?

Mr. Davey: I do not know about the particular circumstances in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, so I cannot comment in detail. However, I should not be surprised if Liberal Democrat councillors were concerned about the way in which that local authority was being run by the Conservatives.

My third major concern with the settlement is the Government's approach to ring fencing. A key reason why all the pressures faced by councils are so difficult to manage, and why they feed through inevitably to large council tax rises, is that the Government are insisting on so much ring fencing. It goes beyond passporting education rises; ring fencing extends across the piece.

Ring fencing is absolutely pernicious. It takes away councils' flexibility and autonomy when it comes to managing tough settlements such as this, and it corrodes local democracy. Not unreasonably, electors cannot understand why they have council tax rises when grant rises are increasing. Part of the answer is ring fencing. One of the worst aspects of the Government's presentation of the figures is their claim that they are reducing ring fencing. They tell us that it has fallen, but in fact they reached that conclusion only by re-defining what counts as a ring-fenced grant, in a way that not only the LGA but many councils throughout the country cannot understand.

Why has ring fencing increased from 14.7 per cent. last year to 16. 8 per cent. this year? When the Government took control in 1997, only 4.5 per cent. of total grant to local authorities was ring-fenced. By massively increasing ring fencing and failing to tackle it, the Government have made the problems of local authority financing far more difficult. That is why there have been such high council tax increases during their tenure.

This year, I predict that average council tax rises will be the highest since the tax was introduced. That is certainly suggested by provisional figures from councils

throughout the country. Given that there may be an element of scaremongering in those figures, the average increase may not reach double figures, but it could be about 9 per cent. Curiously, the Government's own figures assume exactly that amount. When I intervened to ask the Minister for Local Government and the Regions about that point, he seemed to brush it away, but the documentation has a figure for assumed council tax yield of £18.094 billion, which is a 9 per cent. increase on the actual yield last year. By continuing to shackle local government finance through ring fencing, the Government are forcing councils to increase council tax. There should be no mistake about that.

I am extremely worried about those council tax increases. Council tax is one of the most unfair taxes imaginable. It hits pensioners and people on low incomes. It is a Conservative tax and the Government should not continue to push it up. It has a huge impact on the elderly. Under the settlement, many elderly people will face large council tax bills, but there will be a double whammy if they live in a local authority that has a high proportion of pensioners. An examination of the revised SSA formula for care for the elderly and the effects of resource equalisation suggests that something odd is going on.

When the figures were issued in December, spending on care for the elderly appeared to be due to rise by £273 million. At 4.8 per cent. that was not a huge increase, but it was not bad. However, when resource equalisation kicked in, the final total was a cut of £797 million—a drop of 14 per cent. Some local authorities were able to address that problem. There is a little bit of wriggle room—they still have some control—and they may be able to find resources to cope with the cut. However, authorities with a large number of pensioners will have great difficulty in doing that. That is the double whammy: a council tax rise and cutbacks in care for the most vulnerable elderly. The Government should be ashamed of that.

My final point is that the long-term implications of the settlement are worrying. One reason why this year's settlement has been especially contentious is that it involved a major review of the underlying grant formula. I shall not rehearse the Select Committee's arguments—*[Interruption]*—it appears that hon. Members will be pleased about that—but I want to focus on three issues that arise from the major review of the grant formula.

The first point concerns stability. The Government said that stability would be one of the principles embedded in the grant review. They told us how wonderful they were because they had set floors and that they would not change the grant formula for the next two years. However, the problem is that the Government will not announce the floors for the next two financial years; they will not even given an indication of where the floors will be. The capacity for local authorities—especially those who are already struggling—to plan ahead is reduced. The Government's attitude is particularly hypocritical, because they talk about stability and long-term planning in Whitehall, yet they refuse to give councils the necessary information to achieve that at local authority level. That is a dereliction of responsibility. The Government are not following the best practice that they try to promote.

The second issue that concerns me—[HON. MEMBERS: "Second?"] The second issue on the long-term point relates to data changes. There have already been significant data changes between this year's provisional and final settlements. Information from finance officers around the country is that this year has seen larger alterations in grant as a result of data changes than almost any previous settlement. If the Government have implemented a robust and more stable grant formula, how can such huge changes just to do with data occur over a relatively short period? How can local treasurers have faith in the system?

There are practical problems at root level. Kingston alone has lost £329,000 between the provisional and final settlements. In a small authority, that is a lot of money. The Minister must remember that that causes local authorities huge difficulties over a short period. The framework of the review does not seem to be providing the stability that was promised.

The final point on long-term issues—*[Interruption.]* The Government recently announced that they are to review the balance of funding between local and national Government. That should have happened alongside any grant review; it would have made it far more effective. We have read the terms of reference, which are interesting and broad. I hope that the review will include—it could do so because the terms are so broad—reform or, indeed, abolition of the council tax. Only by implementing a fair system of local income taxation can we restore a proper balance of funding between national and local government. In winding up the debate, the Minister should say more about the balance of funding review. We want to know when it will be set up, who will be appointed to it and by when it will report. It is an exceedingly important aspect of the subject.

Liberal Democrats will not be able to vote for this settlement. Effectively, it imposes the largest ever council tax rise on pensioners and families across the United Kingdom. The matter has been poorly handled—whether by the Department for Education and Skills or the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, we do not know. Suffice it to say that there is chaos in Whitehall, and that that is having an effect at root level. Ring fencing remains, and that is a stranglehold on councils, residents and local democracy. My constituents will expect me to vote against the settlement, and those of Government Members will expect them to do so as well.

6.52 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I begin by reiterating that Cambridgeshire county council is very grateful for its extremely high increase of 11.5 per cent. Of that, 4 per cent. was due to recognition as an expensive area and for the first time receiving a grant under the area cost adjustment. Education has seen a 10 per cent. increase and social services a 13.1 per cent. increase. That is probably the best settlement that Cambridgeshire has ever received. I must point out that Cambridgeshire is not a Labour authority or even, thank goodness, a Liberal Democrat authority. It is Conservative controlled, which gives the lie to the Conservatives' point that all Conservative authorities have suffered a poor settlement. That is simply not true.

[Mrs. Anne Campbell]

Cambridgeshire is however concerned about losing £10 million as a result of the transitional arrangements. Although it should have received a 11.5 per cent. increase, owing to the damping arrangements, the ceiling has been set at 8.5 per cent. The county council has asked me to make representations to my right hon. Friend the Minister on that point. It would like—surprise, surprise—the transitional arrangements to continue for as short a time as possible.

The leader of Liberal Democrat-controlled Cambridge city council, who my right hon. Friend has described as deluded—I have to agree with that—appears to think that the Government's indicated rate of a 4.64 per cent. rise would result in every council receiving such an increase. The increase that he expected was then somehow translated in his mind to a promised increase. When he found that he was to receive only a 3 per cent. increase in grant, he described it as a savage cut. He has since been consulting council tax payers on the sort of cuts to services that the settlement will involve. I find that kind of misrepresentation quite disgraceful. It is the kind of absurd statement that makes people distrust politicians.

I have been asked by Cambridge city council to make representations to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions. The city council would like the transitional arrangements to last as long as possible. I find it quite difficult to choose between the two councils—except to say that, from the point of view of council tax payers, the county council is the more important contributor to the council tax bill, and that, therefore, the county council's wish for the transitional arrangements to last as short a time as possible should be the predominant idea in my right hon. Friend's mind.

The leader of the Liberal Democrat city council has gone further and is representing the 3 per cent. increase not as an increase but as a £1.9 million cut. It is true that Cambridge city council has had rather bad news from the Office for National Statistics—in the way that student numbers are calculated and in the way that the change in the formula has, for the first time, excluded overnight visitors. Cambridge has a large population of visitors and finds that—

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Campbell: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to finish my sentence, I will allow him to intervene, even though I have only 10 minutes.

That large population of visitors is creating difficulties because they cause the city council a great deal of extra expense. That would be a valid point to make, but those difficulties do not mean that there will be a £1.9 million cut in resources.

Mr. Davey: Will the hon. Lady confirm that Cambridge city council has real cost pressures—4 per cent. on the wage bill and 1 per cent. on employers' national insurance contributions? Is she wishing those away, as if they were not real cost pressures?

Mrs. Campbell: I am aware that Cambridge city council has cost pressures. I am also aware that that is because of a mistake in the way in which the census figures were calculated in 1990. Cambridge city council found itself being overfunded rather than underfunded for many years, which is now being redressed. We have to nail the absurd notion that the city council was promised 4.64 per cent. and received only 3 per cent.

I do not want to speak for very long but I want to say that, as far as the county council is concerned, the education settlement will mean a real improvement in Cambridgeshire schools, which have suffered from underfunding for many years. Many schools in my constituency run at a deficit, especially those in the more deprived parts of the city, which have more difficulty in attracting pupils than do the schools in the more affluent parts of the city. I know that head teachers, whom I am meeting on Friday, are very grateful indeed—not only for Cambridgeshire's settlement but for the Government's insistence that that settlement is passed on in full to schools.

I believe, too, that social services will benefit hugely from the 13.1 per cent. increase. The care of elderly people is costly in Cambridge; property is expensive; and wages are high because of high accommodation costs. Cambridgeshire has found it difficult to provide good residential accommodation for elderly people for many years, so the 13.1 per cent. increase will be extremely important in raising living standards in the city, and taking away the fear and anxiety experienced by many elderly people in my constituency.

On the whole, therefore, I am pleased with the settlement. I acknowledge the pressures on Cambridge city council, but it does it no good whatsoever for its leader to pretend that he had been promised something which he was certainly not. That is dishonest, and does him no good among Cambridge residents.

7 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): It must be interesting for you, Mr. Speaker, as someone from north of the border to watch the squabbling south of the border. Thus it ever was, I suspect.

This year, the credibility of the annual divvying-up of revenue support grants reached an all-time low. I have a horrid feeling, however, that the Minister will repeat his behaviour and go past that limit next year. This is the first year of the much-vaunted new fairer, clearer system but, by some incredible feat, the Government managed to fail on both counts. It took some time, but eventually the Minister admitted to the Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee that if the system was simple, it would involve a considerable amount of rough justice. There has been plenty of rough this evening, but I am not so sure about justice. The huge diversity and variation in local needs across the country leads to considerable complexity, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman) made clear. Without doubt, the new system is as complex as the one that it has replaced, and I am sure that it will become more complex with every year that squabbles continue.

For local authorities, assessment was particularly difficult this year. The data, control totals and methodology tables—DCM for short—were not provided to the councils until midway through the consultation period. That led to exceptional difficulties,

as the tables are required by councils to check the facts on their allocation. Every year, except this year, they are provided when the allocations are announced. The reason for the delay, according to the Minister, was that the tables were more complicated this year. Who would have guessed? Some councils were upset and had only half the usual period to assess changes and the reasons behind them before the deadline for consultation. Perhaps that is why the Minister saw only 50 councils—he could have seen twice as many if there had been more time.

The old system of allocation was based on verifiable needs indicators, but this year the system is based essentially on subjective principles or, as the Minister put it to the Select Committee, the application of "judgment". It would not be unreasonable to assume that the census data used would have a solid verifiable basis. However, the Select Committee noted:

"The differences between the figures projected from the 1991 Census and the results of the 2001 Census have shifted the population figures into the sphere of contention."

In other words, they could not be relied on at all.

Over the past few years, two things have led to an increase in local government expenditure. First, there has been an increase in central control, a trend which has continued this year. Local authorities are being told what they should spend on education—we have heard quite a bit about that this evening. They are also being told indirectly what to spend on social services, with the Department of Health looking over their shoulder and so on. No account is taken of the fact that in London and the south-east, revenue support has increased less than the FSS. Furthermore, the proportion of allocated grants—grants allocated by Ministers—has risen dramatically this year, perhaps by 37 per cent., the Select Committee was advised. Those grants used to be known as specific grants. To get round the difficulty of the criticism from the Committee, the Government are now renaming some of them. We have "specific grants", "targeted grants" and so on. But in effect Ministers can allocate funds where they like, to friends, setting targets and setting the responsibility of councils to meet those specifics.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman's party never did that.

Sir Paul Beresford: The Minister questions whether it happened under the Conservatives. He should look back at the figures. I understand that the specific grants or similar grants in Conservative days never rose above 4 per cent. The cover, according to the Minister, is that they are to meet specific needs. The reality is that they are to dictate to the local authorities. If the grant formula is as good as the Minister claims, such action should not be necessary.

The second main trend has been the movement of funds north, predominantly to friends, but of course if friends happen to be adjacent to a Conservative council sometimes the Conservative council can benefit, as we have just heard. But effectively the south-east and London are funding those to the north.

This year the new system exaggerates that movement, and it exaggerates it hugely. If it had not been for the floors and ceilings, the shift would have been dramatically worse, sufficient to be an outright scandal. It is on the edge of that now.

The underlying scheme itself is a disgraceful manipulation of taxpayers' money for political ends. The result will be that for the same level of service local people in the south-east will be taxed considerably more than those in the north. The council tax under Labour is a stealth tax. Now it is not just a straight stealth tax; it is a geographic stealth tax.

The residents of Surrey will be expected to find an extra 17 per cent.—17 per cent. more from the taxpayers for county services. They are also suffering from the same issues that were raised earlier— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. We cannot have continual interruptions from a sedentary position on either side of the House.

Sir Paul Beresford: What the Minister ignores is the liabilities put upon those councils, and particularly upon Surrey, for FSS, passporting, which we have covered, and also the social services requirements. Just to stand still, just to meet the passporting, just to make social services safe, as legally required, they are looking at 17 per cent.

Most of Surrey's district councils will be in a similar situation, with the possible exception of Guildford. There the Liberals will, I guess, plunder the balances, because it is an election year. Mole Valley district council, within my constituency, received a 3.1 per cent. increase, which amounted to £107,000. Again, it has a number of centrally imposed increases. I shall pick two. National insurance will cost Mole Valley £45,000 more. The increased staff costs to handle the new centrally imposed welfare reforms will add £110,000. That means that just those two changes, let alone all the other liabilities upon it, will leave the council with a £48,000 shortfall. It is a little council. It is an efficient council. But it will have to increase its council tax by 15 per cent.

Matthew Green: The hon. Gentleman and I have just completed Committee consideration of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill. Does he agree that there will be an extra burden on those councils which are planning authorities, because they will have to take on extra planning staff to cope with the new statements of development principles on top of their existing work?

Sir Paul Beresford: I completely agree. I think that the hon. Gentleman will agree with me that because we have only 10 minutes I could not spend the whole time listing all the extra burdens that all the local authorities have, although it would be a great temptation.

One of the Government's excuses for the shift in the funds is the perceived ability to pay. That is that the people of Surrey are more able to pay than are the people of other areas in England. As for everywhere in the country, it is true that some people are more able to pay, but I do not see why they should have to pay increased taxes because of a biased formula derived from ministerial judgments. More important, though, many people in Surrey simply cannot afford to pay. This allocation is another burden on the cost of living in the south-east and it will drive away the people whom we want to attract back to the area—teachers, policemen, bus drivers and shop workers. All the people whom we are trying to attract and whom the Government say that they are trying to attract will be driven out.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

I am sure that the Minister will not worry. He has dealt with the clamour made by many of the hon. Members on the Benches behind him, although a few of them have put the other side of the case this evening. This situation and the way in which allocation is carried out are complicated. The issue is difficult for the people out there who pay the bills to understand, but they are starting to learn that, on high council tax, it is the Government who are to blame.

7.10 pm

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). He is a fellow member of the Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions, but I shall not take the same entirely distorted route in criticising the report, although I have criticisms of my own that I shall point out.

I accept that the local government settlement is, overall—I deliberately insert that word—a better settlement than we ever got under any Tory Government. I congratulate the Government on trying to produce a better system of local government finance and finally ending the anomalous SSA system. As the Select Committee pointed out, however, there is still some further work to do. As we said, the equality of the outcome suffered from a lack of proper preparation. We also said:

"It is unacceptable that . . . not all the relevant information was published on the day of the announcement"

and that

"local authorities have only just over a month to respond."

That month included the Christmas period. As I shall mention later in my speech, at least one local authority is still awaiting information, even though the final settlement has now been announced.

The Committee also pointed out:

"The Government's proposals for resource equalisation have not resolved the difference in 'gearing' between authorities."

That is a huge anomaly for local authorities in the north, despite what we are hearing from Conservative Members who are crying out about difficulties in the south. It is the poorer areas in the north that have to pay higher council tax in order to subsidise some areas in the south. Indeed, we are now having to do that to try to depress council tax rises in Westminster because of the anomalies in the 1991 census figures.

The report made another point that is very important for my local authority:

"The consequence of 'passporting' increases in education and social services Formula Spending Share is either to increase council tax or to reduce expenditure on other services."

That is certainly the case in Gateshead, where the Government's view of the figure to passport to schools, £6.877 million, is greater than the council's increase in total grant from 2002–03—£6.734 million. That leaves no additional funding for all other council services, with the burden falling on council tax payers.

There are further difficulties that are more local, but certainly affect the north-east. For example, the new formula fails to take account of the need to maintain back lanes. We have many miles of such lanes in the north, but they are ignored in the formula. They have to be surfaced and lit, which is especially important with regard to crime problems, and local authorities have to provide funding. Furthermore, such lanes generally divide long streets of Tyneside flats, but the children in flats indicator that is retained in the children's personal and social services formula does not include Tyneside flats. It usually refers to multi-storey flats. Councils such as Gateshead have a policy of not housing children in multi-storey flats for very good social reasons, but as a result, they are not included in the formula and suffer.

The north of England, which generally comes lowest in most social and economic indices, is still one of the regions that does worst out of the settlement. We heard from some of my hon. Friends representing Durham seats about its concerns about the settlement, but I should like to concentrate the rest of my remarks on my home town and constituency. Gateshead is a beacon council that is excellent by all the standards that the Government and the Audit Commission have set down, so we were surprised and concerned to find that we received a settlement of only 4.6 per cent. In comparison, Wiltshire received a settlement of 13 per cent. Far from transferring money from the south to the north, it seems that this process has operated the other way around.

The Minister very kindly agreed to meet my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin), my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam) and me, and members and officers of the council. That meeting took place on 13 January, and we were told that population loss was the reason for the problem with Gateshead's settlement. I was interested to hear the Minister tell the Opposition that we should compare like with like, as it was pointed out at that meeting that the populations of the neighbouring authorities—Newcastle and Sunderland—had reduced by 4 and 3 per cent. respectively, yet they had received 6 and 6.2 per cent. respectively and that Gateshead's population had reduced by only 2.9 per cent., yet it had received only a 4.9 per cent. increase. So it seems obvious to us that population loss was not the reason for the lower increase in grant.

We were then referred to the resident expert on local government finance—a civil servant who would tell us what was the reason. The answer was, "It must be because of other factors." Well, as hon. Members can imagine, that really was not the answer that we were looking for, so we pressed the expert and asked, "What other factors?" We were told, "It might be education." Again, that is not a satisfactory answer.

Finally, the local authority chief officers were invited to go back to Gateshead to look up the Department's website, where they would find all the figures and be able to work out for themselves why we only got 4.6 per cent. That may be satisfactory in some people's minds, but it is not in ours: we felt that we should have been given a proper answer at the time. Following that meeting, my hon. Friends, the leader of the council and I sent letters to Ministers, but I regret to say that, to date, no reply has been received and no explanation has been given about the 4.6 per cent. increase.

I can understand Ministers' argument that, with a complicated formula that covers the whole country, there will be winners and losers and that some people will get more than others. That is understandable, but we are entitled to an explanation as to how the increase has come about. If we had an explanation that we could understand, we might be able to accept it, however distasteful it might be, but, unfortunately, we have had no explanation.

We now find that Gateshead's final settlement has been reduced by a further £346,000, so the increase now works out at 4.3 per cent—even lower than before. It is certainly the lowest figure in Tyne and Wear. The next lowest in that area is 6 per cent., and it is certainly a lot lower than the 7.3 per cent. average for metropolitan districts. That is not acceptable.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West intervened on the Minister's speech to ask whether he had an explanation for the settlement. I am afraid that, again, we did not get a satisfactory answer. There is still no detailed explanation for that settlement. I accept the Minister's offer of a further meeting—I am sure that it will be taken up—but that is no comfort to us here and now, when we are asked to go through the Lobby to support a settlement that we find totally unsupportable. So unless a miracle happens and the Minister is able to give us a satisfactory reply in his winding-up speech, I have to say that the hon. Members who represent Gateshead will be unable to support the measure in the Lobby this evening.

7.17 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury): Today's report marks the end of a six-month consultation by the Government on local government funding. By any yardstick, it has been an opaque consultation, obfuscated by the Government themselves. The consultation trumpeted the replacing of the standard spending assessment of grants to local authorities, with a "fair funding formula", but not even post Einsteinium relativity theorem could be as difficult to work out as the formula that the Government have presented; nor can anyone say whether the new formula is fair because we have yet to see all the announcements on local authority funding. That is absurd.

The changes affect every service provided by every local authority, yet the Government have deliberately left councillors compromised by lack of information and lack of explanation. Consider Oxfordshire. Only two things are certain. The first is that council tax will have to rise by at least 13.4 per cent., so band D homeowners in Cherwell will pay £25 more because of today's announcement. The second is that local councillors who provide the services on which so many local people depend now have absolutely no idea what the service provision will be following today's announcement.

The imposition of the grants, ceilings, floors, and resource equalisations, which are now part of the compulsory mumbo-jumbo of local government finance settlements, has yet to be communicated to local authorities, including Oxfordshire. Lack of information creates uncertainty. Uncertainty leads to instability.

In a letter to ODPM officials in December 2002, Oxfordshire county council explained how the proposed settlement

"is extremely complicated and it has been difficult for us to understand the implications of the proposals. Some changes interrelate, making it very difficult to understand what is causing the change in our grant. Late release of information . . . has particularly caused problems in terms of providing speedy responses both internally and to media interest".

I would go further. The deliberate late release of information by Ministers has made it practically impossible for Oxfordshire county council and Cherwell district council to stabilise existing services. What do they decide to put out to tender if they do not know what stage their budget is at? How can they properly decide what represents best value, under the Government's own criteria, if they do not know what bit of their budget is doing what?

In the same letter, Oxfordshire county council explained that waiting until February 2003 for the Government to make most of the remaining announcements would

"leave us very little time to set our budget".

Yet here we are, early in February 2003, and councillors are confused. The local media are confused, and council tax payers are so confused that they find it difficult to know whom to hold to account.

Accountability is central to democracy. Without it, democracy is undermined. Of course Ministers and certain Labour councillors are trying to spin the story that any failures are of the councils themselves, but how so? Oxfordshire county council did not draw up the terms of last summer's consultation. It did not dream up thousands of pages of incomprehensible formulae and it did not decide to drip feed local authorities with important financial information that would clearly have a domino effect on their entire provision of key public services. All those are ministerial tactics.

I was initially encouraged when the ODPM announced a local government finance review. I suspect that last summer's consultation document was not intended to be taken to the beach for holiday reading. None the less, the consultation was important for local government and local services, as its aim was, apparently,

"new formulae that are fairer, simpler, more intelligible and more stable".

Sounds good, but then we get to the detail.

Buried away in the Government's document is a sentence that rather alarmingly admits that

"any system based on formulae cannot reflect all possible circumstances, so there will inevitably be an element of rough justice".

Then there is the caveat that rough justice

"tends to be increased as formulae are made simpler".

Council tax payers and business tax payers in Oxfordshire and elsewhere will now experience the Government's "rough justice".

I have referred to the council tax, but there will be no less an impact on business rates in Oxfordshire. Under the consultation options, it was clear that in every case business rates would have to rise by about 7 per cent. It is clear today that that will indeed happen. On that

[Tony Baldry]

basis, it was somewhat cynical of the Government to trumpet in an earlier local government finance Green Paper that

"we said we would give local authorities limited freedom to vary the business rate in their areas".

Under all those scenarios, it is plain that the Government will pass the buck to local authorities, which will either have to undermine local businesses with higher rates or under-resource local public services.

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tony Baldry: Sorry, but I am not going to give way. I have only a limited time.

Even more staggeringly, the same Green Paper claims that the business rate is

"not intended to substitute council tax".

Under all the projections for Oxfordshire's budget, the business rate and council tax will have to rise significantly to cover up shortfalls in Government funding. One can only infer that the Government believe that it is acceptable to use those local council tax hikes as a substitute for proper, sustained Government investment in local services.

The business rate rise is bad news for small businesses in north Oxfordshire. The council tax rise is bad news for everyone living in Oxfordshire. We are told that the Government grant floors will delay the impact of the changes to grant in Oxfordshire, but that is not a solution and floors do not produce fairness. Delay does not enhance stability.

Then there is the so-called resource equalisation. That term is intended to sound good, but it does not mean what it suggests. The Local Government Association explains resource allocation as

"dealing with the problem of the gap between total formulae spending and budgets . . . with a compensating increase in the assumed amount contributed from the council tax".

Put that mouthful into practice for Oxfordshire and it sounds much less promising.

Let us consider the last financial year for Oxfordshire county council. The current formulae dictated that it had to spend £20 million more than it was allocated. Council tax was then increased by an average of 10 per cent., as this "resource equalisation" suggests, but there was still an £11 million funding shortfall. In short, resource equalisation simply is not an escape route from the Government's failure properly to invest in local services. If that is what happened under 2001–02 conditions, how on earth would resource equalisation sustain services when council tax increased by nearly 14 per cent? It would not do so.

I remain cautiously optimistic, however, on the area cost adjustment. Under certain scenarios, Oxfordshire county council can lessen the impact of grant losses through top-ups via the ACA. However, that is dependent on Oxfordshire county council convincing the Government that the cost of living in Oxfordshire is as high as in the rest of the south-east. I can tell Ministers that it is. The Land Registry's latest quarterly survey showed that house prices in London are rising at a slower rate than those outside the capital in the south-east region. They are still increasing in Oxfordshire.

I am concerned that, in the past, the Government's local government finance arrangements have shown no intention of adjusting for the higher cost of living in the south-east compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. The ODPM might say that that was the reason for the review, but if that was the Government's policy, I am slightly at a loss to understand why pay for teachers, police officers and NHS staff recognises only the high cost of living in London and not the high cost of living in counties such as Oxfordshire.

I submit that it is irresponsible of the Government to present options that might lead to massive cuts in budgets for services. Elderly care will be destabilised and youth groups put under threat, and foster carers do not know where they stand. Not a single vulnerable group that depends on the support of social services provided by counties such as Oxfordshire can feel reassured that their lives will be made more stable or secure by today's announcement. This is not a fair formula. Sadly, it will often be the most vulnerable and the weakest in our communities who will suffer as a consequence of the Government's unfairness.

7.26 pm

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): Listening to all the gripes and grumbles from Opposition Members, it is difficult to believe that we are in the Chamber deciding how to divide up a bigger cake, but that is what we are doing. Only a few years ago, we were not discussing how much bigger the cake was, but scrambling around to see if we could get the biggest crumbs that had fallen on the floor after the slices had been taken out of the cake. That is the fundamental difference between today and the 1990s under the Conservative Administration. Conservative Members complain that their local council has received an increase of only 3 or 3.5 per cent., but their complaint is not about the size of the increase, but about its size compared with the increases of 8 or 9 per cent. that other authorities have received. They forget that when they were in power, a 3.5 per cent. increase would have been the envy of most councils in the country, because most got increases of less than that, or even negative increases.

The Conservative Front-Bench spokesman says—without breaking into a smile—that his party would introduce a fairer and less party political system. It was difficult to listen to him. When he was pressed about what that fairer and non-party political system would be, we heard not that he had a system, nor even that he had a commission searching for a system. He could not name the members of his commission, but said that at some stage he would appoint a commission, whose members could be anyone, to try to devise a system that he had already concluded would be fairer and would give more to his Back-Bench colleagues, although at whose expense he would not say. That was an incredible statement: after all the time they have spent looking, the Opposition have not even set up a mechanism to find an alternative. When we get the commission and its great works are performed, no doubt its first job will be to decide how to work a grant distribution formula within a policy of a 20 per cent. overall cut in public expenditure. It will be interesting to see how all councils can benefit and get more under such a regime.

Then we come to the Liberal Democrats. They are nothing if not consistent. They never have a policy or say how much they would spend. They always wait for the Government to say how much more they will spend, then say that they would spend even more. Theirs is a wholly consistent approach. It is not really a policy—more an abdication of policy—but at least we recognise where they are coming from.

Anyone who believed at the beginning of the process that we would somehow come up with a settlement that would determine how to distribute billions of pounds to local authorities and that anyone in the street could understand immediately on first reading was living in an unreal world. Everyone knew that whatever settlement we came up with would be relatively complicated. We wanted a system that was fairer and that could be explained more easily—I think that Ministers have been able to do that—but we knew that it would still be complicated. There is always a trade-off between fairness and simplicity: a really simple system will contain more elements of rough justice—at least the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) acknowledged that. Everyone recognises that a degree of fairness requires a degree of complication. Either those Opposition Members who criticised the complexity and lack of simplicity are extremely naïve, or they were speaking with party political tongue in cheek.

One of the new system's fundamental achievements is, as I said in an intervention, that it is so much fairer. Its only remit is to take the amount of money that the Government believe is appropriate to spend on local authorities and to decide how to distribute it. I accept that there can be different views about whether it achieves that fairly, and some hon. Members will feel that their authorities are not being treated as fairly as they should be, but it is fundamentally different from the previous system, which not only sought to distribute grant but had the additional objective of specifying the level of spend for every local authority as determined by the Government, and, if those authorities overspent, to bring in a system that has varied over the years to penalise or cap them. It was a system of central Government control over local councils, local democracy and local expenditure. This system does away with that and that is why it is so much fairer and more democratic, and puts life back into local democracy in Britain. I welcome that.

I want to make one or two suggestions about certain elements of the new proposals where some difficulties remain. The Select Committee, of which I am a member, made some criticisms and it is fair that we should deal with them. I have one or two slight reservations about the area cost adjustment, but it is remarkable how few people today have slammed that. Year after year I have listened to debates in the Chamber where virtually every hon. Member has said that the system is unfair, unacceptable and must be changed. Let us at least give the Minister a little credit for going some way—I think quite a long way—to resolving that real problem, which has been fundamental to many criticisms of the system over the years.

The census is not directly the Minister's problem, but it is not right. There are problems. Everyone can feel that instinctively. Sheffield has even lost some of the data and does not know how many forms were returned, so it cannot calculate the under-reporting. It has had to do an estimate based on other authorities. We suggested Nottingham and Leeds, but it took other authorities further afield, including Darlington, for its comparisons, and we think that it is at least 2 per cent. out on its estimates, which can mean a lot of money in terms of grant to Sheffield. There clearly are problems with the system, and we must carry on trying to solve those.

The issue of ring fencing remains. I recognise and respect the Minister's commitment to reduce ring fencing but, with the apparent changes of definition, it is sometimes a little difficult to understand whether it is being done. I simply ask the Minister please to keep on with that. It is important if local authorities are to have that extra freedom and local democracy is to have that extra rejuvenation that I mentioned previously.

Some difficulties clearly remain about the relationship between the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Department for Education and Skills. Passporting is not totally unacceptable because the Government have made it clear that education is their priority, so getting money into schools is something that we should welcome. If the Liberal Democrats want to argue for less money to my schools in Sheffield, I am happy, as I said before, to put it on the leaflets and explain where they are coming from, because that seemed to be the end result of what they were arguing for earlier. However, I accept that there has to be a little more evidence of joined-up thinking between Departments.

I thank the Minister for clarifying one particular issue on which the Select Committee spent quite a lot of time, and that was whether there was a requirement to passport on the increase from SSA to FSS in social services. I accept that that is a formulaic increase, which is putting more spending into the resource equalisation procedure, and it is not meant simply to be passed on. Certainly authorities could not have done that within a realistic council tax increase. It is helpful that the Minister and the Secretary of State have now made that clear, as have Health Ministers. I thank the Minister for that. I thank him even though Sheffield has had only a 4 per cent. increase for social services. We were told that there has been a switch within the social services formula from funding the elderly to funding children's services. It happens that Sheffield has a large number of elderly people and therefore loses out on that. Nevertheless, even though we were disappointed with that 4 per cent. increase, Sheffield still has a little money to begin the process of putting money into aids and adaptations, to do away with the horrific policy of the previous Liberal Democrat-controlled administration in Sheffield, whereby elderly people who could not get in and out of their bath and wanted a little financial help for a shower, were told that if they could manage a strip wash such help would not be available. That sort of policy is a throwback to the era when the last Liberal Government were in power, and we should not have such a policy in this century. A little money has been made available to begin the process of ending that arrangement, and we can welcome that.

In the end, for all the arguments about passporting or about amounts, Sheffield will get a 6 per cent. increase. That is slightly below the metropolitan average and slightly above the national average, but it is double the inflation rate. The council tax settlement will probably result in increases of about 7 per cent., which is less than

[Mr. Clive Betts]

the 9 per cent. about which the Liberal Democrats were arguing. We can argue that other authorities will receive 8 or 9 per cent. extra, and Sheffield would have liked such an increase, but 6 per cent. is a good settlement and the national settlement is also good.

I come now to the funding review. The crucial issue is giving local authorities more responsibility and more power to raise their own revenue. That is another key element for local democracy. I ask the Minister to be brave in the review. I would love it if the Government set an objective of raising locally at least 50 per cent. of the money spent by councils. Ministers say that they want the review to achieve that. I ask that it is not prescribed in its thinking. Let it take a genuine blue skies approach; let it think the unthinkable. It simply should ask, "How can we raise the extra money?" If we start with prescription, we will end up with a review that addresses only the margins, and that will not achieve the fundamental change in funding arrangements that I would like.

7.36 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I hope that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) will excuse me if I do not pursue his interesting arguments, but in the time available I have one or two points of my own to make.

I think that we have just gone past Groundhog Day, but I think that, listening to this debate, we all had the impression that we have been here before. It is absurd that in a debate of this importance some six Back Benchers get called, and I hope that in future we can have more time to debate what is a fundamental redistribution of a huge sum.

My case against the settlement is that the Government have made it virtually impossible to deliver not the commitments that councillors have made, but those that the Government have made. They are willing the end but they have not willed the means. They have made it clear that they want to drive up the standard of public services, particularly education and social services, and I share that ambition. However, the impact of these redistributive proposals makes that impossible not only in my Hampshire constituency but in swathes of the south-east. As I said in the last debate on these matters, what the Chancellor bestoweth in his Budget, the Deputy Prime Minister taketh away in the revenue support grant settlement.

Monday's letter, which we all received from the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, said:

"Our proposals for the funding of local authorities' revenue expenditure next year provide another significant boost to enable them to make real improvements in their services."

He went on to say that councils should be able to do that

"while maintaining reasonable levels of council tax".

However, to avoid cuts in services Hampshire county council, which was recently awarded top marks for efficiency, is having to increase council tax by 15 per cent.

The Minister will say that Hampshire's grant increase is 3.7 per cent. or £23 million, but the budget increase is 8.2 per cent., or £78 million. A standstill budget would be 7 per cent., so the gap has to be met by a council tax increase of 15 per cent. Does the Minister consider that increase reasonable? It gets worse: Hampshire county council has to passport an increase of 5.9 per cent. to the schools budget, as required by the Department for Education and Skills. That is £26 million, £3 million more than the whole of the grant increase that the council gets from the Government, so that has already been swallowed up by a mandatory increase in one service, leaving minus £3 million in grant to achieve the Minister's ambition for real improvements, coupled with a reasonable increase in council tax. It is simply not believable.

With minus £3 million in grant left, the county council has to address everything else, including the pressures on social services. Last year, because of the lack of supply, prices rose by 13 per cent., and they may go up by 10 per cent. next year. Added to that are all the other inescapable costs: the increase in national insurance contributions, increases in the landfill tax and the crazy idea of fining social services departments for bed blocking. I hope that the House of Lords, however it is composed, will defeat that Bill.

The Minister made a plea for certainty and stability. I support that. He said that there would be no more changes in the formula. However, we are worried about the changes that have already been announced. Will he shortly announce the floors and ceilings for the year after next so that local authorities have some certainty in their forward planning?

If the Minister hoped that the councillors of Hampshire would carry the can for the council tax increase, I have news for him. Councillor Ken Thornber, leader of the county council, ably supported by Hampshire's Members of Parliament, has led a vigorous campaign, which received extensive coverage in the local press. The Hands Off Hampshire campaign has explained what is going on to ratepayers. They have got the message that the Government believe that, in Hampshire, we are all healthy and wealthy and suitable targets for redistribution. They know that they will pay an extra £2 a week on average because the Government have switched resources.

Of course, people in Hampshire acknowledge that other parts of the country have greater needs and fewer resources. We have no difficulty with the regional support grant reflecting that. However, we believe that what is happening is beyond what can objectively be justified and that it is driven by political imperatives. I predict that people in Hampshire will respond by ensuring that the political motives that have driven up the council tax are changed at the earliest opportunity through the ballot box.

7.41 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): As many of my hon. Friends have said, the debate is so important, given that it involves £39.9 billion of public money directly from the Government and considerably more in council tax, that we should have more time for it in future. I urge Government business managers to ascertain whether we can hold a similar debate shortly.

Conservative Members made excellent contributions, notably my hon. Friends the Members for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) and for Banbury (Tony Baldry) and

my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). They point to the genuine difficulties that they and other similar southern authorities experience. That is not surprising. The grant increase is 5.9 per cent., which amounts to £3.2 billion. The increase in national insurance takes up £280 million; that in pension contributions takes up £100 million; and that in the local government pay settlement above inflation takes up £490 million. A large part of the 5.9 per cent. is therefore already swallowed up by Government-imposed increases.

The Minister said that local authorities had a choice of whether they wanted to pay the increases. How can they choose whether to pay increases in national insurance, pensions or a nationally negotiated local government pay settlement? They have no choice. The average increase in the country is only 3.86 per cent. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills tells us that we must pass on an average passported increase of 6 per cent. to education. As either the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) or the hon. Member for Ludlow (Matthew Green) said, that is roughly three quarters of any local authority budget.

It is hardly surprising that many southern authorities must make a whopping double-figure increase in their council tax to maintain services and make up the shortfall. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire said, as well as the increases that the Government have imposed directly on local authorities, his authority faces an increase in landfill tax, huge increases for waste disposal and problems with the social services block. Many authorities also have a problem with the census. That leaves some southern authorities in genuine difficulty. No wonder their council tax payers will suffer a huge increase.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: I wonder whether my hon. Friend knows that west Somerset, which has the smallest district council in England, has got just over £200,000 and cannot carry out its duties. My hon. Friend is right. The chief executive is sick to death of Government intervention.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: One of the Government's great claims when they reviewed spending distribution for local government was that local authorities would have more discretion. Not only has the settlement been mean but the Government have exerted more control over passported increases. Local authorities therefore have less discretion over how to spend their money on other services.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): Does my hon. Friend agree that the review gave the Government an opportunity to put right historic anomalies caused by the old system? The London borough of Havering, for example, has experienced perversely low settlements for a long time, as the Minister knows. Instead of taking the opportunity to do the honourable thing, he has given Havering the lowest increase in London—3.5 per cent.—and made the borough's financial difficulties a hundred times worse.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I was about to say something about London authorities' increases.

Andrew Bennett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I will give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee shortly, but I will not give way to anyone else.

Conservative London boroughs have benefited from a 3.72 per cent. increase on average, whereas their Labour counterparts have received 5.6 per cent. That may not seem much of a difference, but by golly, it is a big difference given the budgets with which those authorities are dealing. The Minister of State's borough, for instance, has received a 7.6 per cent. increase, while one of its closer neighbours, Richmond-upon-Thames, has received only 3.5 per cent. How can such differentials be justified? One has a strong suspicion—even if it is not based on fact—that this Labour Government have treated Labour authorities in London more generously than they have treated Conservative authorities.

Andrew Bennett: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will exemplify this idea of meanness. Is he saying that the Conservatives are committing more money? Or are the Conservatives actually saying that they will take money from some authorities and give it to those that they think have done badly in this regard?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman would have a point if his party were not imposing increases that local authorities will have to fund. If this were a real 5.9 per cent. increase, without all the tax increases imposed by the Government, we would not be whingeing so much; but when the Government impose extra duties and extra costs on local authorities, of course authorities have no alternative but to raise council tax to double figures.

As well as all the problems I have mentioned, there are significant other problems. Members have mentioned a problem with the social services block. How can it be right to take money from the elderly and give it to children's services? Surely both are vital services, for which authorities should be fully funded. Authorities such as my own—already mentioned by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton—a large proportion of whose social services budget must go towards care of the elderly, will be particularly badly hit. It really is mean-spirited of the Government to start saving and penny-pinching at the expense of the elderly.

Many Members have described increases in their areas as unacceptable. One reason why 12 authorities have got into particular difficulties is that the passported education increase is higher than the total increase. The Local Government Association is Labour-dominated. Its chairman, Sir Jeremy Beecham, has written to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the right hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), saying that given the turbulence in funding this year the association strongly believes that new powers that a former junior education Minister had assured the House would be used only in exceptional circumstances should not be used. In his reply, the Secretary of State recognised that in some authorities the grant increase

[Mr Clifton-Brown]

did not wholly cover—I would say "does not cover"—the increase in school funding, but declined to give an undertaking not to use the reserve power in 2003–04.

It must be wrong, in the case of any authority anywhere in the land, for the Government to insist that a certain amount must be spent on education and then not to fund it properly. The only consequence can be that authorities having to spend too much on education must cut spending on other services.

This is redistribution of local government funds on a grand scale. Not only must we deal with resources equalisation, but couple that with the pooling of capital receipts, the moving of money from one housing revenue account to another, and the repayment of huge debts, and what we have is a redistribution from southern authorities to northern, Labour-dominated authorities. That cannot be a fair system.

7.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) gets himself into a terrible muddle. I was very interested to hear that he calls this a mean settlement. That explains why he was whingeing so much. If the settlement is so mean, does he completely dissociate himself from the comments of the shadow Chief Secretary, who says that he wants to cut public expenditure by 20 per cent.? Does he not feel that such a cut would be even more mean and penny-pinching, and would inflict considerable damage on vital public services?

It was also very interesting to hear the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) announce that he is not content with this settlement, and that the Conservative party will set up a commission to look into local government finance. I wish him luck with that commission, and we shall certainly watch that development with great interest. We will remind him of that promise next year, and see how he is progressing. Perhaps people such as Dame Shirley Porter are working on that issue.

Many contributions were made during the debate, and I want to pick out a few from the Members who are still present. The hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) complained about the settlement for Oxfordshire county council. I should remind him that when he was a Minister during the final three years of the previous Conservative Administration—I think that he was a Minister—Oxfordshire county council received only a 2 per cent. increase, but under this Administration it has received a 6.6 per cent. increase over the past three years. I should tell the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), who was also a Minister during the final three years of the previous Conservative Administration, that Hampshire county council received only 1 per cent., on average, during that time. Under a Labour Government, it has received 4.9 per cent., on average, over the past three years.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) *rose—*

Mr. Leslie: The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who was the Minister with responsibility for local government during the final three years of the previous Conservative Administration, awarded an average of only 3 per cent. under his own stewardship. However, the Labour Government have awarded 5.8 per cent., on average.

Sir Paul Beresford: The Minister is forgetting the other side of the coin: the best value, the changes in committee structure, all the auditors and the cost in extra staff to meet all the liabilities that he and his Government are imposing on local authorities. He should balance that against it.

Mr. Leslie: To echo a phrase that was used earlier, I think that I have touched a nerve. There have been a number of changes in the settlement, in the light of the consultation.

Richard Younger-Ross: Devon county council is run by a coalition of all parties, including Labour. It estimates that the council tax rise will be £2.60 a week; otherwise, it will have to cut services. Will the Minister tell his Labour group leader and the other leaders in Devon whether they should cut services or raise the council tax by £2.60 a week?

Mr. Leslie: The hon. Gentleman's county council is receiving a grant increase of 4.2 per cent., which is way above the rate of inflation, and Teignbridge district council is receiving a 5.9 per cent. increase. I do not understand his references to excessive increases in council tax, because they just do not exist.

The hon. Members for Brentwood and Ongar, for Mole Valley and for Cotswold alleged a north-south divide in the allocation of resources. I know from what we have heard so far that some Members from the south think that the north is getting too much, and that some Members from the north think that the south is getting too much. The truth is that there are big gains in every single region: for example, 8.4 per cent. in Conservative-controlled Wokingham unitary council; 8.5 per cent. in Tory-controlled Cambridgeshire county council; 7.1 per cent. in Bedfordshire county council; and 8 per cent. in South Gloucestershire council. I could go on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) expressed concern about the 4.3 per cent. settlement for Gateshead, but I should point out that there has been a 33 per cent. increase in neighbourhood renewal funding. I accept that the settlement is less than for some other metropolitan authorities, but it is not catastrophic, and I hope that he will look again at the matter.

Mr. Pickles: I have listened to the Minister carefully. Would it be a fair summary to say that what he told Barnet council—that it should not worry as no money was involved—is what he is telling the House?

Mr. Leslie: No. Every authority, including Barnet, is receiving an increase in grant above the rate of inflation, and that has not happened before.

Many hon. Members—including, among others, my hon. Friends the Members for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman), and the right hon. Member for North-

West Hampshire mentioned floors and ceilings, which ensure that all authorities are protected. The process has been generally welcomed. Stability in the system is extremely important, and we foresee that floors and ceilings will be part of the finance settlement for the foreseeable future.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) asked about the ring fencing of grants. We want to move away from ring fencing, which for the coming financial year is 12.4 per cent. but which will fall below 10 per cent. in the financial year 2005–06.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) hit the nail on the head in his excellent speech: the settlement is giving significant increases. We are debating how to divide a bigger cake. Since taking office, the Government have raised local government funding by 25 per cent. in real terms, compared with a real-terms reduction of 7 per cent. under the Conservatives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe was right also to highlight the changes to the area cost adjustment. There has been less criticism of that matter than in previous years. The Government's approach is more sophisticated, and specifically reflects individual authorities' circumstances. The old area cost adjustment was arbitrarily confined to London and the south-east. The new area cost adjustment recognises that higher-cost areas border the south-east and exist in some of the major northern conurbations.

Several hon. Members raised the question of funding for social services. Resources for personal social services are increasing in real terms over the next three years by 6.3 per cent., 4.5 per cent. and 6.3 per cent. That represents an average annual increase of 5.7 per cent. on a like-for-like basis. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar said that the settlement amounted to robbery from the shires, but that is complete nonsense. Shire district councils have benefited from an average increase in grant of 7.4 per cent., and shire counties are getting 5.7 per cent. more, or £690 million extra in grant. We have found a way to reflect questions of rurality and sparsity in the grant formula, and that is how we have managed to secure the increases that we have made.

Several hon. Members rightly pointed out that there is concern about the census, and how the population figures will impact on the settlement. We have discussed the matter with the Treasury. We have to use the best data available, on a nationally consistent basis. The ONS is confident about the information that it has but, if any revisions are made, we shall have to look carefully at their potential impact.

We have listened carefully, and we have consulted at great length about this formula settlement. We believe that it is one of the most radical settlements for local government finance for a generation. The new formula spend-share approach is very different from the old standard spending assessment. We no longer tell councils what to spend. The buck has to stop with local councils, which must make their own judgments about council tax levels.

The new formula is transparent, and based more on evidence of need. We believe in investing more and in supporting local government. The settlement grants £51 billion to local government. As I said, the Government have increased spending on local government by 25 per cent. in real terms. That contrasts with the 7 per cent. real-terms cut by the previous Conservative Administration. That is the Opposition's track record.

The choice for the public could not be clearer. Labour believes in improving services and investing more. The Conservatives plan to cut that vital spending by 20 per cent. and damage public services. They never gave an above-inflation increase

It being six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [28 January].*

The House divided: Ayes 316, Noes 190.

Division No. 81] **[7:59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Caborn, rh Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom *(Tooting)*
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel

Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Organ, Diana
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Dan Norris and
Joan Ryan

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Doughty, Sue
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip

Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mark Francois and Mr. David Wilshire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance (England) Report 2003–04, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3rd February, be approved.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *then put the remaining Question required to be put at that hour.*

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance (England) Grant Report 2001–02: Amending Report 2003, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3rd February, be approved.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

ADJOURNMENT (FEBRUARY)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 13th February, do adjourn till Monday 24th February 2003.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation),

FAMILY LAW

That the draft Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, which were laid before this House on 9th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

Question agreed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I propose to put together the Questions on the three proceeds of crime motions.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation),

PROCEEDS OF CRIME

That the draft Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Investigations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Code of Practice) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.

That the draft Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Disclosure of Information) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.

That the draft Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Exemptions from Civil Recovery) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 22nd January, be approved.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

Question agreed to.

Horse Passports

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

8.13 pm

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): I start from the proposition that it is an essential duty of Government to try to minimise the bureaucracy that our constituents must deal with in their daily lives. I want Ministers to get out of bed every day and ask, "How can I make life easier? What rule can I scrap today?" The saga of horse passports would seem to suggest that today's Ministers get out of bed each day and do precisely the opposite.

By the end of December, all horses, ponies and donkeys will have to have a passport. It is not for travelling or for sale or purchase; it is just for existing. There are no exceptions. As one newspaper put it,

"every child's pony, every happy hacker . . . every retired equine, even every donkey, mule and zebra must have a passport."

Let us clear about where that requirement came from. European Commission decision 93/623 required registered horses born after 1998 to be accompanied by a passport when they are moved. The intention was to simplify the trade in pure-bred horses. Commission decision 2000/68 amended that decision to ensure that horses treated with certain drugs did not enter the food chain. Under that decision, all horses will require a passport setting out all medicines taken if the horse is ultimately intended for human consumption.

The Government decided after consultation to implement the directive by introducing a compulsory system of passports for all horses, backed by fines of up to £5,000 or six months' imprisonment. Four questions need to be answered. Is a passport scheme necessary, did the Government consult properly, is their proposal on implementing the decision the right one, and have they fully understood the drawbacks of their scheme? [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] My hon. Friends pre-empt me: the answer is no to all four questions.

The Government should have fought the scheme to a standstill in Europe. Pigs and sheep do not have passports. Cows now have passports, but they do not include any information about drugs. At the abattoir, the farmer is simply asked whether any drugs that could enter the food chain have been administered in the past six months. The same procedure could apply to horses, especially in countries such as the UK, where the overwhelming majority of horses never enter the food chain—and a very good thing too. European countries such as France that eat horse flesh import much of it from countries outside the European Union. Will this bureaucratic nonsense be imposed on those countries? Of course not. The EU decision will not even serve the purpose it is intended to serve; it should have been resisted.

Will the Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life pledge to prevent other such proposals? It would be ridiculous to have passports for every animal that is reared for, or may conceivably end up in, the food chain, including chickens, ducks and pigs. Farmers who are suffering under dreadful bureaucracy will want a clear answer.

I do not believe that the Government consulted adequately. The press release from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that announced the compulsory passport proposal said that

"it has the support of the equine industry as represented by the British Horse Industry Confederation (the BHIC). The BHIC was set up to represent the views of the equine industry to government."

My evidence is that the situation is much more complex. I have received submissions from a large number of organisations that either oppose passports or believe that the Government have got it badly wrong, including the British Palomino Society, the Donkey Breed Society, the National Equine Welfare Council, the Pony Club, British Dressage, the Association of British Riding Schools and many others.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am president of the Association of British Riding Schools and a former consultant to the BHIC. The association opposes the proposal, and the BHIC, which DEFRA cites as being in favour of the proposal, is split down the middle. Two members are in favour, two against.

Mr. Cameron: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and shall talk later about the response that the ABRS has given me.

I cannot claim that I have conducted a consultation on the same scale as the Government or the BHIC. However, some of the bodies I have mentioned were not listed in the British Equestrian Federation consultation—that was supposed to be part of the BHIC's work. The Donkey Breed Society said that

"this has been a fait accompli and we have not received the support from DEFRA we would have liked."

Some organisations involved in the consultation have major misgivings, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said. Some of the organisations have many thousands of members. The Association of British Riding Schools, for example, represents 65,000 horses; the Pony Club has 33,000 members. That is just the organisations—how much does the ordinary owner of a horse, pony or donkey know about the plans? I conducted a telephone survey of small livery yards and riding schools in my constituency, and their answer was, "Virtually nothing."

I have a nagging doubt about the approach of the BHIC, which is focused on the top end of the industry, and works with the British Horseracing Board and the Thoroughbred Breeders Association. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) knows, those organisations are vital. However, racehorse owners have always had a lot of paperwork. I am concerned about the small owners, people who own a horse for hacking, keep a mule as a pet, or have a pony for the children. The British Horse Society, attempting to justify the introduction of compulsory passports, said:

"This new step will mean that for the first time ever we shall know exactly how many horses and ponies there are in this country. This will give the BHS greater leverage with Government, both local and central."

I simply do not believe that that is a solid justification for this sort of bureaucracy. If I were to be unkind, I would call it slightly self-serving. The ABRS said that

the consultation was seriously flawed, and called the BHIC "unrepresentative and undemocratic". I cannot say for certain whether it is right, but I ask the Minister what he will do to seek assurances about this matter before he goes ahead with this misguided compulsory scheme.

My third question was whether the Government have got it right in bringing in a compulsory system. The DEFRA press release gives three justifications for the compulsory system.

First, it says,

"it may lessen the incentive to keep poor quality horses in poor quality condition."

I have to tell the Minister that the reverse could be the case. If owners do not obtain a passport, they may find it very difficult to get treatment from a vet, and they may find it very difficult to find someone who will take the horse at the end of its life.

Secondly, the Government claim—and this is extraordinary—that the system could help cut the over-breeding of wild ponies. I find that hard to believe. One would have thought that wild ponies would have to be exempt from compulsory passports, but apparently not. The vision of local authority inspectors chasing across Dartmoor trying to check that two mating ponies have the correct paperwork is one to which I cannot do full justice—perhaps the Minister can do so when he replies.

Thirdly, according to the Government, having all horses registered would help the equine industry to use the breeding data to improve the quality of the British herd. All that I can say to that is "Oh, please!" The herd, if one can use such a phrase for such a diverse group of animals, is permanently improving anyway. The breeding of great racehorses, the saving of rare breeds and the production of great hunters have happened for decades, even centuries, without the need for wretched passports.

In fact, the opposite could happen. The Shetland Pony Association states:

"Many of our members have been involved in breeding for many generations and see this as the final straw, bureaucracy at its worst . . . Before we know it our native UK breeds will be in dire straits and part of our heritage will be gone for ever."

There are alternatives to a compulsory system. We should start from the proposition that the vast majority of British horses will not enter the human food chain. As the website "Saddle-up" puts it,

"If there is no intention for a horse to be sold for slaughter for human consumption, it does not need a passport. So why the need for universal passports?"

I ask the Minister to look again at this issue.

Could, at the very least, the Select Committee be asked to carry out a quick inquiry, take evidence and make a recommendation?

It may be worth considering the solution offered by the Spotted Pony Society, which I consider to be right. It suggests a simple order stating:

"No equine shall either be exported or allowed to enter the food chain unless accompanied by a passport containing the duly completed section referred to."

That would satisfy the directive; no more, no less.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful case against this dismal proposal. Does he agree that the Government would have been far better occupied in trying to deal with the appalling conditions in which tens of thousands of horses are shipped to France for food consumption, rather than monkeying around with British horses and ponies, which are already kept to a very high standard?

Mr. Cameron: That is absolutely right. In fact, what the Government are suggesting could make matters worse, because if we have more of these passports more horses could find themselves transported in horrible conditions right the way across Europe. That is what the Government system will make possible.

Perhaps the Minister could tell us what progress other European countries have made in implementing the directive. I suspect that we all know the answer.

My fourth and final question was whether the Government had fully understood all the drawbacks of the proposed compulsory system. I think that the answer again is a solid "No".

The first drawback is the cost. There are estimates that the passports will cost around £20 each, or perhaps a little more. There are estimates of 850,000 horses in the UK. So even if half already have passports—and they do not—that is around £9 million of new cost.

The situation could be much worse. If every horse will need a vet's examination before the passport is issued, the cost could be as much as £100. Think of the small riding school or livery stable. They suffered from foot and mouth disease, because they could not go off the roads. They are desperately worried about the Hunting Bill, and now they have this.

Mrs. Hayes has a riding stables near Lincoln. She has 16 horses. She believes that the system could cost her £1,600. That is a lot of money for a small business. Another owner of a BHS and ABRS-approved riding centre has written to me saying that

"the scheme will put an unacceptable burden on riding schools . . . the issue has been misrepresented to the Equestrian Industry, who are only now waking up to its implications."

The Pony Club is thoroughly depressed about the measure. It wrote to me about

"the financial burden put on our members by yet another cost."

The British Driving Association, which represents 15,000 people and 30,000 horses, makes the point that the cost of employing a vet will rise. It states:

"It will be compulsory for every single medicine . . . to be recorded in the passport . . . from wormers to simple painkillers . . . costs will inevitably rise to cover the costs of vets filling in details."

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the people who are most likely to go through all the palaver and pay all the costs will be the responsible horse owners, who should not be checked on in the first place?

Mr. Cameron: My hon. Friend is entirely right. There will be people who have owned horses for many years, but will not comply. As a result, it will be those horses that suffer—a point that I shall deal with at the end of my speech.

British Dressage makes with great vigour its point about the situation in which vets will be placed. What will happen if an animal does not have a passport?

[Mr. Cameron]

The owner may feel prohibited from calling a vet, so the horse will suffer. Alternatively, the owner might go to the black market to get the drugs, so the horse could be mistreated. If a proper vet is called, he or she might feel inhibited about administering drugs that cannot be written into a passport. What happens if somebody is out riding without their passport and they have an accident? The Palomino Society asks:

"would the owner be expected to produce the passport before veterinary attention could be given?"

It goes on to say

"Surely such non treatment would be in breach of the Royal College's recommendations."

There is also the situation that could occur at the end of a horse's life. As I said, there will be two types of passport. The first says that the equid is not for human consumption. The second, with all the drugs information, will allow the animal to enter the human food chain. What happens if the horse changes ownership? The horse with the first type of passport, which cannot possibly go to the slaughterhouse, might be dumped or let loose because the alternatives, such as incineration, can be expensive. The situation could be even worse. As one respondent to my trawling exercise said:

"There is therefore a real danger of an illegal live export trade developing."

We do not want that to happen.

There is much evidence that animal welfare will suffer. The Shetland Pony Society told me that many people will

"just abandon the ponies rather than face the passport cost or a possible fine. The welfare implications of this are horrendous."

What about horses that need certain medicines, but whose owners are worried about their being entered on to the passport towards the end of those horses' lives? As the British Driving Society puts it:

"This could result in sick animals being destroyed because they cannot receive live-saving medication and elderly, retired horses denied medicines which . . . ensure them a comfortable old age."

How will the new bureaucracy work? What steps have the Government taken to consult local authorities? After all, they will be policing the new power. Are we really going to have another new group of snoopers and inspectors? Finally, will the compulsory system be implemented fairly? The ABRS has said that it is inequitable because

"the only individuals who will be inspected on a regular basis are the licensed riding schools."

They will be pursued by the councils.

Some groups that back passports would support them only if the Minister agreed to go even further. The National Equine Welfare Council supports the policy only if it is

"linked to some form of permanent identification such as micro-chipping or freeze marking."

The International League for the Protection of Horses agrees. It concludes:

"Otherwise the cost and effort to both Government and charities is probably not worth while from a horse welfare point of view."

Mr. Soames rose—

Mr. Cameron: I shall not give way, as I believe that I am running a little short of time.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to set all those drawbacks and disadvantages against the perceived benefits and ask himself whether the case is made for a compulsory system. What is the mischief? What is the problem that we are trying to overcome? In this country, there is not really a problem, because we do not eat horses, so why the extra cost? I end where I began—with a plea about bureaucracy, regulation and this Government. My heart sank the other day when I read that the Government now have a Minister for the horse—it is probably this Minister—and even an official for the horse. Indeed, I can see three of them sitting in the loose boxes. The press release announcing those appointments said:

"We will be discussing with representatives of the industry how best to ensure that the horse plays its full part in our efforts to strengthen the rural economy."

I would say to the Minister that, frankly, the horse is doing fine without him, so please do not start regulating, bureaucratising and strangling the creature. We in this country have a vibrant economy of stables, schools, breeders, businesses and ventures. Let them thrive. We now have half as many DEFRA officials as farmers. As regulation rises, the prospects for farmers fall, so please do not go there. I ask the Minister: please, think again.

8.30 pm

The Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life (Alun Michael): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) on obtaining this debate and providing the opportunity to illuminate the issue of horse passports. I cannot congratulate him quite so enthusiastically on the way in which he opened the debate; he appeared to be trying to audition for the role of pantomime dame, with a sort of childish chorus around him lead by the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames). That is the sort of jocular attempt to ridicule anything that is being done that one occasionally expects from the Europhobes on the Opposition Benches. I was particularly surprised about the criticism of the British Horse Society.

Mr. Cameron: I hope that the amount of time that I spent listening to people involved in the industry was obvious from the amount of material that I cited, and all I ask of the Minister—he probably cannot answer all my questions now—is that he take the issue seriously, because it will affect a lot of our constituents. I did not make any jocular reference, and I hope that he will not do so. Let us just get on with the issue.

Alun Michael: I was referring to the hon. Gentleman's manner; he did not sound very serious.

Mr. Soames: Nonsense.

Alun Michael: I am sorry but the hon. Member for Witney should expect criticism if he introduces a debate as he did.

The hon. Gentleman also criticised the fact that we now have a Minister for the horse and an official for the horse. The first Minister for the horse was Lord Donoughue, who has always been passionate about the place of the horse in British society, and it was a good initiative. However, when I took over the responsibility

on becoming a DEFRA Minister, I found that ministerial enthusiasm was not matched by official back-up in the Department. I felt that it was important that officials should have the expertise needed to work with the industry.

The hon. Gentleman sought to ridicule that initiative, but it was strongly welcomed by organisations such as the British Horse Society, the British Equine Federation and many others, because they realised that the Government are seeking to work with the industry to try to ensure that the possible contribution to British society and the rural economy is developed.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned something that I suggest needs a lot of careful thought: he said that some of the organisations that have spoken to him have proposed using microchips, rather than the passport option. The problem is that we have to meet the requirements of the European legislation, which is very specific on the nature of the passport. There is something in the microchip option, and I have some sympathy with those in the industry who have pointed in that direction. Of course, there are parts of the industry that use that technique without its being compulsory in any way, but we have to meet the requirements.

A full consultation exercise on introducing horse passports was carried out in the summer of 2000. The main objective of the legislation is to provide assurance across Europe that horses that have been administered with medicines that have not been authorised for use in food-producing animals cannot be slaughtered for human consumption. A degree of certainty was being sought in introducing that legislation.

In deciding how to implement the measure, the Government listened to the concerns of the equine industry and acted accordingly. Full implementation of the new legislation—whereby all horses are required to have a passport, not just those entering the human food chain—received the support of the majority of those in the equine industry, who view it not only as a safety measure to prevent horses administered with prohibited medicines from entering the food chain, but as a way of improving the breeding and welfare of horses.

The Government therefore announced on 14 February 2002 that all horses will have to have a passport to bring the UK in line with European legislation. We set an implementation date of 31 December 2003. Part of the reason for doing that was to give the industry full opportunity to plan and prepare for that implementation date. I emphasise the fact that the UK must comply with the legislation. This is a case not of regulation being imposed on the industry, but of the Government listening to the industry on how EU legislation should be implemented in this country.

The Government agreed with the industry's wishes that passports should continue to be issued by the various private sector organisations, particularly the breed societies that have been issuing horse passports for years.

Mr. Gray: Absolutely scandalous.

Alun Michael: It would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman, who is occupying the Opposition Front Bench, listened to what is being said instead of muttering in the way that he does. He has already intervened with a declaration of interest—

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Alun Michael: No. This is Back Benchers' time and I am responding to a debate introduced by a Back Bencher.

Mr. Gray: Nonsense.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. We should conduct the debate in a slightly more civilised way.

Alun Michael: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The advent of passports for all horses will create a level playing field, because all horses, not just pedigrees as at present, will have to have a passport. That will remove the perceived discrimination against registering pedigree horses. The loss of important blood lines will be threatened if those horses are not registered.

Mr. Soames: Will the Minister give way?

Alun Michael: No. With regard to the cost of a passport, 56 organisations and associations are approved to issue horse passports, which are valid for the lifetime of the horse. With all horses requiring a passport, we believe that the average cost will come down to between £20 and £30. However, we understand that some organisations or associations may offer an even lower price for passports for horses owned by riding schools and charities.

The legislation will be enforced, as is normal for animal health legislation, by the local authorities. Passports will be required before a horse is sold, which will also help enforcement of the measure. For horses going to be slaughtered for human and pet consumption, enforcement at the slaughterhouse will be the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency. I am pleased that a large part of the equine industry supports the need for a passport for all equines.

In addition, since the announcement on 14 February last year, we have continued to listen to the concerns of particular sections of the industry, such as areas with semi-feral breeds, such as Dartmoor and the New Forest. I have met representatives of those concerned with the situation, and I am considering the case for special rules to apply in such areas. The issue is not simple and straightforward, which is why I have met people personally and ensured that there are meetings with my officials in order for their concerns to be taken on board.

I am aware that, more recently, concern has been raised about how the introduction of passports will impact on abattoirs that slaughter horses for human and pet consumption. We are considering whether and how it might be possible to minimise that impact. That is a serious point. We hope to send the draft legislation out to the industry for comment very shortly.

I am pleased that the Government are working with the industry to consider the BEF's proposals for a central horse database to be established on information

[Alun Michael]

supplied by the passport-issuing societies. The industry is very much in favour of that, and I met representatives personally to explore those possibilities at an early stage in introducing the legislation.

The database is a unique example of collaboration between the equine industry and the Government. The database will help the Government, because, for the first time, there will be information on the location of horses that could be crucial in a horse disease outbreak. That would provide more knowledge of the size of the horse population in the country—

Mr. Soames: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Alun Michael: I am not sure of the normal conventions of an Adjournment debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought that I was responding to the hon. Member for Witney, who introduced the debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: For the Minister's clarity, may I say that it is entirely up to him to decide whether to give way to interventions, in the normal way.

Alun Michael: I am grateful to you for that clarification, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In view of that, I give way to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex.

Mr. Soames: Will the Minister tell me what horse disease he has in mind that could possibly require the issuing of passports to every horse and pony in the land?

Alun Michael: I said no such thing.

Mr. Soames: Yes you did.

Alun Michael: No, I did not say any such thing. I said that the information made available though the passport system would be fed into a database, which would be of advantage both to the horse industry and in the event of horse diseases becoming a problem in this country. The hon. Gentleman should be aware that frequently diseases and problems that have not been anticipated arise in fairly short order.

Mr. Cameron: Given that there are clearly unanswered questions—the Minister cannot answer the question about what disease might arise—and given that I have made clear the number of bodies that are unhappy with the decision and do not feel that they were listened to, would it not be a good idea if the Select Committee were to consider the matter, to call some evidence and to have another go at examining the issue, before we produce an enormous bureaucracy that affects so many people in the country? I ask the Minister to think about it before coming back so quickly.

Alun Michael: The horse industry sought certainty about what would happen and within what time scale. We provided both certainty and a generous time scale—information on the way in which implementation of the European directive would be pursued has been available for more than a year—so that the industry would know where it stood and could make plans and organise. That is true of the passport-issuing authorities, of which there are more than 50, which provide the service for their memberships and for wider horse ownership. Some have been examining the potential impact on organisations and horse owners that have not until now been tied into one of the existing passport systems. As I said, the database is not a part of the implementation of the passport scheme—it is a bonus. In parallel to implementation, we are trying to work with the industry to achieve a measure that is of benefit to the industry.

Conservative Members do not appreciate it, but it is a fact that Ministers get up each day and try to make the lives of our constituents better and to work with industries, such as, in this case, the horse industry—*[Interruption.]* I appreciate that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, who keeps—

The motion having been made after Seven o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at seventeen minutes to Nine o'clock.

CORRECTION

Official Report, 4 February 2003: in col 238, under heading **"HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM (NO. 5)"**, text should read:

Motion made,

That this House approves Option 5 (60 per cent. appointed/40 per cent. elected) in the First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (HC 171).—*[Mr. Robin Cook].*

Question put and negatived.

House of Commons

Thursday 6 February 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Access Regulator

1. **Mr. David Cameron** (Witney): What representations he has received on the role of the access regulator; and if he will make a statement. [95744]

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): I have received a range of responses and comments since the publication of our White Paper "The Future of Higher Education." We will shortly be publishing detailed proposals for consultation, and I will look with interest to see what the comments are.

Mr. Cameron: Could the Secretary of State tell us why there was so little detail on the access regulator in the White Paper, and why we have had to rely on press leaks about it? Is it not the case that there are two views? The first is led by the Chancellor, who thinks that the access regulator should involve himself in every university and look at details of family income, postcode and parents' education. The second is that of the Prime Minister, who thinks the whole thing an expensive waste of money. I agree with the Prime Minister—what does the Secretary of State think?

Mr. Clarke: You will be glad to know, Mr. Speaker, that there are many more than two views on this interesting question. If the hon. Gentleman talks to vice-chancellors, as I do, he will find a very wide range of points of view. Many of them accept completely the purpose of and need for the access regulator, because they acknowledge that the record of British universities in terms of access for children from working-class homes is absolutely unacceptable. However, we will publish our detailed proposals precisely in order that we can establish the responses and comments, and take account of them in detail.

Alan Howarth (Newport, East): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a particularly absurd point of view is to say that it is an assault on academic freedom if the Government, on behalf of the taxpayer, decline to endorse admissions policies and practices that are socially exclusive, or, equally, to argue that it is an assault on academic freedom if the Government refuse to subvent research that is not of international quality?

Mr. Clarke: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend, and given his experience of the higher education world, he is aware that many people within it know that it is a disgrace that those from working-class homes do not have better access to universities. They recognise that, as the Government fund the universities, we are entitled to express our determination to make this historic change, and that is what we are going to do.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The Secretary of State really must make up his mind as to whether he wants to base admission on merit, or to persist in his remarkable assertion today that the situation in some universities is absolutely unacceptable. When will he come to terms with the fact that neither he nor—more modestly—I, nor any politician, is half as well placed to promote the access of talented people of all social backgrounds to university as the universities themselves? Does he not understand that this proposed regulator, who represents the biggest ever sop to the Treasury's obsession with social engineering, will at best prove ineffectual—as he undoubtedly hopes—and at worst will interfere with cherished academic freedoms?

Mr. Clarke: What I do agree with is the proposition that universities have to address this question, and I also agree that many are doing so very effectively; indeed, in a statement to this House I mentioned Sheffield, Liverpool and others. However, the hon. Gentleman should accept that too many universities do not address this question effectively, and we need this form of regulator to ensure that they do so.

I should remind the House that very many of those from less conventional academic backgrounds who have gone to university have in fact performed much better than some of those from more conventional academic backgrounds. So the purpose of the admissions process is to recognise merit and attainment, as the hon. Gentleman says, but also to recognise and foster potential, because that is what it is all about.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, although his proposals will apply to England and Wales, they will also have implications for Scotland? In addition to the fact that many would-be students from Scotland go to English universities, Scottish universities will have to take on board the effects of the proposals. Can my right hon. Friend give the House an assurance that, during his consultation, he will take account of the views expressed by individuals, academic bodies and Scottish Ministers before taking his final decision on the matter?

Mr. Clarke: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that specific assurance; indeed, I regularly meet my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and the relevant members of the Scottish Executive to discuss precisely the points that my hon. Friend raises. One of the joys of devolution is that our different countries can establish different systems, but I acknowledge that within that it is important to have good dialogue and

understanding of the way we work together, and of the implications of decisions taken in one part of the UK for those taken in other parts.

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield): Can the Secretary of State explain to the House the point of establishing an access regulator whose purpose is to get more children from working-class backgrounds into elite universities, when at the same time they are being deterred through the imposition of differential fees of £9,000?

Mr. Clarke: On the purely financial question, we are encouraging people by removing the upfront fee of £1,100 a year, and by providing, for the first time in years, proper levels of maintenance and grant support while people are studying. Those are positive incentives. However, if the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that in seeking to promote access we concentrate only on finance, and ignore the quality of schools in working-class areas or the record of universities in terms of networking and admissions procedures, I do not accept his point. We certainly have to look at finance, but we must also improve education in working-class areas through measures such as those proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband). We must also address the performance of universities through our access regulator, which is what we are doing.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): Does my right hon. Friend envisage that the role of the access regulator will involve the setting of individual targets for universities in widening access?

Mr. Clarke: I envisage that the access regulator would require each university to have in place a process that includes the setting of its own targets against which it can be monitored. That is the right way to approach it. I do not myself think—although I emphasise that it will be a matter for consultation through the process that I described—that a central individual organisation saying that X, Y or Z is a specific target for a specific university is the right way to go. It is absolutely right, however, for universities to have their own target-setting regimes that aim for improvement and for the access regulator to ensure that that is followed through.

Mr. Boris Johnson (Henley) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

May I ask the Secretary of State whether he envisaged any social objective when he said the other day that he would not mind in the least if classics were to decline as a subject that is studied at school and in universities? Was not that a sad and surprising thing for a man who is supposed to be encouraging scholarship and learning to say?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman is more of an expert on social matters than I. In fact, in the interview to which he refers, which was with *The Sunday Times*, I praised the study of philosophy in schools and in universities. The journalist then asked me what I felt about classics. I shrugged my shoulders and said that I was not so sure about that. I am happy to have the opportunity to make my position clear, because it has been widely misrepresented. I am in favour of the study of classics, I am in favour of studying languages and I am in favour of studying the ancient civilisations. *[Interruption.]* Yes, including the Tories. However, I do not accept the argument advanced by some advocates of classics that the best way to learn French is to learn Latin. We should study classics on its own merits—it is an important academic study which I support.

Further Education

2. **Ross Cranston** (Dudley, North): If he will make a statement on unit funding in further education colleges. [95745]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): In November we announced the largest ever investment in further education to support a radical and ambitious reform strategy that links funding to college performance. That will increase planned funding per full-time equivalent student from £4,040 in 2002–03 to £4,650 by 2005–06—a real-terms increase of 7 per cent.

Ross Cranston: That is very good news and I welcome it unreservedly. Dudley college—an excellent college—has told me about a pressure point this year related to the lower settlement for college lecturers. The historic gap in pay between school teachers and college lecturers makes it difficult for Dudley to recruit good lecturers. Can my hon. Friend give me some assurances on that?

Mr. Lewis: I can give my hon. and learned Friend those assurances. This settlement is widely accepted by the Association of Colleges and the relevant trade unions as a significant level of investment that will allow the gap between the pay of teachers in schools and the pay of lecturers in colleges to narrow significantly during the next three years. That is very important in terms of the status of further education. It is central to achieving our 14-to-19 objectives and our basic skill objectives, to work force development, to attaining higher-level skills and, increasingly, to access to higher education. We urge the employers and the unions, now that the money has been made available, to come to a sensible negotiated settlement and to get on with the job of delivering reform in the sector.

Tony Baldry (Banbury): There is genuine excitement in my constituency as a consequence of the reorganisation of colleges in Oxfordshire. For the first time, Bicester will have a further education campus, which is very good news for the town. The Minister said that the gap in pay will narrow significantly in the next three years. When does he expect college lecturers to get back to parity with teachers in schools—back to where they started a few years ago? When will that gap close?

Mr. Lewis: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is so excited, and I am convinced that he will inform his constituents that this happened under a Labour Government. I remind him that it was his party that devolved power to individual colleges to negotiate with

trade unions at a local level on terms and conditions of incorporation. We have no intention of interfering in those arrangements, but everybody, including the employers and the unions, accepts that this is a real opportunity significantly to narrow the pay gap.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): There are more young people aged between 16 and 19 in further education colleges than in schools, and more adults in FE colleges than in universities. Are not FE colleges therefore right at the heart of the lifelong learning strategy, and are they not crucial to widening participation? Will my hon. Friend make certain that further education is given the crucial place in the Government's strategy that it deserves?

Mr. Lewis: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend, and that is one reason why it has been accepted that the reform and investment programme has finally removed the "cinderella" tag from the FE sector. The programme has stopped the sector feeling undervalued and under-resourced, and that it has not been prioritised over many years under successive Governments. We need to move away from the victim culture to a can-do culture. The sector is essential to ensuring that young people, often from disadvantaged communities, have access to progression and success in the education system, and the capacity to go on to university.

It is worth saying that the package of resources practically eliminates the unit funding gap between the funding that is available for 16 to 19-year-olds being educated in schools and for those being educated in colleges. It brings an equity to the previous disparity.

School Exclusions

3. **Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell): If he will make a statement on his policy on exclusions from schools. [95746]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): We are committed to backing head teachers' authority when pupils' behaviour warrants exclusion. Local education authorities need to ensure that excluded pupils continue to receive full-time education, and we are investing some £470 million in a national behaviour and attendance strategy to help schools tackle deteriorating behaviour at an early stage.

Chris Grayling: I read with interest the speech by the Secretary of State on 12 December last year. One of the biggest complaints of the governing body involved in a recent case in my constituency was that it had no advice or representation when it went into the appeals process, whereas the parents against whom it came up had publicly funded advice and representation. The Secretary of State's speech made no attempt to redress that potential imbalance. Will the Department look again at the matter, and come back with new proposals?

Mr. Lewis: We have significantly reformed the appeals panel process to take account of the genuine concerns expressed by Members such as the hon. Gentleman. The appeals panel process has been changed in a number of ways. From now on, there will be a head teacher and a governor on every panel, decisions will not be overturned on technicalities, and the needs of the whole school must be balanced with the needs of individual pupils. In addition, if a panel finds that an exclusion was not technically justified, it will not necessarily have to instruct that the pupil involved be reinstated, because of the effect that that would have on the school generally. However, if there is a feeling that local education authorities or schools are not being represented appropriately at appeal panel hearings, we would be willing to consider that.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Yesterday's Ofsted report highlighted pupil behaviour as an obstacle to improving schools' educational standards. I recently visited a school in my constituency with a pupil referral unit on its campus. Pupils and students saw that the unit was working, and had a clear understanding of the programme. Students and staff said that the big difference was that that unit simply did not exist a year earlier. If we are to tackle pupil behaviour, is it not important that we get the resources into schools?

Mr. Lewis: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We must back head teachers and teachers who have to make difficult decisions and who feel obliged to exclude students as a last resort. However, we must also do something that did not happen for 20 years—invest in preventive work to ensure that exclusion does not become an inevitability for far too many young people. For example, we have learning support units in schools that allow head teachers to withdraw pupils from classes but also to keep them in school so that they can be reintegrated into classes. We have key workers who provide a more individualised support for young people. We will have an emphasis on training teachers in the management of discipline and behaviours. We are focusing on the early years of secondary school when, traditionally, far too many young people have gone backwards in performance terms and been lost to learning as a consequence. We have also introduced proposals for a more flexible 14 to 19 curriculum.

As my hon. Friend says, from now on we will not merely exclude young people permanently: we will insist that they have access to a full-time, high-quality education so that we can reintegrate them into the mainstream and stop them drifting into a life of antisocial behaviour and crime.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the Minister agree that exclusion is the least satisfactory sanction and that school principals should use it only as a last resort? Does he also agree that to make provision other than at school for disruptive, unruly and aggressive pupils is very expensive? What consideration has been given to helping all schools to deal individually with difficult children by providing additional non-teaching time for senior teachers so that they can deal with the problems on their own school campuses?

Mr. Lewis: This Government have put an unprecedented number of adults into schools, in addition to teachers, to help teachers to ensure that challenging young people are offered an individually tailored programme of support, which considers not

only their educational needs but their home life and family relationships; for example, we have learning mentors and we have developed the Connexions service, which provides personal advisers. Increasingly, we also recognise that, for their continuous professional development, teachers need support for the management of discipline and behaviour problems. My hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has concluded a ground-breaking agreement with the unions on the reform of the work force in the teaching profession, which will ensure that we make the best use of all the adults who contribute to the school community and that we allow senior staff to deploy their resources and skills more effectively.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Bearing in mind the fact that parents can be taken to court for allowing their children to truant, who is responsible for monitoring the length of time of an exclusion; and when does that period become unacceptable?

Mr. Lewis: It is the duty of the educational welfare service and the local education authority to monitor whether exclusions are applied appropriately. In the past, one of the failings of the system was that neither fixed-term nor permanent exclusion was followed by decisive action to reintegrate and support the pupil and tackle the problems. However, we now have a commitment to full-time education for those who are permanently excluded, and that will make a real difference. Furthermore, for fixed-term—but not permanent—exclusions in schools in 34 LEA areas, we are insisting that from day one children will have access to proper education and that there will be a proper focus on their needs, so that they will not simply be left excluded to drift into further behaviour problems and social decline.

Teachers (London)

4. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge): What recent assessment he has made of teacher recruitment and retention in London; and if he will make a statement. [95747]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Stephen Twigg): The teacher vacancy rate in London fell from 3.5 per cent. in 2001 to 2.7 per cent. in 2002. There are now more than 60,000 full-time equivalent teachers in London, a 6 per cent. increase since 1997. However, I acknowledge that many schools continue to face difficulties and we are taking measures to further improve the long-term position.

Mr. Randall: I am grateful for the Minister's acknowledgement that the problem is becoming serious, because it undermines the efforts of staff and pupils to improve standards. Can he confirm that the funding available through the standards fund for recruitment and retention will not be renewed? Are there any plans to do something constructive about that?

Mr. Twigg: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his acknowledgement that we are taking the problem seriously. The situation is by no means a new one. We have decided to ensure that money goes directly to schools through local education authorities. The hon. Gentleman's authority received a good settlement under the recent local government settlement, which includes schools, and a significant number of schools in his constituency will benefit from our new leadership incentive grant. Many of the problems of recruitment and retention that we need to tackle in London relate to housing costs, and we are working closely with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to consider schemes that will build on the success of the starter homes initiative to attract more teachers into London and, perhaps more importantly, to keep more teachers teaching in London.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that if recruitment and retention issues in London and elsewhere are to be met, we must carefully consider yesterday's Ofsted report—especially in regard to schools in challenging circumstances? I hope that my hon. Friend and the whole education team will examine the challenges faced by teachers in London. As behaviour, attendance and exclusion problems impact greatly on recruitment and retention, will my hon. Friend carefully consider David Bell's excellent report and learn its lessons quickly?

Mr. Twigg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and agree that the excellent Ofsted report provides a great deal to consider. The issues around behaviour and attendance clearly apply throughout the country but I have no doubt that they are especially pronounced in some London communities. There is every indication that pupil behaviour is a much bigger factor in teacher retention in London than in other parts of the country—which is why our behaviour strategy focuses especially on London and other urban areas.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): As I represent a south-west London constituency where teachers cannot remotely afford to live without a well-paid partner, can the Minister say how many key worker affordable homes have been made available to teachers, and how many the new initiative will make available in the next year or so?

Mr. Twigg: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the precise figure. The starter homes initiative, which is aimed at public servants across the board, has been taken up by teachers more than any other category. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman shares my concern about teachers who are already in the profession, who want to settle into a family rather than a starter home. We are working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on proposals for meeting that need.

Higher Education

5. **Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): When he last met Universities UK to discuss the funding of higher education; and if he will make a statement. [95748]

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): I frequently meet representatives of Universities UK formally and informally. I have been

glad to inform them that the comprehensive spending review gave an increase in university funding of 6 per cent. a year in real terms.

Mr. Lansley: I am disappointed that the Secretary of State did not say that he had met Universities UK representatives this week to discuss its report on student debt, which states:

"Debt aversion deterred entry into higher education, especially for the very groups the government most wants to attract."

It said also that

"a key criticism of the White Paper voiced to date is the potential impact of variable fees".

In light of that report, does not the Secretary of State consider it important to think again about the imposition of substantial long-term debt on students? Or does he share the view of his ministerial colleague, the hon. Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge), who said that only rich kids go to Oxford or Cambridge—which is both misleading and damaging?

Mr. Clarke: As I told the House when I made a statement on the White Paper, if the decision were taken to get rid of upfront fees of £1,100 a year in favour of repayment through the tax system, the debt would increase by £3,300—but payment through the tax system would be on an income-contingent basis with a zero real rate of return. I acknowledge also that debt can be inhibiting, but one has to set that against the inhibition of an upfront fee of £1,100; no support in the form of grants and fee remissions; and a repayment system that does not reflect income. I shall carefully study the Universities UK report, but the overall balance of our proposals is positive for access.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): The Secretary of State will be aware that I was a child from a working-class background who went to Cambridge university, when no other member of my family stayed at school beyond the age of 14. Does my right hon. Friend realise that for such families, the prospect of debt and a differential fee for attending a university such as Cambridge will act as a serious disincentive?

Mr. Clarke: I accept, as I have told the House on many occasions, that we need to take the disincentive effect into account. However, it is important that people contribute. My hon. Friend is an example of someone with a university education securing a well paid career throughout life. She would have to decide the form that her contribution took. In my opinion, if one achieves a good degree and earns on average 50 per cent. more than people without degrees, that should be taken into account in the funding system. Those who have questions to raise should discuss that aspect.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): On 9 January, at Education questions, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) rightly asked the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education what the funding gap was between what the Government thought universities needed and what, in fact, the universities were receiving. Can we have an answer to that question today? Will the Secretary of State explain why he said in his statement that there would be a 26 per cent. increase in funding for teaching and learning, yet in the three years of the comprehensive spending review, the actual funding rises are 3.1, 0.66 and 2.89 per cent.? In reality, excluding the Government's initiatives, which are targeted at certain universities, there will be a cut in real-terms funding for the vast majority of our universities, so recruitment and retention and, indeed, support for students will, in fact, decline.

Mr. Clarke: Two things arise. I have nothing to add to what my hon. Friend the Minister of State said on the funding gap at Question Time in January, because there are many claims about what the funding gap is. Universities UK has produced an estimate; other academic estimates have been made. What I say is very simple: we have to increase spending, and that is what we are doing. Indeed, there will be no cut in real terms for any university, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman suggests. We are putting in more money—6 per cent. a year in real terms is the most significant settlement for higher education for decades. That will make a real difference to every university, with the focus on teaching and knowledge transfer, and I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman would welcome that, rather than publishing his own batty schemes, designed to force children to live at home when they go to university.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I welcome the extra £2.2 billion announced in the higher education White Paper—it will obviously go a long way to ensure that those universities that are underfunded do better in future—but may I suggest to my right hon. Friend that all universities are feeling the pinch? Would it not be better to raise tuition fees generally across the board, rather than to allow some universities to charge differential fees?

Mr. Clarke: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. We have discussed it outside the Chamber on several occasions. First, I appreciate her thanks for the resources that are going in. It is important that she acknowledges that, and I am grateful to her for the fact that she has. Secondly, I am grateful to her for acknowledging that still more money is needed through the fees system from students themselves. That is an important comment as well. Whether that is done by a standard fee increase across the whole range or by variable fees, as we suggest, is a question for debate—there are many views on this—but I believe that we should acknowledge that we now have a multi-tier university system, with differing impacts on possible earnings from the various universities, and that it is reasonable for the fees system to reflect that. However, I am sure that my hon. Friend and I will continue to debate that, both in public and in private.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Secretary of State is making much of the funding increases under this Government. Will he tell the House what the funding per student is?

Mr. Clarke: I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman the figure that he asks for, although I am happy to write it down and send it to him if he wants to know; but what I can say is that, throughout the whole period of the Conservative Government, funding per student was in

absolute freefall until 1997. In 1997, we put in the money to flatten that out, so that it did not continue going down. As we set out in the White Paper—I am sure that he has a copy in front of him—we need to start raising it so that funding per student increases. That is why we have a 6 per cent. a year real increase in funding, and we are considering raising more money from fees precisely to address the massive disinvestments that the Conservative Government created.

Mr. Green: Let me enlighten the Secretary of State about what has happened under this Government, based on a letter that the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education sent to me on 7 December. What they inherited in 1997 was funding per student in real terms of £5,060. This year, after six years of Labour Government, the figure is £4,900—a Labour cut of £160 for every full-time student. This Government have been taxing more and spending more, but the money is not getting through to where it matters: the education of our students. Does not he agree that that sums up the whole new Labour failure on education?

Mr. Clarke: It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to hear that I do not agree with him. If he considers the years from 1979 to 1997, he will see an absolutely dramatic fall in funding per student. That is set out clearly in a graph in the White Paper. Since 1997, that fall has been flattened out. We are now putting in the money to increase the level of funding. That is what we intend to do.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): I am organising a conference on the higher education White Paper at my local university college at the North East Wales institute of higher education in Wrexham. My right hon. Friend is very welcome to attend, but can he help me by telling me whether the White Paper applies to England and Wales?

Mr. Clarke: The White Paper indeed applies to England and Wales. However, in England and Wales, the regimes for student funding and control of universities are different. As my hon. Friend knows, an issue that has been discussed—and I referred to this in my statement on the higher education White Paper—is that student funding is not devolved whereas universities are devolved. We should consider that issue. I look forward with great interest to the outcome of the conference that my hon. Friend is organising. I will be interested to hear its conclusions on this important policy question.

Sponsored Scholarships

6. **Mr. Anthony Steen** (Totnes): How many Government-sponsored scholarships there are for students studying for university degrees in England. [95749]

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): A range of scholarships, bursaries and grants is available, including opportunity bursaries, the disabled students allowance and the child care grant. In addition, many universities offer their own scholarships, or administer those of private benefactors. However, that information is not held centrally.

Mr. Steen: How can the Secretary of State and the Government justify spending millions of pounds funding three-year Mickey Mouse degrees such as golf course studies and surf sciences, when the money could provide bursaries to allow bright students from poorer backgrounds to study rigorous academic degrees and not face record levels of debt?

Mr. Clarke: I agree that it is necessary to put more money into bursaries of the kind that the hon. Gentleman suggests, and we are discussing precisely that issue with universities. However, if the implication of the hon. Gentleman's question is that we should abandon the target of having 50 per cent. going into higher education by the end of the decade, I would not agree with him. It is important that we acknowledge that the future of this country depends on having a highly educated and highly qualified population, able to deal with the economic and social challenges of the future. That is what our competitor countries are doing, and that is what we have to do.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Will the Secretary of State explain how we can find billions of pounds to increase our defence budget and go to war with Iraq, but cannot find the moneys to scrap tuition fees?

Mr. Clarke: As my hon. Friend knows, all Governments deal with the conflicting priorities of government—both within education and between education, defence and other areas. Universities are not well placed to compete against, for example, nurseries, primary schools, secondary schools and other areas. That is why we have to encourage universities to develop their own independent sources of finances.

Modern Languages

7. **Tony Cunningham** (Workington): What recent steps he has taken to improve the teaching of modern languages in schools. [95750]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. David Miliband): The national languages strategy sets out a key objective of improving the teaching and learning of languages, particularly in secondary schools but also in primary schools. We want language learning to be available and exciting, and we are developing the key stage 3 strategy to achieve that goal.

Tony Cunningham: My hon. Friend will be aware that I have some superb specialist schools in my constituency. I hope that, in the near future, I will have quite a few more. What role does the Minister see for specialist schools in improving language teaching in our secondary schools?

Mr. Miliband: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There are now 157 language colleges around the

country. They are centres of excellence for the teaching of languages. I hope that the excellent practice that they develop can be spread out across the system.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): Is the Minister aware of a school in my constituency where a pupil was permanently excluded for breaking into a language class and doing £2,000 of damage? That obviously had a profound impact on the teaching of languages in the school. The governor supported the exclusion but unfortunately, on appeal, it was overturned. Will the Minister consider this particular case if I write to him? Does he not agree that head teachers, chairmen and governors should not have their power to exclude overruled by an appeal panel?

Mr. Miliband *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister should not answer that question.

Education (Stockport)

8. **Ms Ann Coffey** (Stockport): What representations he has received about the increased spending on education in Stockport. [95751]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Stephen Twigg): Since the provisional settlement for 2003–04 was announced on 5 December, we have received no representations about the increased spending on education in Stockport. In 2003–04, Stockport's education formula spending share is increasing by 6.1 per cent. on a per pupil basis. After taking account of pupil number changes, the increase in its education assessment is 7.2 per cent. Both figures are above the national average.

Ms Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. As he says, it is a very good settlement. He may recall that, in a letter sent to his Department in September last year signed by the leader of the council and local Members of Parliament, Stockport asked for a specific grant of £1 million, because Ofsted had identified the funding available to the authority as very poor and insufficient to provide effective support to schools. Does he therefore share my astonishment that the Liberal Democrat council is proposing to passport only a small proportion of the £1.3 million increase in the local education authority block grant? Will he make it clear to the council that that money was given by the Government to meet educational need in the borough and should be spent on education?

Mr. Twigg: All of us are used to the fact that the Liberal Democrats will say one thing in this place and do something very different at the local level. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the hard work that she undertook with her local authority to secure such a good settlement. It would be a great pity if the extra money that is going to education in Stockport were not fully spent, so that full support can be given to schools as the local council asked for.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Stockport is a long way from the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

A2 and AS-levels

9. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): What steps he has taken to ascertain whether the necessary re-marking of A2 and AS-level scripts from last summer's examinations has been completed. [95752]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. David Miliband): Following the investigation into the setting of the 2002 grade boundaries, the outcome of Mike Tomlinson's regrading exercise was announced on 15 October. I understand that the awarding bodies are due to complete appeals from schools and colleges against the grades for individual candidates by 14 March. If the head of the examination centre is dissatisfied once the awarding body appeals procedures have been exhausted, he or she may appeal to the Examinations Appeals Board on the candidate's behalf.

Mr. Luff: The date of 14 March is just too late. I know of a case in Worcestershire in which the re-marking last summer of two specimen papers revealed that a much larger group of pupils had had their AS-level grades significantly depressed, and wrongly so. However, despite forceful requests from the school, the board has still not completed that re-marking. I do not believe that this case is unique, and the Minister's comments suggest that it is not unique. Does he understand that this understating of achievement, as a result of either the attempt to manipulate grades to meet political objectives or of simple incompetence, has had a serious impact on the applications of the young people involved to the universities of their choice? That could seriously damage their future careers.

Mr. Miliband: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that this was a very serious issue last summer. We take it extremely seriously. The deadline of 14 March is one month later than the deadline that has existed in every previous year, and it reflects the problems that existed last August and September. Notwithstanding that, I think that he will find that awarding bodies are making strenuous efforts to ensure that the grades are right for every individual pupil.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Minister wrote to me a few days ago confirming that there are remaining concerns about the standards of marking of the OCR scripts in certain subjects, namely English literature, history and psychology. That potentially affects 25,000 exam entries. Will he accept that it is unacceptable that, six months later, thousands of students do not know whether the marking of their exams was accurate? Will he now make a statement on

the inquiry being mounted by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and on what he expects it to uncover?

Mr. Miliband: It is important that I put on record the facts of the matter. I have written two recent letters to the hon. Gentleman. One concerned scripts in OCR psychology examinations. The letter was about a particular subject that affected a school in the constituency of a Conservative Member who is not present at the moment. Both he and the hon. Gentleman have asked me about that.

The hon. Gentleman also asked me when the scripts for all subjects would be destroyed, and I explained to him in the second letter that, in the three subjects that he mentioned, all the scripts would be kept for the moment. The grades in those subjects are not somehow dubious or under review, but the scripts are being kept in case further questions are raised about them in the future. The results are not dubious. I suggest that he joins the consensus, stretching from the Secondary Heads Association to the Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference, that Mike Tomlinson's inquiry has given a clear guarantee to students that their grades are correct. The hon. Gentleman should join that consensus and not seek to undermine it.

Specialist Colleges

10. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire): If he will make a statement on the private funds required for a specialist college bid to proceed. [95753]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. David Miliband): Sponsorship continues to be an important element of the specialist schools programme. Applicant specialist schools must raise £50,000 in sponsorship from the private sector. An applicant specialist school's involvement in raising sponsorship will help them develop valuable relationships. As the hon. Gentleman knows, a new partnership fund announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State a few weeks ago will help bridge the sponsorship gap for schools in areas of economic disadvantage.

Andrew Selous: I thank the Minister for that reply. Will he consider the introduction of much more flexibility in the requirement for schools to raise £50,000 of funds? He will understand that it is extremely dispiriting for a school that is perhaps only a few thousand pounds short of that target to face the prospect of losing a £500,000 grant, as was the case with Vandyke upper school in my constituency. Will he consider extending the time scale within which the school would have to raise that £50,000 during the first four years of funding?

Mr. Miliband: The hon. Gentleman will know that two schools in his constituency have managed to raise sufficient funds: Northfields upper school, and Queensbury school, both of which are in Dunstable. The flexibility for which he asks was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State: that is precisely the purpose of the partnership fund when the school has real problems in raising sponsorship, whether because of economic disadvantage or because other schools have reached companies in that area first. We will give serious consideration to those matters. The flexibility for which he asks is now in the system.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): Will my hon. Friend consider the use of private funds and sponsorship to ensure that people are placed in work placements in the middle of their degree course? Given concerns about the separation between the worlds of work and education, that is one way to unite the two. In addition, given concerns about top-up fees and debt, it is one way in which an individual can pay off debt and enjoy work experience while undertaking their degree.

Mr. Miliband: My hon. Friend tempts me to venture into areas that are somewhat beyond my immediate responsibility. The sort of liaison and linkage to which he refers between schools, colleges and workplaces is at the centre of our 14 to 19 strategy, and all those links will be supported by Members across the House, as they are in the interests of young people and the country.

School Repairs (Wandsworth)

11. **Mr. Tom Cox** (Tooting): What Government funding has been made available to the London borough of Wandsworth towards the cost of repair and refurbishment of schools within the borough in each of the last five years. [95754]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Stephen Twigg): Over the last five years, the London borough of Wandsworth and schools in that borough, including those in the voluntary aided sector, have been allocated more than £28 million for the repair and refurbishment of school premises. A further £2.9 million was provided in that period for new pupil places.

Mr. Cox: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for that reply, which will be welcomed by my two parliamentary colleagues who also represent the London borough of Wandsworth. Is he aware that that will ensure that the public living in the borough of Wandsworth understand the Government's commitment to the whole range of education services in that borough, despite the ongoing, misleading and distorting statements that are issued by the Tory-controlled local authority about our education policies?

Mr. Twigg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, particularly for promoting me to the Privy Council in his opening remarks, and I pay tribute to him and his two colleagues for their hard work on behalf of their constituents in Wandsworth. The capital funding made available to Wandsworth in 1996–97 was £1.5 million. In the current financial year, it is more than £12 million: a significant boost. After decades of neglect of capital investment in our schools, this Government have quadrupled investment nationally to a point at which it is £3 billion this year and will rise to £5 billion in 2005–06.

Pupil Discipline

12. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): What steps he is taking to improve standards of pupil discipline in schools. [95755]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): From September 2003, all secondary school teachers will have access to training designed to help them manage unacceptable behaviour. In targeted areas, further support will be available to allow schools to have behaviour and education support teams, police in schools and more truancy sweeps. Many schools now have learning mentors and learning support units.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I am grateful for that reply. Does the Minister accept that one of the major responsibilities of teachers is to provide the best quality of education to the children in their care, but that that includes a standard of social behaviour and recognition of the importance of discipline? Does he also accept that many teachers are taking early retirement because of the deteriorating discipline in schools, which is particularly acute in Cheshire, where for the last year for which figures were available there was an increase of some 52 per cent. in teacher vacancies? What more will the Government do to abolish political correctness and to recognise the importance of discipline?

Mr. Lewis: The concerns that the hon. Gentleman articulates are shared by hon. Members on this side of the House. It is a source of deep regret that words like "discipline" and "respect" have become dirty words in far too many sections of our modern society. It is also a cause for regret that we do not talk equally about responsibilities as well as rights. I genuinely hope that we can build a new political consensus on the importance of rights and responsibilities in our society. But I am not persuaded that we shall be able to do so, because when we have this debate what frequently happens is that we have sneers and empty rhetoric from many of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, who would have people believe that the decline in behaviour and discipline has been entirely the responsibility of Labour Governments. I say to the hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Time is up.

THE SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Serious Fraud Office

19. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If she will make a statement on the effectiveness of the Serious Fraud Office. [95766]

The Solicitor-General (Ms Harriet Harman): The Serious Fraud Office investigates and prosecutes cases involving serious and complex fraud. Its lawyers subject these very challenging cases to intense scrutiny. Its effectiveness is monitored in three ways: an internal audit is conducted annually by the Inland Revenue; it is scrutinised annually by the National Audit Office; and it has the active engagement of a non-executive director. In the 10 years since it was established the outcome of SFO trials has been 30 per cent. of defendants acquitted and 70 per cent. of defendants convicted.

Mr. Heath: With the best will in the world, the Solicitor-General must accept that the performance of the Serious Fraud Office in bringing successful prosecutions has been patchy. Will she consider whether there might be merit in talking to her right hon. Friends in Government with a view to bringing together the Serious Fraud Office, the Inland Revenue, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, and indeed the City of London police, so that we have a more effective body able to work over a wider spectrum and capable of attracting the best possible calibre of officers?

The Solicitor-General: I do not accept that the record of the Serious Fraud Office has been patchy. The prosecutors on fraud do get together; the Department of Trade and Industry, the Inland Revenue and Customs work closely together with the Home Office, and with their counterparts in the police, particularly the City of London police. So that is already under way.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): Is it not the case that in fact over recent years the Serious Fraud Office has seen significant improvements in its track record? Does not that suggest that there might be value in extending its powers to look at other areas of fraud as well?

The Solicitor-General: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. I pay tribute to the work of the Serious Fraud Office, under the leadership of Ros Wright, who will shortly retire. The Serious Fraud Office is working very closely together with others. It is perhaps not necessary that all the fraud prosecutors should be brought together institutionally. Certainly they need to work closely together, and they do.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Domestic and international fraud continues to become more complex and more sophisticated. Does the Solicitor-General believe that the Serious Fraud Office has sufficient multi-disciplinary professional skills? Are there sufficient accountants, experts and valuers, as well as lawyers, with language skills and detailed knowledge of the international jurisdictions and international laws? In other words, do we have a Serious Fraud Office that is an effective fraud-fighting force?

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman makes very important points, including the fact that fraud is global. Clearly, he understands what many people do not: that serious fraud is connected to money laundering, drug dealing, terrorism and human trafficking, and that it is global and needs to be challenged globally.

When I visited the Serious Fraud Office recently, I went to its mutual legal assistance unit, which carries out investigations for other Governments on the basis that those Governments will then carry out investigations for us. It will prosecute cases involving many jurisdictions. It has huge piles of documents, sometimes translated into as many as 15 languages. It also has a map of the world on

the wall, not because its members are junketing or planning their holidays, but because fraud is global. But, of course, it is a small organisation dealing with a big problem, and no doubt it could do more if it were larger.

Infanticide

20. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What guidance she gives to the Crown Prosecution Service relating to prosecution of cases involving unlawful killing of children by parents or carers. [95767]

The Solicitor-General: When prosecuting cases involving unlawful killing of children by parents and carers, CPS lawyers are governed by the code for Crown prosecutors and by the additional guidance for the prosecution of cases involving allegations of child abuse. Senior Crown prosecutors are responsible for cases involving the death of a child, and they instruct senior barristers to advise and to appear for the Crown at court.

Tim Loughton: The Solicitor-General will know that on average one to two children are killed at the hands of their parents or carers every week. Two years ago, for example, out of 88 child homicides, only 19 cases were prosecuted in the courts. Worse still, very few result in a conviction for murder, such as the case in my constituency of four-year-old John Smith whose foster parents were eventually only prosecuted for child cruelty, rather than murder, because the law of joint enterprise meant that it was not possible to prove who dealt the fatal blow. In the spirit of Lord Laming's findings, which require all agencies to work much more closely together to prevent child killings and penalise such acts when they do happen, what advice is she giving to her members of staff to ensure that the prosecution rate is increased so that it acts as a real deterrent?

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman makes a number of important points. The first to consider is the issue of prevention, which involves all the agencies working together to identify children at risk. The Government are concerned about that following Lord Laming's report. The second point relates to the challenge that such cases present in terms of prosecution. He is absolutely right that it is difficult to bring people to justice if more than one person is involved in killing a child. Although the child has clearly died as a result of a criminal act, it is often not possible to work out who of those present with responsibility for that child was criminally responsible. As he says, often the lesser charge of neglect is the only charge that can be made and that does not reflect the seriousness of the offence.

The hon. Gentleman will know about the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children working party and the conference that it held on the subject, and it is producing proposals. He will also know that the Law Commission is considering the matter. The issues that he raises are important and I think that action will be forthcoming.

Vera Baird (Redcar): Is it not the case that there is a low conviction rate in cases in which only one of two people could have caused the death when either neither speaks or each blames the other? Could not relatively straightforward changes be made in the rules of evidence to prevent that from being a ban on conviction? Could not they be introduced in the Criminal Justice Bill in Committee?

The Solicitor-General: Changes could be made either to the rules of evidence, to which my hon. and learned Friend adverted, or to substantive law to make it easier to bring to justice those responsible for killing children. It will be important to discuss that again in the House when we see the Law Commission's proposals. We want to be sure that we get it right and consider the evidential as well as the substantive legal aspects.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): Following the wrongful conviction of my former constituent, Sally Clark, will the right hon. and learned Lady confirm that there will be a full inquiry into the way in which the CPS handled her case? Will she also comment on the suggestion that it may be wrong to bring murder convictions if there is medical uncertainty about the death of very young infants in such cases?

The Solicitor-General: We have yet to see the full judgment of the Court of Appeal in the Sally Clark case. When we do, we will be able to consider what action, if any, needs to be taken. The hon. Gentleman raises the very important issue of medical expert reports and evidence. We know too little about the causes of sudden infant death. I pay tribute to the work in Manchester and St. Thomas's hospital to research those matters further. The Home Office is looking closely at the issue of medical evidence. In particular, there is a shortage of paediatric pathologists available to give expert advice in such trials. I am sure that the points that he raises will be subject to further scrutiny and action.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Solicitor-General recognise that we wish to work with the Government in their analysis of the issues raised by the Clark and Climbié cases? Will she agree to work with all parties in the House on these terribly harrowing issues? I know from my own past experience at the Bar how difficult those cases are, but the Opposition are gravely concerned about the quality of some of the expert evidence given by medical practitioners and social services. Sometimes, the best experts are not available to the prosecution. Will the Solicitor-General undertake to look into those issues seriously and work with all parties on this matter?

The Solicitor-General: Certainly, I welcome warmly any input into those discussions by the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, and look forward to meeting him and discussing the matter further. He made a point about the quality of evidence. There are two issues—first, the quality of evidence and the available pool of paediatric pathologists, which I mentioned in response to the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), and secondly, the issue of conflicting evidence. In the Sally Clark case, there were 12 medical experts, all with different views. We need to know more, so I shall raise the matter with the Department of Health. We must get expert pathology better sorted out, which is a matter for the Home Office. Prosecution must be effective, and will no doubt be enhanced by the discussion arising from the work by the NSPCC and the Law Commission.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Leader of the House please give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the National Minimum Wage (Enforcement Notices) Bill [*Lords*], followed by motion to approve the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (Amnesty Period) Order 2003.

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Opposition Day. There will be a half-day debate entitled "The Government's Failure on the Economy and Public Services" on an Opposition motion—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am glad to hear that the Opposition support their own motion.

That will be followed by proceedings on the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Bill, followed by a motion to take note of various European documents relating to the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy and the operation of milk quotas.

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY—Debate on education for 14 to 19-year-olds on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 14 FEBRUARY—The House will commence the constituency week, and will return on Monday 24 February.

The provisional business for that week will include:

MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Industrial Development (Financial Assistance) Bill.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful, as ever, to the Leader of the House for giving us the business. Will he give us the date for the annual Welsh debate—the St. David's day debate—as it is important that we know that as soon as possible? I acknowledge that this year St. David's day does not fall conveniently in the parliamentary calendar, but it would help to be given the date as early as possible.

May I ask, yet again, whether we are going to have a date for the Budget? What is the Chancellor afraid of? Is he running away from something, or can he not make up his mind? When will he share the Budget with us? As I reminded the Leader of the House last week, the Treasury Committee said that we should receive proper notice of the Budget date. Am I to assume that the Budget will not even be in March? Is it slipping into April? Will the Leader of the House please give us a clue so that we can all be ready to examine the Chancellor in detail following his Budget statement?

Yesterday in PMPs—*[Interruption.]* In Prime Minister's porkies, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister for his view of the London congestion charge. The Prime Minister said, "Not me, guv." Well, what he actually said at column 267 was that that was

"a decision not for us but for the Mayor."—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 267.]

I am told that Mayor Livingstone was heard to say on television last night, "I couldn't have implemented the congestion charge without £200 million from the Government." That raises a number of questions that we ought to debate. It was the Labour Government who created the ghastly mayoralty and gave the Mayor his ghastly powers, so if Labour did fund the congestion charge, as the Mayor told us, how can the Prime Minister not have a view on it? I find that difficult to understand, but, if we have a little debate on it, perhaps the Prime Minister can come to the House and clear the matter up for us.

May we have a complete rerun of the debate and the votes on Lords reform? When I read my *Hansard*, I was astonished to find that the Prime Minister had managed to vote only once on the issue. The one vote that he cast was directly at odds with his own party manifesto commitment, and directly against what the Leader of the House had been urging us to do.

Matters are worse than that. The Chancellor did not vote at all. We ought to know why. *[Interruption.]* I am in a generous mood, so I will get into *Hansard* the fact that some bright spark on the Government Benches has just said that the Chancellor was working on his Budget. The Chancellor is obviously not working on his Budget; we have not been told the date for it yet, so that eliminates that possibility.

On Radio 4 this morning, I distinctly heard the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), the distinguished Chairman of the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform, being asked whether the Labour Whips were in action during the voting. To my astonishment, the right hon. Gentleman said yes, the Labour Whips were indeed very active in urging Labour Members to vote against what the Leader of the House wanted to do and in support of the Prime Minister. We were assured that it was to be a free vote, yet a distinguished senior Labour politician tells us that it was not a free vote at all. We must have a rerun so that the Prime Minister can vote, the Chancellor can vote, and we can have a proper free vote.

We must clarify one final issue. I want an assurance that there is no hidden agenda. I suspect that what may now happen is the abolition of the hereditary peers and the setting up of some ridiculous bureaucracy that will be called an appointments commission, which the Prime Minister will claim gets rid of patronage. We have heard him say that before. However, the Joint Committee report states:

"Only the Prime Minister would have the right to have nominations"—

that is, to the upper House—

"confirmed."

How can we square the Prime Minister's repeated assertion that he wants to set up a patronage-free system with the fact that the Joint Committee report states that only the Prime Minister would have the right to have nominations confirmed? That is a question that the Prime Minister may want to answer, if the Leader of the House cannot. Will the Prime Minister, or the Leader of the House on his behalf, refute that suggestion and give us a guarantee that nothing of the kind will ever happen?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman asked a range of questions; let me try to deal with them one at a time.

[Mr. Cook]

I am happy to assure the House that the Government are well aware of the importance that the House attaches to Welsh day. We will make sure that there is a Welsh day as soon as practicable upon our return. We are always keen to have a Welsh day debate, in order to remind the world outside that there is not a single Conservative MP from Wales.

I have no reason to believe that the Budget will not take place at some point in March. There is no slippage, and it would be entirely normal to announce it some time during February.

On the £200 million announced by the Mayor yesterday, we welcome the fact that we have secured a settlement with him on the funding for the public-private partnership—a settlement that, I am pleased to say—

Mr. Forth: A settlement?

Mr. Cook: If the right hon. Gentleman will contain himself, I shall answer his question. The Mayor welcomed the settlement of the PPP in his singularly expressive terms: "We got beat." It would have been very helpful if he had concluded that the settlement was going to happen two years ago and not deprived us of the opportunity of getting on with improving the infrastructure of the tube.

Mr. Forth: What has it got to do with the tube?

Mr. Cook: The answer is that the £200 million is part of the package for improvements in the tube. That is exactly what it is. It is to the credit of the Government that we are providing the funds that will enable the tube to proceed. None of that money is for the congestion charge; it is all about improving public transport in London for Londoners.

I admire the right hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for a rerun of Tuesday. Indeed, I am sure that many of us have replayed Tuesday in our minds in the hours since then. As a practical politician, I am always one for rerunning votes, although I cannot necessarily express the same enthusiasm for rerunning the debate. If we are going to go back over who voted for what and what happened in the Division lists, I may say that I felt—I am sure that my hon. Friends will agree—that one of the striking features of Tuesday's Divisions is that a majority of Conservative MPs voted against the Conservative policy of 80 per cent. of peers being elected. In the light of the fact that he could not even persuade the majority of his own party to support its policy, I think that a touch of humility from him would immensely enhance the attractiveness of his personality.

The fact of the matter is that all options were defeated on Tuesday; there were no winners. I asked the House to give a clear, coherent and commanding lead on one option for reform. Plainly, we did not secure that from the House on Tuesday. We will continue to look for that support for an option for reform in this House, but the bottom line is that there will be no reform of the House of Lords until there is a majority vote in the House of Commons.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): We understand that the United Nations arms inspectors will report to the Security Council on Friday 14 February, which is, of course, just before our constituency week. Given that we would assume and hope that the United Kingdom Government will then try to have some positive input into a draft second resolution for the Security Council, may we have an undertaking from the Leader of the House that this House will have an opportunity to debate the nature of that second resolution and that, if necessary, the House will be recalled during our constituency week for that specific purpose?

The House will now be in some difficulty until the Government give us a new statement on the revised remit that will obviously be necessary for the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform. Accepting what he has just said, does he understand that this House has voted very clearly against a fully appointed House? Indeed, that was the only substantial majority on Tuesday night. Whatever the Whips were doing, they lost, as the option favoured by the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor was defeated. I assume that both of them are democrats, so will the Leader of the House give us an absolute assurance that the Joint Committee will not now be expected to work up proposals for a fully appointed House, which would clearly be a complete constitutional farce? Indeed, I suggest that it would be improper for Members of this House who serve on that Committee to be asked to do that job after this House has defeated that proposition. I also hope that the Lord Chancellor and Prime Minister, who have made great play of the pre-eminence of this House, will accept that the pre-eminence of our vote must count on this issue. In those circumstances, when can we expect a statement from the Government about what should happen next and on whether there will be a revised remit for the Joint Committee or whether it should wind itself up?

Mr. Cook: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I fully understand the importance that the House attaches to being able to debate and discuss Iraq. Indeed, there will be another statement on the matter today. I do not know whether a Security Council resolution will immediately follow on 14 February. I would only say to the House from my experience of such matters that it takes more than a few days to get agreement on a text for a Security Council resolution. I am therefore not suggesting that the House will necessarily have its constituency week interrupted, but we have all shown ourselves willing if the case arises—I am not saying that it will do so—for the possibility of recall to be on the agenda. Of course, we are away for only one week and there will be an opportunity for the House to consider the matter when we return on the week beginning 24 February if that is necessary.

I remind hon. Members that the House approved a remit for the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform by resolution last summer. It provides for the Joint Committee to continue its work to devise detailed proposals in the light of votes in the House. No doubt the Committee will want to meet and consider the votes that were held this week. I echo the hon. Gentleman's comments that a fully appointed House secured the least support and the greatest opposition on Tuesday. A majority of Members from all parties, including the Labour party, voted against it. I am therefore sceptical about the allegation that the Labour Whips were

working on the matter. Labour Whips are competent and efficient; I therefore cannot believe that they would place themselves in a minority in the Labour party.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): If the vote on war in Iraq is held after hostilities start, it will be judged to be a vote of loyalty: opposing the war would be perceived as an act of betrayal against our troops in battle. Are not all our elections as valid as that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair)? Is not it right that the strong opposition that our constituents are expressing to a war of aggression is heard in the House before it is decided to send our troops into battle to kill and be killed?

Mr. Cook: Of course I fully understand the gravity of the issue and its importance not only to hon. Members but their constituents. I assure my hon. Friend that there will be opportunities for hon. Members to debate the matter again. [HON. MEMBERS: "And to vote?"] And to vote on it, too. *[Interruption.]* If I may be allowed to answer the question, we provided for a debate, a motion and a vote on the previous Security Council resolution. I have no reason to believe that that will not happen in the case of a further resolution.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): Will the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on shortages in health services in Essex? That would give us a chance to raise a problem that affects many of my constituents, who have recently been removed from the list for chiropody and podiatry treatment because a review of that service has been undertaken. How can it be that the Government plough billions of pounds into the health service at one end yet the service on the ground appears to be getting worse?

Mr. Cook: I must disagree with the conclusion of the hon. Gentleman's question. We are investing large sums in the national health service. Indeed, we have provided a greater increase in the health service than any other major country, and that is yielding results in the substantial increase in operations and the great reduction in those on waiting lists. There may be circumstances in areas such as that to which the hon. Gentleman refers when the local health service reaches a judgment about reassessing its priorities. I stress that the Government are keen to devolve decision making to local areas and allow those in the front line to determine the right priorities for the area. It would be wrong for me to say from the Dispatch Box that they should change their priorities.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Cannot the Leader of the House find time for a debate on section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002? It provides for the removal of all support for asylum seekers who claim in country. The House of Commons has never debated that section properly. It was the result of a last-minute Lords amendment, which was debated for only 15 minutes because of the guillotine. It is being implemented in a way that is different from indications that Ministers gave hon. Members when it was introduced.

Mr. Cook: I note my hon. Friend's last comment, which I shall draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who may wish to contact him to assure him about the guarantees that were given to the House.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): The Leader of the House gave a positive response on Zimbabwe two weeks ago. The position has deteriorated further, with disgraceful scenes outside the courthouse in Harare where the leader of the opposition is on trial. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a Minister must make a statement, not least on the problems of renewing sanctions? Many of us believe that sanctions, especially smart sanctions, should be increased. A Minister should also explain the special problems that we are experiencing with the French.

Mr. Cook: I fully understand the right hon. Gentleman's consistent interest in, and concern about, the issue. We in this country must be careful about what we say about the conduct of the trial, because it could be misused. Therefore, if he will forgive me, I will make no comment on that matter.

On the generality of the issue that he raises, he is correct to say that the situation continues to deteriorate in Zimbabwe and we have grave concerns about the increasing degree of violence that is being used to suppress legitimate views. Many millions in Zimbabwe also feel real anxiety about where their next food will come from.

We have provided a range of sanctions against Zimbabwe and we have always sought to find a balance between ways to demonstrate our rejection of the policies of the regime and our wish not to harm the ordinary people of Zimbabwe. That is a difficult balance to get right. However, I hope—in the light of the latest developments—that the cricketing authorities will be able to resolve the present problem and that we will be spared the embarrassment of the English cricket team going to Zimbabwe.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the health of local government is even more important than the health of the House of Lords, Members of which some of us would gladly throttle? Is he also aware that the democratic decision-making powers of local authorities are under serious threat from the response of the Department of Trade and Industry to the general agreement on trade in services? May we have a debate on the dangers to local authorities? Their powers over planning operations, local economic development proposals and sustainable development may be blocked. Those powers are important to the well-being of our democracy and to social provision.

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that throttling Members of the House of Lords would be consistent with the health of the House of Lords, with which my hon. Friend began his question. However, he raises two profound issues. First, it is important that we make progress on the general agreement on trade in services, which reflects the substantial importance and growing significance of services to our economy and, at the same time, it shows that we respect the right of countries to ensure that they preserve public services for their people.

[Mr. Cook]

Secondly, my hon. Friend raised the important issue of the freedom of local authorities, to which the Government are fully committed. I am not at present aware of any threat to British local authorities from the development of the general agreement on trade in services, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will keep a close watching brief on the matter.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The interesting results on Tuesday included—as the Leader of the House has pointed out—Opposition Members' rejection of the so-called official policy of the Opposition. I fully accept that a genuine free vote was allowed to Members on both sides of the House, but will he give us an undertaking that he will not put any pressure on the Joint Committee, but give it time to deliberate as much as it wishes, and that we will have no further debates on the future of the House of Lords for the rest of this Session?

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that I can entirely reassure the hon. Gentleman on that last point. Indeed, I am wearily resigned to the fact that we will have to return to the matter again. I agree that Tuesday's proceedings were interesting—indeed, fascinating—and I am grateful to him for confirming my point that the majority of Conservative Members rejected the Conservative policy.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): May we have a debate on the growing nightmare faced by many of our constituents, especially in northern cities and towns, from the creeping dereliction and abandonment of terraces of housing? I raised the issue with my local authority and suggested that, once one house in a terrace became derelict and abandoned, we should try to nip the problem in the bud by using compulsory purchase orders. I was told that it is very difficult to obtain CPOs—it takes a long time and is expensive—and my local authority did not want to try. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill, which is going through Parliament at the moment, would not affect that problem, because it covers compulsory purchase of land.

Mr. Cook: I fully understand my hon. Friend's concern about the dereliction of some of the inner cities in the regions of England and, indeed, in Scotland, although it is a devolved matter. I also understand why my hon. Friend has made that point on behalf of her constituents and the impact of blight on their lives. She will be aware that only yesterday the Deputy Prime Minister made a major statement on sustainable communities and I am pleased to remind her that it included an additional £5 billion to help with regenerating communities. I hope that as part of that programme we will be able to assist some of the communities to which she refers.

Mr. Peter Duncan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): The Leader of the House will be aware of the continuing cycle of paramilitary violence that still plagues the people of Northern Ireland during the stuttering peace process. Has he been briefed on developments overnight when several UDA members and their associates were evicted from the Province and landed at Cairnryan in my constituency? Will he make time for an urgent debate, in Government time, during which the House can examine the continuing cycle of violent blood-letting in Northern Ireland? In particular, we must consider the worrying possibility of exporting that violence to small, vulnerable mainland communities.

Mr. Cook: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and I appreciate that that is a major issue for his constituents. I assure him that the police authorities in Northern Ireland and Scotland are co-operating closely on the issue. Our objective in Northern Ireland is to restore stability and normality and to encourage confidence in the future. We will continue to work on that and we would deplore any violent or forcible eviction of any citizens of the United Kingdom from one part of it to another.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): Notwithstanding what happened on Tuesday evening, will my right hon. Friend accept that an item of unfinished business remains—the situation of the remaining 92 hereditary peers in the other place? In spite of the remarks of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack), will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Joint Committee considers the position of those 92 peers, because, regardless of whether people want an elected Chamber or an appointed one, I am sure that the majority view is that that remnant from the middle ages is no longer appropriate in Parliament. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that all the noises that I hear are in support of my hon. Friend's conclusion. Of course, one of the important motivations for reform is finally to remove the hereditary principle from our parliamentary system. There can be no justification for people playing any part in the consideration of legislation, which others must obey, if they are there solely by the accident and privilege of birth. I agree with my hon. Friend that that is an important element of any package of reform. It would be difficult to remove that element alone, because the effect would be to create an all-appointed House of Lords, which the House rejected by a large majority on Tuesday. We would need to consider very carefully before we took a decision that was inconsistent with the vote of the House of Tuesday.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Bearing in mind the well-known special relationship that exists between the Leader of the House and the Lord Chancellor, may we have time for a debate on pensions? The Government's Green Paper, published recently, contains a proposal that the single lifetime limit on savings in a tax-privileged pension should be £1.4 million. On Tuesday, we failed to vote on the Lord Chancellor's option of an 80 per cent. appointed and 20 per cent. elected House, and I am worried that we might not have the opportunity to vote on another

Derry option—to reduce his pension fund from its present £2 million to £1.4 million. The House should have a chance to vote on that Derry option.

Mr. Cook: I think that we have debated enough Derry options without a further one.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Leader of the House bring in Gurney's to transcribe the debates of next week's Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation? I draw his attention to the fact that the deliberations of the Committee that considered the renewal of the Security Act 2000 will not be transcribed until next Monday. That is a nonsense, and it makes a farce of having *Hansard* if we cannot have access to it almost immediately. For the Committee's work not even to be transcribed until Monday, let alone published, is unacceptable. On Monday, we will consider Northern Ireland security legislation. It should be open to the Minister, Government Departments and other hon. Members such as me to consult our deliberations, in which some material factors were raised about security at airports and the functions of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It is unacceptable, when legislation relating to human rights and security is being deliberated on, to give priority to mere matters of debate. Will the Leader of the House comment on that?

Mr. Cook: I think that I would be in some difficulty as Leader of the House if I were not to confirm the importance of giving priority to matters of debate. It is the long-standing policy of *Hansard*—this has not been contentious—that the first priority is to transcribe the proceedings in this Chamber, that the second priority is to transcribe the proceedings in Westminster Hall, which is treated as an extension of this Chamber, and that thereafter comes the priority of transcribing the proceedings in Standing Committees. We have a very large number of Standing Committees at present, which is putting a lot of pressure on *Hansard*, and I think that we have to understand that and be realistic about it. Plainly, we would all wish to have the proceedings transcribed as quickly as possible and we are all just as keen as my hon. Friend to read our own speeches as quickly as possible. I will, of course, draw his concerns to the attention of the authorities, but, given the present large number of Standing Committees, I cannot promise an immediate increase in the turnaround of Committee transcription.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): The Quarry Products Association in Northern Ireland has been making representations to Members of the Legislative Assembly, to MPs and to Ministers about the very serious impact of the aggregates tax on quarrying in Northern Ireland, especially in the border areas, where there has already been a 50 per cent. downturn in productivity and sales. There is a risk of some quarrying businesses collapsing, and a serious risk to at least 1,000 jobs in Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on this matter in the Chamber before the Budget, because the impact of the aggregates tax in Northern Ireland was not fully examined before the decision to introduce it was made?

Mr. Cook: The aggregates tax was introduced for sound environmental reasons, and the consequence of those reasons is that, in some cases, we would wish to see the environment preserved. I hear what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I am sure that the relevant Department will consider the points that he has made. As we have already observed earlier in our exchanges, several days of debate will follow the Budget, during which it will be open to the hon. Gentleman to make this point, if he wishes to press it at that time.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the Leader of the House review the arrangements for yesterday's debate on the police grant and local government finance? Of the six hours set aside, by the time the police debate and Division had taken place, there were less than two and three quarter hours left. The opening speeches from the various Front Benches—including one of pure tedium from the Liberal Democrats that induced narcolepsy among several of those present—took more than an hour and a half, which left less than an hour and a quarter. The 20 minutes for winding up left less than an hour for Back Benchers on both sides of the House to make serious points about the local government settlement which, in my own case in Leicestershire, leaves us cemented in the cellar of educational funding, with the worst ratio of funding that we have had in decades.

Mr. Cook: I am very glad that my hon. Friend has had the opportunity to correct the omission from yesterday's debate by making his local point. I understand the importance of that to him and to his constituents. On the generality of the time allocated for the debate, strictly speaking, Standing Orders provide for an hour and a half. We rightly took the view that that was insufficient, and therefore provided double that length of time. If my hon. Friend compares the record on previous occasions, he will find that that is not an unreasonable provision for a debate on a very important issue, and an issue on which it is important that we also get a decision from the House.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): May I rise to support what the Leader of the House has said about the events of last Tuesday? I entirely share his dismay; my position was very similar to his own. He was right to draw attention to the fact that the one option comprehensively rejected was the proposal for a wholly appointed second Chamber, and that if all we do is to remove the hereditaries, we shall have given the Prime Minister precisely what he wants—a proposition wholly rejected by this House.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his views. If I remember rightly, I also heard him expressing them this morning on the "Today" programme. He draws attention to one of the interesting features of Tuesday's votes, which is that 334 Members of the House voted for one or other of the options for a largely or wholly elected second Chamber, which is substantially more than voted for an all-appointed House. I personally regret, however, that my warning, that it was important for all who supported a largely elected House to vote for all those options, was not listened to by more hon. Members. The tragedy is that,

[Mr. Cook]

on Tuesday, there was no single Division in which those 334 supported one of those options. If there had been, we would not be having this exchange today.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I am sure that the Leader of the House is aware of the plight of the British citizens who have been locked up in Saudi Arabia for more than two years, having been accused of bombing other expats over a fall-out about illegal alcohol production and sales. The family of one of those men, Sandy Mitchell, has asked me to raise the issue of his continued incarceration, because of his poor and deteriorating health. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make representations to the Saudi Government to ask for Mr. Mitchell's release on humanitarian grounds? Will he also report to the House any progress made on the plight of the others?

Mr. Cook: Before I respond, may I say to my hon. Friend that I do not think that we should speculate on any of the background that may have led to the arrests of these gentlemen? I would not wish anything that I say in response to her to be seen to endorse the claim that they had anything to do with activities relating to the provision of alcohol. I fully understand my hon. Friend's concern about the welfare of these British citizens and I can assure her that the Foreign Office has been making representations on consular grounds for a long time regarding their welfare and their legal treatment. It was doing so even before the general election, and has continued to do so since. I will certainly draw the attention of the Foreign Secretary to my hon. Friend's observations today.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): I apologise for returning to the issue of the congestion charge that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) brought up earlier, but I have written on a couple of occasions to the Leader of the House on the matter without getting a satisfactory response. I am one of seven Members of Parliament who will have to cross the congestion charge zone to carry out their constituency duties. I will not reimbursed for that. However, the large number of Ministers in Parliament will be reimbursed, although the Leader of the House said when he wrote to me some time ago that the purpose of the charge was to prevent the everyday use of cars. Will he now ensure that Ministers are not exempt from the congestion charge? Will he also tell me which constituency duties in Livingston he feels should not be compensated for? It is an absolute disgrace that the seven central London Members of Parliament will have to go about their everyday duties without receiving compensation in the way that I have set out.

Mr. Cook: The mileage allowance for Livingston is identical to the mileage allowance for any other constituency the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. On the congestion charge, the issue has been examined not only by me but by the advisory panel to the Speaker. We have all come to the same conclusion, which is that, as the charge is a tax, it would be improper for the House to reimburse Members for it out of our allowance system. Nor is there any exemption for Ministers. Ministers travelling by private car will have to pay the charge in the same way as anybody else, and when they travel in a ministerial car, the corporate fleet will be charged in the same way as any other corporate fleet.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East): Will my right hon. Friend set a date on which the House can review the new working arrangements? Is he aware that many of us who voted for the reforms did not fully appreciate that we were voting for the parliamentary equivalent of the split shift rota, with a late ending on a Monday and an unfeasibly early start for Committees on a Tuesday? I am afraid that many of us think that these family-friendly policies have left us all knackered.

Mr. Cook: I am very sorry to hear that my hon. Friend felt that he did not fully appreciate what he was voting for. In fairness, I should say that I tried, at great length and over a long period of time, to explain what he was voting for, and I suggest that he considers it more carefully before he votes again.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): In view of the strong feeling in the House and the country that when dealing with the Iraqi dictator we should proceed democratically and work through the United Nations, will the Leader of the House give us an early opportunity to debate the important testimony submitted by the United States Secretary of State, so that the House can hear the Government's view of what does constitute proof?

Mr. Cook: The Foreign Secretary of course responded immediately to Mr. Colin Powell's statement. He did so in the Security Council. His view is on the record, and is well known.

I am sure that we shall return to this issue on a number of occasions, and when we do Mr. Powell's evidence will obviously be one of the factors that we shall wish to take into account. I personally felt that the evidence that he provided of concealment and evasion in respect of the inspectors' work was an interesting addition to the debate, and one that should be troubling.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): Does the Leader of the House recall the Deputy Prime Minister's saying in his statement yesterday that he intended to present a housing Bill one of whose provisions would give local authorities enhanced powers to deal with unscrupulous private landlords who are ruining local communities? Those powers are urgently needed in former mining communities such as Featherstone, Hemsworth and South Elmsall, where the activities of such landlords are not just blighting communities but leading to their abandonment. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government intend to legislate robustly, and will he take my voice, at least, as encouragement to them to act expeditiously?

Mr. Cook: I entirely understand the importance of this measure, especially in deprived areas and areas where there is not much housing demand. I agree that we need a clearer, better system of licensing private

landlords in order to check abuse in the sector, and I assure my hon. Friend that that will be an important element of the forthcoming draft housing Bill.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge): Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the proposed changes in arrangements for payment of benefits through post offices? As he may know, forms and information packs will not be issued until the end of March, just before the change. There is a lot of uncertainty among postmasters, who want to have the information much earlier. Post offices, including the one at Milber in my constituency, are still closing. The Milber postmaster blames the Government, firmly and squarely, for the closure of his post office.

Mr. Cook: Of course the fullest possible information should be provided at the earliest opportunity. I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman's observations are passed to the Departments concerned. It is also important, however, for us to give members of the public maximum freedom to decide how they wish their benefit to be paid. All Members should support that important principle, which might well result in some people choosing to receive their benefit in other ways. We should not deny them that opportunity.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): I share others' disappointment over Tuesday's votes, especially as a Labour Member, but I take some crumbs of comfort from the fact that most Labour Members who voted supported "wholly elected" or "substantially elected" options. I think, however, that many Members were confused about how to vote if they supported indirect election, and also about the roles and powers of a second Chamber. Could not the Joint Committee do a bit more work on those issues?

Mr. Cook: I do not think there is any need for further work on the roles and powers of a second Chamber, as I think there is almost universal consensus on that principle, and when dealing with this issue one clings strongly to principles that have achieved universal consensus. Certainly the Joint Committee needs to work this out a bit more, but I do not think there is any disagreement on the fact that the second Chamber should be a revising Chamber, the fact that it should have power to delay but not to veto legislation, and the fact that it should have no powers over taxation.

I am aware that a number of colleagues believed that by voting for appointment they were voting for indirect election. I am all for taking them at their word and seeing whether we can find a greater consensus in favour of a democratic mandate through indirect election than we secured on Tuesday. I am glad that the Chairman of the Joint Committee said today that the Committee would examine the possibility of working out an option including indirect election at least in part.

Mr. Forth: I hope not.

Mr. Cook: I can tell already from the right hon. Gentleman's face that that will not command universal consensus on both sides of the Chamber, but since many of my hon. Friends appear to have meant that they wanted indirect election when they voted for appointment, I think it right for the Joint Committee to explore the possibility.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): As the right hon. Gentleman is such a caring man, will he find time for a debate on the crucial importance of speech therapy, and in particular the importance of fully meeting children's statemented needs? That would give us an opportunity to thank all who work in speech therapy for their dedication and professionalism, and to try to ensure that funds get through from the primary care trusts to the sharp end so that children receive proper provision, especially in south Essex.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well. We all salute the work of speech therapists, and recognise their immense importance in developing young people's confidence so that they can continue other aspects of their education. We hope that our increased, record investment in the national health service will provide adequate support for speech therapy.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on youth justice? I am sure he is aware of the shocking report from the chief inspector of prisons, Anne Owers, on Ashfield young offenders institution near Bristol. He may not know, however, that because of a lack of provision in Wales many young people from Wales serve their sentences in that prison. The plan is now to empty the institution, which will greatly concern families in Wales because young offenders may be even further from family and friends as a result. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Home Secretary to consider where such young people will be placed in future?

Mr. Cook: I am sure that all Members, regardless of whether they represent one of the local areas, will share my hon. Friend's concern over the very worrying report on the Ashfield centre. I assure my hon. Friend that Ministers are following the work of the Prison Service with the closest attention. I will ask them to write to her setting out the particular implications for young offenders from Wales.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Will Ministers and officials meeting Mr. Kharrazi, the Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister, raise with him Iran's appalling human rights programme and its own secret weapons programme? Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that some of us, while accepting that the spotlight should be turned on Iraq, cannot understand why we are asked to turn a blind eye to the bloodstained activities in Tehran and the secret weapons programme that it is developing? Could we have an opportunity to discuss that?

Mr. Cook: I am confident that my colleagues at the Foreign Office have continued the dialogue on human rights with Iran that has been proceeding for some time. I understand my hon. Friend's concern about, in particular, the potential weapons programmes in Iran, but what has been encouraging over the last few years is

[Mr. Cook]

the substantial support among the Iranian electorate for forces of modernisation and moderation, and the extent to which they have rejected the hardline clerics' position.

It is one of the unfortunate features of Iranian politics that the military and security aspects are in the hands of the revolutionary authorities set up by the hardline clerics rather than those of the democratic and elected Government of Iran. If we want to assist the people of Iran, it is in our interests to support and welcome the modernising forces of which Iran's elected Government and Mr. Kharazi are a part, and make sure it is clear that the west is willing to work with the forces of moderation and democracy in Iran.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): In view of the crucial importance of the evidence presented to the UN yesterday, may I add my voice to those calling for a specific debate on the question of evidence—also in view of the weapons inspectors' report, which will appear next week?

After business questions we shall hear a welcome statement on our contingency preparations in respect of Iraq, but we shall not have an opportunity to discuss the evidence to which the contingency preparations are designed to respond. Does my right hon. Friend not consider that unusual?

Mr. Cook: I am quite sure that the evidence will play a crucial part in any discussion on policy in relation to Iraq. In fairness to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, he has sought to put in the public domain a lot of the evidence available to the British Government. My hon. Friend is right to say that those who are concerned about what action might be taken in relation to Iraq will necessarily wish to probe, examine and assess the evidence for themselves. That must form part of any future debate, and I can assure the House that there will be an opportunity for that to happen in any such debate.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): May we have a debate on early-day motion 561?

[That this House notes that community pharmacists offer their local communities convenient access to NHS services; recognises their role in reducing the burden on local general practitioners; notes the recommendations of the Office of Fair Trading that pharmaceutical dispensing should be made open to free market competition; is concerned that supermarkets would use their market power to undermine and eliminate small local pharmacies and thereby effect a net loss of NHS provision; and urges Her Majesty's Government not to accept this recommendation of the OFT.]

The motion relates to the Office of Fair Trading's recommendation that pharmaceutical dispensing be opened to the free market. That would threaten the existence of hundreds, if not thousands, of small chemists, and would open yet another sector to the rapacious tendencies of the big supermarket chains. For many communities, that would be simply unacceptable. If we cannot have a debate, may we at least have a statement, so that the many of us who are concerned about this issue might recommend that the OFT proposals be thrown out?

Mr. Cook: I am not familiar with that OFT report, but I shall make a point of becoming so as soon as I leave the Chamber. I fully share my hon. Friend's concern that we ensure that local community pharmacists have every opportunity to continue in business. I am well aware from my constituency work how much constituents value them, and I am sure that other Members are, too. It is important that we take forward a proper competition agenda, while at the same time ensuring that we preserve local services.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There are six hon. Members left to speak, and if the questions are brief, I can take every one of them.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): My right hon. Friend will be aware that today, North Korea threatened a pre-emptive strike against American troops stationed on the Korean peninsula, should the number of those troops be increased. The Prime Minister has committed this country to contesting North Korea through the United Nations, but equally, it is British Government policy—should a second resolution on Iraq be tabled and one of the five permanent members of the Security Council exercise a veto—that this country will still engage in a war against Iraq. May we have a debate on what precisely the British Government's policy is in respect of the United Nations?

Mr. Cook: I am quite sure that there will be further opportunities for the House to debate this matter, but there is no doubt about this Government's commitment to the United Nations. Indeed, it is partly as a result of the Prime Minister's energy and activity that we have kept the Iraq crisis firmly anchored in the UN, and that the next stage of developments on Iraq will be for UN inspectors to report to the Security Council. They are in Iraq only as a result of the action that we and other countries have taken to ensure that the issue was raised through the Security Council.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): We can all play about with the statistics arising from Tuesday's votes and come to conclusions that suit our own arguments, but that is a rather silly avenue to go down, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will try to rise above it. What is clear after Tuesday is that the status quo is not an option and hereditary peerages must go—indeed, even their lordships did not vote to retain them. I welcome what he is now saying about indirect elections, but will he have a word with his colleagues on the Joint Committee who supported the elected option—they included the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who voted to have any reference to indirect elections removed from the report?

Mr. Cook: I am not quite sure which of the statistics that I quoted my hon. Friend is taking exception to. If he wants to amend any of these statistics, I will cheerfully

correct the record, but I notice that he did not suggest that I was wrong in any particular fact in respect of those that I quoted. What I did say is that all options were defeated—there were no winners on Tuesday. I agree with him that the status quo is unacceptable, but unfortunately, as a result of Tuesday we do not currently have an alternative to it, and there is no facile and easy solution.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): In considering the options for the future of Lords reform, does my right hon. Friend agree that how Parliament should be composed, how many Houses there should be and who should be in them are questions not just for parliamentarians in this place or the other place, but for the public, who might also have a view? Given that they voted in an election for a more democratic second Chamber, that polls indicate that they still support that proposal, and that the other place voted that the public should keep their noses out, does my right hon. Friend feel that we should find a way of gauging whether the public do indeed still feel the same way?

Mr. Cook: I agree with my hon. Friend that this is not a matter in which we should simply indulge ourselves by choosing our own preference; we must also carry the public with us. Having been through the debates on House of Lords reform that we have had in the past 18 months, I certainly do not want this issue to continue for a further 18 years. It is therefore very important that when we make a change, we make one that will stand the test of time. It will do so only if we can carry with it the confidence of the public.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Can the Leader of the House find space in the schedule to debate the recent rise in unemployment in Germany of almost 10 per cent.? German unemployment is now above 11 per cent., and more than 4.5 million Germans are unemployed. The euro is clearly not working for Germany, and ought we not to debate this issue as a matter of urgency?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend frequently expresses concern about the state of the German economy, and I am sure that his remarks will be well reported in Bonn and Berlin. I hesitate to suggest that I will draw his remarks to the attention of the Chancellor of Germany and invite him to write to my hon. Friend, which would be my normal response on these occasions. However, the decision on whether this country should join the single currency must be based on a rigorous assessment of the economic impact on Britain, not on Germany. It is very important that we recognise that one reason why so many companies have come to, and invested in, Britain—and, if I may say so, in Livingston in particular—is precisely so that they can export to the whole of the European market. It appears that many of these companies, in view of the recent figures, are reflecting on whether they wish to invest outside the eurozone.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Would it be possible to have a debate on the United States' refusal to allow international inspectors into many of its chemical plants in order to verify its compliance with the chemical weapons convention? Does the Leader of the House agree that if we had such a debate, the Government could explain why it seems to be easier for international inspectors to access chemical plants in Iraq than those in the United States?

Mr. Cook: I am not entirely sure to what extent such a debate would illuminate the general question of Iraq. However, it is of course the Government's policy that all countries should comply with the chemical weapons convention; indeed, we have urged the Americans to accept an inspection regime.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): May I encourage my right hon. Friend in his use of statistics in respect of Tuesday's votes? Can he confirm that, if the votes of those who voted for 60 per cent. and 80 per cent. elected are taken together—bearing it in mind that the same people were not always involved—of those voting on that night, there was a majority in this House for a substantially elected House of Lords?

Mr. Cook: I would not disagree with my hon. Friend, but as I have already said, the fact remains that no one option was carried. If we are to find a way forward and a majority for one option, we will have to have more flexibility in future than we saw on Tuesday.

Iraq: Further Contingency Preparations

1.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on further contingency preparations in relation to Iraq.

In a statement on 7 January, I announced the deployment of maritime forces including 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines and a substantial naval task force. In a further statement on 20 January, I announced the composition and deployment of land forces involving Headquarters 1 UK Armoured Division, 7 Armoured Brigade, 16 Air Assault Brigade and 102 Logistics Brigade. Today, I would like to set out to the House our plans for the deployment of air forces.

As with the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force already maintains a significant presence in the middle east region, routinely involving around 25 aircraft and 1,000 personnel. For more than a decade, the Royal Air Force has played an important part in patrolling and enforcing the northern and southern no-fly zones over Iraq, in support of UN Security Council resolution 688, in order to provide the Iraqi people with some protection from Saddam Hussein's regime. In carrying out this task, it has on many occasions been attacked by Iraqi forces, and I am sure that the House will join me in saluting its courage and professionalism.

As part of our contingency planning over recent months, we have been considering carefully what additional air capabilities might be required in the event of operations against Iraq. The details of that planning will necessarily continue to evolve. It is in the nature of air forces that they can be deployed over long distances more rapidly than maritime or land forces, but we envisage that in the days and weeks ahead we will increase the Royal Air Force presence in the region to around 100 fixed-wing aircraft supported by around 7,000 personnel, including members of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. That will be a balanced and highly capable force, including E-3D Sentry aircraft for airborne command and control; Jaguar and Tornado aircraft in the reconnaissance role; VC10 and Tristar air-to-air refuelling aircraft; Hercules transport aircraft; Tornado F3 aircraft, with the newly integrated ASRAAM missile providing an air defence capability; and Tornado GR4 and Harrier GR7 aircraft providing an offensive capability should it be required, including precision-guided weapons. The Royal Air Force Regiment will protect the deployed forces. In addition, the Royal Air Force element of the joint helicopter command will deploy a very substantial proportion of its equipment and personnel, providing helicopter support to other deployed forces. Its contribution will consist of 27 Puma and Chinook helicopters and about 1,100 people.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the Royal Air Force's air transport squadrons, which, in addition to operating in the region itself, will work to maximum capacity in deploying and sustaining forces of all three services, supplemented as necessary by civilian charter aircraft. As with the maritime and land forces that we are deploying, these air deployments will provide a balanced and flexible force package, bringing together a wide range of capabilities. I do not intend to discuss the specific tasks that might be undertaken, but it will be obvious to the House that this represents a very substantial contribution by the Royal Air Force to the building of a credible threat of force in support of the policy objectives that I have previously set out to the House.

I have now announced the composition and deployment of forces from all three services. I recognise that that may tempt some people into speculation about the likelihood or timing of military action. It is still possible for Saddam Hussein to change his behaviour, to co-operate actively with the weapons inspectors and to disarm by peaceful means, but, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, time is running out. The Iraqi regime must decide whether it will comply with its obligations or face the consequences.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for giving me a copy in advance.

The statement's brevity belies its significance. The Secretary of State has today put in place the final major element of a very substantial taskforce for deployment in preparation for any military action against Iraq. I join him in his tribute to our fixed-wing and helicopter pilots, particularly those who are enforcing the no-fly zones, some of whom I had the privilege of meeting when I visited Prince Sultan airbase in Saudi Arabia at the end of last year. We salute their courage and professionalism.

Let me reiterate, lest the Secretary of State prefers to misunderstand my remarks, that Her Majesty's Opposition have confidence in the professionalism and dedication of our armed forces, but we should not take them and their excellence for granted. The sheer size of the commitment for all three services raises very serious questions about sustainability and overstretch. About 60 per cent. of the Army is now committed—that is, preparing for, on, or recovering from operations. What strain will today's very major Royal Air Force commitment put on the availability of pilots?

When was the last time that personnel in our armed forces truly enjoyed 24 months between operational tours, which was laid down in the 1998 strategic defence review? That is desirable not only so that they can have the time with their families that most of us take for granted, but so that they are fully trained and ready for whatever operations they next face. I fully accept that the present deployment is exceptional in its size, but it raises questions about the overall size of the armed forces.

Will the Secretary of State comment on recent reports that the Government intend to maintain peacekeeping forces in Iraq for up to three years? How could that, or even a much shorter period, be sustained while all three services remain thousands of men short of the Government's own manning targets? For example, in the light of today's announcement and a significant shortage of combat pilots, RAF pilots left with aircraft in the UK for our own air defence must be asking, "How long can we sustain full readiness while we remain so overstretched?"

On the deployment itself, I do not expect the Secretary of State to be any more specific about the RAF's role and purpose in any Gulf operations, but will

he clarify whether Sea Harrier fighters are included in the deployment? Will he confirm that, with its outstanding Blue Vixen radar, the Sea Harrier remains our most capable air-to-air fighter, which has already proved itself in the Gulf as part of the no-fly zone operation? While Sea Harrier fighters remain operational, it would be rather perverse if they were left at home simply because Ministers have decided to scrap them as obsolete in 2006.

When will the Secretary of State be able to clarify the command arrangements? Will the relationship with the United States be the same as it was in the last Gulf war? If not, what will be different, and why? I have asked that question before, and I can see no reason for the Secretary of State to refuse to inform the House that all the key elements of the force are in place. Will he at least confirm that operating under US command does not mean that Her Majesty's armed forces cease to be accountable to the UK Government and to this House—yet another scare launched by the Liberal Democrats?

On a particular issue of which I have given him notice, can the Secretary of State reassure the House about a report that appeared in *The Washington Times* yesterday, which said that, according to a US Air Force report,

"There is significant confusion about roles, responsibilities and chain of command throughout key areas within the Combined Air Operation Centre"

and it is not ready for war.

This further announcement comes on the day after the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, presented the most damning indictment of Saddam Hussein's record of defiance of the UN. On the day that Dr. Hans Blix is visiting the Prime Minister, the evidence is now clearer than ever that Saddam Hussein is prepared to risk war rather than to disarm. Is it not time for those such as the Liberal Democrats to get off the fence? Does the Secretary of State agree, even at this stage, that military action is not inevitable and that Saddam Hussein still has time to comply with the UN resolutions? Nevertheless, this substantial deployment, which we welcome, demonstrates the determination of our country to back the United Nations with a credible threat.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support and for the support of Her Majesty's official Opposition. I shall deal with the points that he raised.

On SDR tour intervals, I am as disappointed as he is that it has not been possible to achieve those projected tour intervals, but in the period since the publication of the strategic defence review, Britain's armed forces have been exceptionally busy. Since the Opposition have never, understandably, opposed any of the deployments that have taken place during that period, they must share in the responsibility, which I accept, for having been unable to achieve the SDR planned tour intervals.

As regards the reports that I, too, have seen in newspapers about a three-year deployment, I assure the hon. Gentleman, as I assure the House, that they are purely and simply speculation. Clearly, our forces will be in the Gulf for as long it takes to disarm Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein.

I have already dealt with the issue of Sea Harriers and the deployed forces aboard the aircraft carrier that will go to the Gulf region as part of the taskforce, and I do not need to repeat my answer in that respect.

On the command and control arrangements, those are still evolving. We are in discussions with the United States. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that Britain's forces will remain under the command of the United Kingdom Government, which is always the position.

I am certainly aware of the report in *The Washington Times*, but I am not aware that it is accurate.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in allowing me to see a copy of his statement, and for informing me about his communication earlier today. I join him and the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), in sending our respects and best wishes to the men and women in Her Majesty's forces who are already in the Gulf, to their families, and to the young men and women now on their way to the Gulf.

The Secretary of State has made three statements on military contingency plans for the Gulf. Does he expect to make any more in the coming weeks? Will he confirm that he will return to the House if further developments take place, especially during the recess that begins in 10 days' time, and that the House will be recalled if events require it?

I assure the Secretary of State again that Liberal Democrat Members support the deployment of forces to the Gulf. However, we do not believe that they should go into action until there has been a substantive vote in the House of Commons.

The Royal Air Force is already in theatre, as the Secretary of State said. I met RAF personnel at Ali Al Salam and Mubarak a couple of weeks ago. I support and recognise the work that they do. Will there be any change in the current role of the RAF forces already in the northern and southern no-fly zones, or any change in their rules of engagement?

We all accept that war is not inevitable, and hope that it can be avoided. However, if military action becomes necessary, it must be under UN authority. Operations conducted in the UN's name must abide by the UN's principles. Will the Secretary of State confirm that any prisoners taken in the course of hostilities will be treated in accordance with the Geneva convention, and that any action will be proportionate?

In the event of hostilities, there must be humanitarian contingency plans. Will the Secretary of State say what will be the role of the RAF in any humanitarian support? My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) raised with the Prime Minister the other day the concerns of UK civilians living in the Gulf, of whom there are some 90,000. Are there are any contingency plans for the RAF to evacuate them, if that becomes necessary?

Yet more men and women in our armed forces are venturing into potential conflict. They should know what is expected of them, in both the short and the

[Mr. Paul Keetch]

long term. They should also know that they remain in our thoughts as we hope and strive for a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his observations. I assure him that the Government will report to the House as and when necessary, in the light of unfolding events. However, I caution him against the insistence on requiring a substantive vote of the House before any military operations are conducted. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"] If I may explain: it is obviously vital to retain the element of surprise if military operations become necessary. That has always been the case. It would not be sensible to signal in advance our intentions to an enemy. The House must consider that very carefully.

I assure the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) that the Government will treat prisoners in accordance with international law. All our operations will be fully in accordance with the principles of international law, including the use of our forces for humanitarian purposes, should that be necessary. I have described the successive deployments as both balanced and flexible, so that the forces involved can be used in a range of military options. I repeat that those options include humanitarian operations, where that is necessary.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as long as the UN weapons inspectors are in Iraq, the threat to world security from the Iraqi regime is at a lower level? Will he assure the House that there is no logistical reason why the Government cannot keep open the option of an inspection process lasting months rather than weeks?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his observations, but I am sure that he knows the history of the involvement with Iraq of the UN and the international community. That involvement stretches back over a period of 12 years. A series of UN obligations have been placed on Iraq, culminating in the passing of resolution 1441, which specifically sets out Iraq's obligation to co-operate with the weapons inspectors.

It has become clear—from Dr. Blix's first report to the Security Council and from the damning evidence set out yesterday by Secretary of State Colin Powell—that that co-operation is simply not forthcoming from Iraq. It is a question not of allowing time for the weapons inspectors, but of whether there is any prospect of Iraq co-operating with the international community and the UN

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I expressly support the Government's foreign policy on this matter, and the outline of the case made by the Secretary of State this afternoon. However, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to consider the position of our reserve forces. In his statement, he said that 7,000 RAF personnel, including members of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, would shortly be in the Gulf. How many of those 7,000 will be auxiliary airmen or reservists? I understand that 6,000 Army reservists are now on call for 12-month duty. How many—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I think that the hon. and learned Gentleman has asked enough questions. He must be brief on these occasions.

Mr. Hoon: I shall try to anticipate the rest of the question in my answer. I was able to set out, in a written ministerial statement on 30 January, the Government's intention to send out further notices to secure a total of around 6,000 reservists. In broad terms, our requirement is for approximately 500 Royal Navy and Royal Marines reservists, for about 1,600 RAF reservists, and for about 3,600 Army reservists.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): The Secretary of State has just asserted that the House apparently does not need to have a vote on the deployment of British forces. Will he please reconsider that? The mass of British public opinion is deeply sceptical about the war, if not completely hostile to it. People believe that it is being fought in the interests of America and nothing else, and that it is largely about oil. Cannot the House of Commons have a vote at the very least, before a third of all British armed forces are deployed in a theatre of war that has neither public support nor consent?

Mr. Hoon: I ask that my hon. Friend properly represents what I said, which was that I did not anticipate that a vote would be needed before deployment took place. In similar circumstances in the past, the practice of the House has been to have a vote shortly before deployment. If that is possible, the Government will follow that precedent. If it is not possible—because of the security risks associated with having such a vote shortly before any military operation—I and my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have made it clear that a vote will be held as soon as possible thereafter. I urge my hon. Friend to reflect properly what I just said to the House.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent): On previous operations, members of the armed forces deployed away from their permanent duty station for a length of time have often lost out on station-specific pay, such as the living overseas allowance or London pay. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that will not happen on this occasion? Does he agree that it would be wholly wrong for any member of the armed forces to lose out financially as a result of service in the Gulf?

Mr. Hoon: I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman quite properly raises. We shall consider the matter carefully as part of the overall welfare arrangements. Those arrangements are still evolving, as they depend on the length and circumstances of any deployment. However, the hon. Gentleman has made his point well. I am aware of the matter, and it will certainly be taken into account.

Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that no members of our armed services are having to purchase their own items of equipment?

Constituents of mine with relatives in the services have told me that their relatives are having to purchase their own boots and mosquito nets. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the 7,000 RAF personnel being sent to the Gulf will not have to do that?

Mr. Hoon: I can confirm that no members of the armed forces are having to purchase equipment. However, it has long been the practice of armed forces personnel to prefer to purchase certain items or equipment for their own use. That has gone on for a very long time, and the matter has been brought to my attention regularly by the personnel whom I have had the opportunity of meeting.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The Secretary of State must know that the essentials of military planning are to know the contingency against which the plans are being made, and the troops that will be available. Does he realise that, by dribbling out news about deployments as he has done, he has made life much more difficult for military planners? The way that he has handled the matter smacks more of political expedience than military leadership.

Mr. Hoon: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that he is quite wrong. These announcements are made precisely in response to the deliberations of military planners, who prepared the material at the appropriate stage, given the notice requirements—as I implied in my observations about the timing of any deployment of air forces. The announcements are made specifically as a result of military planning and are in no way inconsistent with that military planning.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is the Secretary of State aware that, given the size of the US and British deployment in the region and the hundreds of thousands of forces massing on the borders of Iraq, the likelihood of any allied attack being a surprise is remote? He will have to come up with something better than that to explain to the British people why the US Congress can have a vote before US troops are sent into action but the British Parliament is denied such a vote.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend knows full well the very different constitutional arrangements that exist. The Government are following well-established procedures of the House and have clearly set out the arrangements; it is clear that the preference is for a vote before any deployment, but, in the circumstances, it may be necessary to delay that until shortly afterwards. That has always been the position for the House.

Angus Robertson (Moray): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Can he confirm that the majority of deployed personnel from Scotland are based in my constituency, at RAF Lossiemouth and RAF Kinloss, and that, like the majority of people in Moray, he wishes them well and hopes for their safe and speedy return? Together with other members of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I visited airbases in the Gulf region and I have raised concerns with the MOD about communications so that service personnel can keep in touch with their families back home. Can the Secretary of State confirm that efforts will be undertaken to maintain the improvements in those vital phone and internet communication links?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his observations and can confirm that the great majority of RAF personnel will be coming from his constituency. I note his support for that deployment. As I indicated in response to an earlier question, detailed work is being undertaken on the welfare package and I can certainly assure the hon. Gentleman that every effort will be made to ensure the most effective package possible.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is not the choice simple? One accepts either the denials of the Iraqi dictator in answer to those searching and difficult questions that were put to him, or the compelling evidence given yesterday to the United Nations by the US Secretary of State. Is it not clear that the regime is engaged in deception over weapons of mass destruction and that it cannot be trusted in any way? It is an unfortunate fact that too many people in this place are willing to give credibility to a murderous dictator.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has always approached this issue with commendable consistency and absolute logic.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Has the Secretary of State given any thought as to what he will do about keeping the public informed as the war progresses, if there is a war? Many of us were concerned about the amount of information in the media before part of a recent special forces operation in Afghanistan. That cannot be helpful. What thought has the right hon. Gentleman given to that issue?

Mr. Hoon: A great deal of effort goes into ensuring that the media are given accurate and up-to-date information, provided of course that it in no way compromises the safety and security of our forces. The hon. Lady is right however—there are lessons to be learned, not least by the prominent newspaper that published details of British forces' actions in Afghanistan long before they had even arrived in that country.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): How much is all this lot going to cost? Is it not a fact that in the Budget statement about £1 billion was set aside? Is the Budget being delayed because the Government are not sure of the costs if a war takes place? Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is all to satisfy the whims of a tin pot American president who had a lousier election result than Mugabe?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is well known for his determination to do the right thing and to ensure that proper action is taken, irrespective of cost, and I assure him that that is the case for this deployment. We are doing the right thing. We are taking the right decision in support of the UN and the international community and we shall go on doing so, irrespective of the cost.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): May I join the Secretary of State in paying particular tribute to the air

[Mr. James Gray]

transport squadrons, a large part of which are based in my constituency at RAF Lyneham? Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that not only C-130J but also C-130K Hercules will be deployed? Will he comment on local rumours that, as a result of that, he intends to make a substantial investment in upgrading the defensive aid sweeps of the C-130K? I certainly hope that he will.

Mr. Hoon: I can confirm that both types of aircraft will be deploying and that part of our efforts will indeed be to improve the protection available to at least some of those aircraft in appropriate circumstances.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): As we discovered during the Suez invasion, we cannot act irrespective of cost. If these contingency measures and the ones already in place are acted on, what will be the consequences for our economy, the lives of the Iraqi people and the stability of the Arab world?

Mr. Hoon: I should be happier with my hon. Friend's question if he had also addressed the costs of inaction. What are the risks faced by the international community of leaving Saddam Hussein to continue to develop weapons of mass destruction, including his efforts to develop a nuclear weapon? What are the costs to the immediate region of a country such as Iraq, which should be wealthy, successful, prosperous and an effective participant in the international community? That is not the case and the situation cannot continue indefinitely.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): After the compelling demonstration yesterday by Colin Powell of the extent and range of chemical and biological weapons in Iraq, can the Secretary of State give us an assurance that all British armed forces personnel will be fully protected when those weapons are fired at them, not just when they are in the front line but when they are within range of medium-range ballistic weapons?

Mr. Hoon: I have given that assurance in the past and I repeat it: we are taking the necessary steps to provide our troops with appropriate protection against a nuclear, chemical or biological threat.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): What are the implications for the contingency preparations now under way of Saddam Hussein's refusal to allow scientists to be interviewed privately by the inspectors, with their families being taken to a place of safety?

Mr. Hoon: It simply demonstrates that the international community and the UN are not receiving the full and effective co-operation that was clearly specified by resolution 1441. Above all else, it is an indication of the determination of the Iraqi regime to avoid its international obligations and to avoid implementing the resolution as required.

Patrick Mercer (Newark): I welcome the additional deployment of RAF personnel. Credible deterrence makes war less likely rather than more likely. Will the Secretary of State confirm, however, which officers will command which parts of our forces? Can he also confirm that this time they will receive the unequivocal support of the Government, unlike certain unfortunate aspects of the Afghan campaign?

Mr. Hoon: The precise details of the officers in command of each unit have now been published and I shall ensure that a copy of the release is sent to the hon. Gentleman. I assure him that he should not believe tendentious reports in our newspapers; there was absolute support for the leadership of our armed forces in Afghanistan and that will again be the case for our forces in Iraq.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): As this war will be only the second in 100 years in which Britain has been the aggressor, is not it essential that we go forward with sound knowledge? To test the worth of the statements made yesterday by Colin Powell, would not it be good to assess the value of the dossier placed before the House in September, as it has proved to be almost entirely untrue? Two days ago, the Government admitted that one of their main claims was completely untrue and that none of the sites that had been visited contained weapons of mass destruction. Given the opposition of the British people, how can we go forward with such a war of aggression in which our soldiers will lose their lives and in which they may kill Iraqi innocents in their tens of thousands?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend will forgive me for suggesting that he is rather confused. The United Kingdom acting in support of a clear United Nations resolution—which I assume my hon. Friend supports and wants implemented—is a curious definition of aggression by the UK. My hon. Friend usually supports UN decisions and I would have thought he would want to see them properly and effectively implemented, and see the UK Government play their part in the international community in that achievement. My hon. Friend has asked me before about the absence of weapons of mass destruction on certain sites. If he studies carefully the material so cogently set out yesterday by Secretary of State Powell at the Security Council in New York, he would know why weapons of mass destruction are no longer at the sites indicated last September. They have been moved by a Government determined not to co-operate with the UN.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, at a time when this country might be on the brink of war, the Ministry of Defence has spent £40,000 on a survey to identify sexism in the Army—and that the term "girl" has been criticised, despite men in the Army being referred to as "boys"? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that is not just a preposterous waste of taxpayers' money, but that any woman who is so sensitive as to worry about such politically correct nonsense has no place in the armed forces?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that the House is grateful to the hon. Lady for pointing that out at this particular time. I will certainly have the matter investigated.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Ministers have said that they will not feel bound by what is, in their opinion,

unreasonable use of the veto on a further Security Council resolution. Where in the UN charter is there provision for any member state to choose to ignore a veto? If my right hon. Friend believes that this country and the US have that right, why should any other country pay any attention in future to use of the veto by the UK or US—on this or any other issue?

Mr. Hoon: We have not reached that stage. I invite my hon. Friend to await the outcome of the further report by Dr. Blix to the Security Council and whatever resolutions, discussions and votes may follow.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge): The Secretary of State ought to sort out his arguments about whether it is a matter of arrangement or surprise that the House cannot have a vote. Will the right hon. Gentleman return with a statement on humanitarian aid, but say today what will be the RAF's contribution?

Mr. Hoon: Alongside the military preparations—some of which I have set out today—a determined effort will be made to ensure the safety and security of the Iraqi people, with whom we have never had any quarrel. People who have been threatened by Saddam Hussein deserve better protection from the international community, which we will seek to provide.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I hear the Secretary of State's reassuring words about humanitarian aid, but we need more. Aid agencies in the region advise that there has been no increase in the supplies necessary to protect the population from the same weapons that our troops may face. Many of us desperately seek reassurance that such supplies will be available in equal measure.

Mr. Hoon: A determined effort is under way to ensure that, alongside effective military preparations, provision is made for the kind of response that may be required following any action, to ensure the rebuilding of Iraq's civil administration so that it will be in a position to take its rightful role in the international community.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Saddam almost certainly has far fewer biological or chemical weapons and missiles than in the past. The Central Intelligence Agency reckons that currently, he is only likely to use or pass them on to others if attacked. Intrusive inspections can check on Colin Powell's allegations while both constraining and disarming Iraq. Saddam's positive co-operation with disarmament—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman must not make a speech. He must ask a question—quickly.

Mr. Savidge: Is the relentless rush towards a pre-emptive war dictated less by an immediate threat than by US domestic politics and military and climatic considerations?

Mr. Hoon: It is dictated by Iraq's failure to co-operate properly with the decision of the international community. My hon. Friend referred to intrusive inspections, but clearly the obligation is on Iraq to co-operate with the inspectors. There will be no need for intrusive inspections if Iraq co-operates. The evidence is clear—Iraq is not co-operating with the will of the international community.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): As well as paying tribute to our deployed forces, does my right hon. Friend acknowledge the implications of today's decision for support units such as the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, which will have to meet a big challenge—and will do so professionally? Is he satisfied that he will be able to charter the number of civilian aircraft and other heavy lift needed? Is it true that other European countries are currently busy chartering from the same source?

Mr. Hoon: I had the opportunity recently to meet work force representatives from DARA and I pay tribute to the excellent work that that agency does on behalf of our armed forces and the country. As to chartering civilian aircraft, I am confident that there will be sufficient availability, although, as my hon. Friend indicated, a number of countries are interested in chartering similar aircraft at this time.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must move on. We will doubtless return to this topic.

Points of Order

2.6 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May we, through you, ask Mr. Speaker to make representations on behalf of the House on the censorship of e-mails received in this building? It has been drawn to my attention that were I to quote from the British Board of Film Classification guidelines in this Chamber and that was reported in *Hansard*, if that report were electronically sent back to the House, it would be automatically be blocked. Similarly, if I were to quote from the Sexual Offences legislation and that was reported by *Hansard*, published and communicated by e-mail, it would be blocked under the present system of censorship.

I ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to examine that issue in relation to free speech in this Chamber and to ask the House authorities to review principles and practice in respect of the present arrangement. Clearly, censorship has gone too far and the nanny state is into overkill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The clear intention behind the move to block incoming e-mails was to protect our staff from some extremely offensive material that some members of the public are prepared to transmit. In light of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, I will ask the appropriate authorities to consider the matter again, to ensure no nonsense is perpetrated in the operation of what is intended as a sensible and sensitive approach to the feelings of our staff.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. On 29 January, the Prime Minister categorically stated:

"The decisions whether to commit troops . . . are taken by our Government, our House of Commons and our country."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

That statement was totally refuted today by the Secretary of State for Defence. Either that shows a basic shift in Government policy that, again, the House has not been privileged to examine or the Secretary of State does not know what the Prime Minister is thinking. Surely that warrants some kind of statement, given that the House is about to engage in a war against Iraq that the majority of people of this country regard as illegal and immoral, and which the House has had no opportunity to debate on a substantive motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady knows that that matter is not for the Chair but for debate. I have allowed her remarks to be placed on the record but her experience in the House will lead her to appreciate that there are other channels through which to convey her strong feelings on the matter.

Orders of the Day

Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Considered in Committee.

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

EXPENDITURE RELATING TO BRITISH ENERGY P.L.C.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I beg to move amendment No. 12, in page 1, line 5, leave out paragraph (a).

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment No. 10, in page 1, line 6, at end insert—

'in relation to qualifying activities'.

Amendment No. 14, in page 1, line 13, at end insert—

'( ) Nothing in subsection (1) shall permit the Secretary of State to incur expenditure on the management, transportation, storage or reprocessing of nuclear waste materials.'.

Amendment No. 15, in page 1, line 13, at end insert—

'( ) Nothing in subsection (1) shall permit the Secretary of State to enter into any arrangement having the effect of transferring financial liability for the storage or reprocessing of nuclear waste material to the Exchequer.'.

Amendment No. 3, in page 1, line 20, after 'loan', insert 'or'.

Amendment No. 4, in page 1, line 21, leave out 'by any other means'.

Amendment No. 11, in page 2, line 3, at end insert—

'"qualifying activities" shall be limited to the financial liabilities generated by a British Energy company prior to 4th September 2002, to a maximum of £2,100 million'.

Amendment No. 26, in page 2, line 8, at end add—

'(4) No money shall be made available by the Secretary of State to a British Energy company for the purposes of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, or that would have the effect of displacing the cost of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel from the general expenditure of a British Energy company.'.

New clause 1—*Historic liabilities*—

'Expenditure under the provisions of this Act shall be restricted to the historic liabilities of British Energy plc as at 4th September 2002.'.

Dr. Cable: I am delighted to begin the Bill's consideration in Committee. I am conscious of the fact, however, that we have very limited time. The time for discussion in Committee has been concertinaed, and it has now been further reduced by the statement on Iraq, so I will try to be brief and to the point. I am also conscious of the fact—we had strong guidance about this from the Chair on Second Reading—that this is a narrow discussion; it is not about the general merits and demerits of nuclear power, and this series of amendments will narrow the debate even further.

I wish to focus on three issues, the first of which is captured in amendment No. 12 and relates to the lively debate in government and the European Commission and what should be a lively debate in Committee about

the relative merits of solvent restructuring versus administration. We have tried to capture that issue in the amendment by proposing the deletion of the relevant subsection.

Secondly, we have tabled amendments Nos. 10 and 11, by which we seek to limit the Government's commitment to their decommissioning liabilities. That is an attempt to address the issue, which is replete in the Bill, of very large, open-ended financial liabilities. Whatever we feel about nuclear power or British Energy, we wish to try to provide some discipline and limits on those financial commitments.

Thirdly, we have a couple of amendments—to which I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) will speak—that relate to the link between British Energy and BNFL and our concern that BNFL's losses and British Energy's problems will simply become interchangeable in a very opaque way. The purpose of those amendments is effectively to create a financial firewall between the two undertakings.

Let me address most of my remarks to the very live issue: the relative merits of administration as opposed to solvent restructuring. When I first publicly raised the idea of administration, I vividly recall that it was regarded as being somewhat insane, but I subsequently discovered that my wing of the lunatic asylum is inhabited by the European Commission and, if we are to believe the press, by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, too. It would appear that there are great doubts in government about whether solvent restructuring is the best option for the British taxpayer.

Perhaps I can put the discussion in context by reading the relevant quotations from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. In her first statement, which was very well balanced, she made two keys points that frame the whole discussion. She said:

"whatever happens"

—administration or solvent restructuring—

"nuclear power stations will continue to generate electricity and will continue to employ staff. Pensions entitlements will be met. Trade suppliers will be paid. Customers' lights will stay on."—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2002; Vol. 395, c. 490.]

We are not debating safety issues or security of supply. The Secretary of State has made it very clear that those aspects would be protected under an administration arrangement. She went on to say:

"Let me make it clear that there is no real difference in the cost to the taxpayer between the solvent restructuring that we are giving the company a chance to put into place and falling into administration".—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2002; Vol. 395, c. 492–93.]

The Government's own starting point is that the two approaches are not fundamentally different financially, but it is very clear that a debate is going on about them.

2.15 pm

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Does the hon. Gentleman have any observation to make on the last point about the difference in cost? If, as is proposed by the Bill, the financial ceiling is removed, is there not the danger that British Energy will become a sink down which money is poured?

Dr. Cable: Indeed, that is very much my view, and I hope to develop it in more detail. However, that concern is shared not just by Liberal Democrat Members and even by Conservative Members, but in many reaches of the Government. There was a discussion in *The Business* newspaper on Sunday about the debate that is going on in Whitehall. As none of us has had that kind of information, one must assume that it has some accuracy. It said:

"Securing bondholders and creditors' agreement to the restructuring would represent a victory for the Department of Trade and Industry and the energy minister, Brian Wilson over the Treasury."

It has been made very clear that the Treasury, which has done its own cost-benefit analysis, is very sceptical about whether solvent restructuring is the best deal for the taxpayer. It concludes that narrative by saying:

"But the DTI insisted British Energy should be kept in the private sector."

So I shall briefly assume the mantle of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, rather than that of Liberal Democrat spokesman, and argue what I think he would argue if he were here defending his corner against the DTI. He would make the point that, if solvent restructuring goes ahead, there are clearly some financial benefits to the Government, and those benefits have to be set against the costs in a fair-minded way.

The Government would derive two benefits from solvent restructuring. First, £275 million in new bonds will be produced by the restructured company. That is new money; it is a positive addition of cash, which the Government would not have got if the company had gone straight into administration. When the issue was raised by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, the Minister for Energy and Construction was asked to explain the assumption that the bonds can be successfully floated. That is the problem. I do not know whether they can be floated, but we are in a difficult market environment. There are certainly question marks over whether that is deliverable.

The second and most contentious benefit relates to the fact that, under the restructuring deal, the Government will be able to attract into the company, by keeping it private, 65 per cent. of free funds—in other words, net cash flow. Those funds would not be available to the company if it went into administration. At the optimistic end of the range of forecasts, we are talking about £100 million. I shall say in a moment why I think that that figure is wildly optimistic.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon): The hon. Gentleman mentions the marketability of the bonds, which was indeed touched on by the Select Committee. Of course, the point is that marketability depends on the market. The private sector does not know what the market is because the White Paper has not been published. That is one of the problems that we have in considering the Bill at this time.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is massive uncertainty about whether the 7 per cent. coupon yield that, I think, has been offered is sufficient to overcome that problem, but I am not an expert in securities markets. At the very least, there are doubts. Equally, there are doubts about whether the 65 per cent. free funds will be available. The economics are very questionable indeed.

[Dr. Cable]

British Energy, which has been making enormous efforts to improve the productive efficiency of its units, is currently producing at about £18.50 a megawatt-hour. That is its production cost, but for the additional cash flow to materialise, it will need to get its costs down by about £2 a megawatt-hour. It will need to achieve an extra 10 per cent. in efficiency to get the margin to generate the cash flow. I have seen no indication, other than a hope, about how that increased efficiency will be achieved. It is assumed that the plants will work flat out and at optimal efficiency and that the problems that have occurred at Torness and elsewhere will not arise. It is an heroic assumption and, if the assumptions are not realised, the benefit will not be maintained. Those are the two elusive financial benefits that may come from the solvent restructuring solution.

The Government will have to contemplate paying out money that would not be paid out in the administration solution. Other factors also have to be taken into account. There is the balance of the free funds—the 35 per cent.—and, more important, there will be a commitment to continue paying interest on the bonds, which will amount to about £50 million a year. That money will have to be paid to outstanding creditors in the private sector, which would not happen in administration.

If we put the two elements together, we can see that the case is finely balanced and that there is a lot of uncertainty. However, in an uncertain environment, several compelling reasons arise for pursuing administration. We are dealing with a private company that has manifestly failed in the past. I know that it has a new chief executive who may turn things round. However, we are being asked to believe that, despite their record of failure, the same company and the same chain of management can deliver spectacular improvements that have not been seen before.

If the company went into administration, we would not have the problem that the restructured company will have—that of having to justify its treatment relative to its competitors. It is not yet clear that the restructuring proposal will get through the European Commission. Some of Mr. Monti's comments suggest that the Commission does not regard the Government's proposal as acceptable state aid, although we do not yet know the final outcome of that. He has certainly made it clear that the Commission's assessment is that administration is the preferable solution. With administration, the Government would not be committed—as they will be under the present proposals—to open-ended financial support for this private company.

The Government keep reassuring us that their £650 million loan is secure, that they have first charge on all the assets, that the money will be paid, and that the taxpayer has nothing particular to worry about from the bail-out. They keep telling us that and, in purely legal terms, they may well be right. However, the Government's optimism is belied by other things that they are doing. As we know, their submission to the European Commission had a much higher ceiling level, and this Bill has an unlimited ceiling.

Let us assume that solvent restructuring is agreed by the City and the Commission and that it goes ahead. What will happen if the price of electricity falls? British Energy is already losing money with the financial terms under which it is required to operate. Its costs, including capital charges, are well above the market price. However, what if the price falls further? We know that the industry has a lot of excess capacity. None of that is being removed by British Energy, which will be required to operate flat out to meet its financial objectives. We could well be coming into a difficult economic environment. We do not know what will be the economic consequences of a war in Iraq. The effects on the economy and the price of electricity could well be to drive that price down much further. There will then be open-ended liabilities that the Government will be required to pay to this private company. The £650 million—or some other form of assistance—could well be the minimum rather than the maximum.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) *rose—*

Mr. Djanogly *rose—*

Dr. Cable: I will finish my point and then take an intervention.

Whatever we think about the controversial issue of nuclear power, if we take all those factors into account, and if we take into account the body language that we see in Whitehall Departments—notably the Treasury—administration would seem to be a more prudent solution for the taxpayer than the route that the Government are taking.

Mr. Field: The hon. Gentleman has rightly pointed out the commercial risks. None the less, it is fair to say that commercial risk is inherent in this. The City of London, although it would take account of his concerns, would be able to price things accordingly. Will he say a little more about the risk that the whole financial assistance package falls foul of European Union law? That was not discussed in any great detail on Second Reading and the Minister for Energy and Construction has not given a full analysis of those concerns.

Dr. Cable: For several reasons, the proposals may run into difficulties because of the need to consider competitors. We await the ruling of the European Commission. We know that some private creditors, such as Barclays, have taken the view that administration would be no worse and would probably be better than the Government's proposal. Those creditors may well take court action on that point. There is the Greenpeace legal case as well. For any one of a variety of reasons, competitors may well be able to stop the process.

I will conclude now—remembering that I started my speech by invoking the issue of time. I want just to refer briefly to the other amendments. My points will flow from the discussion that we have just had.

Amendments Nos. 10 and 11 seek to limit the extent of the financial liabilities that the Government are undertaking. They try to limit the liabilities to

decommissioning liabilities. We would all accept, given the Government's position, that the taxpayer will have to assume decommissioning liabilities in some form. Years ago, it was hoped that the private sector would be able to finance nuclear power and its decommissioning liabilities, but those hopes seem to have gone. There is little prospect of them being realised. We concede, in these two amendments, that the Government will have to make a substantial increase in their contribution to nuclear decommissioning liabilities. However, we say, "Why not leave it at that? Why do the Government need extra financial provision?" The Minister has always forcefully said that, even in the event of the industry going into administration, the economics of nuclear power are clear because the operating costs justify keeping the industry going. A sane administrator would keep the industry going because the operating costs mean that there would be a bit left over for interest obligations, if not all of them. Why, therefore, is there a need for additional financial support beyond the decommissioning assistance?

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Has the hon. Gentleman not touched on the reason why the Government are right to try what they are trying? Under administration, the Government would not be able to avoid decommissioning costs. Under successful solvent restructuring, there is at least a possibility that, in the long term, the industry could do what it was always intended that it would do, and pay the decommissioning costs itself.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right. The upside of the story is that, under solvent restructuring, private companies would make a modest contribution to decommissioning costs. If that part of the package realised its full potential—which is, I believe, around £100 million—that would be a positive element of restructuring. I accept that that would go on the plus side of the balance sheet, but we have to consider the overall balance.

We are dealing with very complex financial calculations and none of us here is qualified to make professional judgments. I urge now, and will urge in amendments to follow, that before the Bill has completed its passage, we must build in some mechanism whereby auditing authorities, and the House through its Committees, can consider properly the economics and the financing arrangements. At the moment, those arrangements are highly opaque. That obscurity is one of the most unsatisfactory parts of the Bill.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who rightly concluded that this is a complex matter. He would like more transparency, and so would we all. He offered a range of possibilities for the direction that the energy market will take. He wondered whether electricity prices would fall as a result of war. I suspect that they would go up rather than down. He also spoke about the range of liability costs over the coming years.

I want to be more practical and more down to earth than the hon. Gentleman. The rescue package will cost the Government a great deal of money. These amendments seek to cap or restrain those financial consequences. Can my hon. Friend the Minister tell us whether the money is there to do the job? In the short term, there is a £650 million loan, with contributions of between £150 million and £200 million over 10 years, amounting to something like £2.1 billion. My impression—I put it this mildly—is that that clears out the Department of Trade and Industry energy budget in one stroke. Many of the issues that we have been discussing relate to the consequences and the direction of future energy policy and the cost of this rescue package, however it is done, over the next 10 years.

2.30 pm

The White Paper will be published shortly—in the spring, or at the end of February or the beginning of March—and one of the things that many Members wish to know is the consequent cost of that in relation to the White Paper. My hon. Friend the Minister, who has been very good to me over many years, will know of my long-standing interest in other sources of energy, particularly coal. Is the £60 million that has been set aside for the coal industry investment aid scheme starting this year still available, or has it been cleared out to give to British Energy?

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), whose expertise in energy matters is known to all hon. Members. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) for setting out the broader picture so well. I do not intend to repeat that exercise but simply to pick up one or two points that he made.

First, it might be helpful if the Minister were to let us know whether there is any new formulation in relation to when the White Paper is due. According to the last one, it is due at the end of February or the beginning of March. If things have moved on since—it has been more than 10 days—it would be useful to know.

The Minister for Energy and Construction (Mr. Brian Wilson): Before the summer.

Mr. Blunt: I am now tempted to ask which months make up summer, but I might trespass on your patience, Sir Alan, if I pursue that line.

The hon. Member for Twickenham rightly drew attention to the fact that this whole debate is now about the amount of assistance that the Government will give British Energy, behind which sits the whole question of state aids and the European Union. Even if the Government are successful in putting together the rescue package with British Energy, it is highly likely that when we arrive at the summer of 2004, the competition commissioners will, properly, unpick the whole thing.

There cannot be a case for giving an unlimited amount of money to one company in the electricity sector, particularly when the rest of that sector is under such enormous pressure. I am certain that at least one company will pursue the matter vigorously, along with

[Mr. Blunt]

environmental groups, with the competition authorities. That is why the question of whether this Bill is necessary at all remains.

The hon. Member for Twickenham made it clear—repeating what is now accepted across the House—that the plants will continue to generate power, whatever condition they end up in: administration as an independent private company; a private company with the Government rescue arrangement; or owned by the Government. No one disputes that they will continue to generate power, and, on my understanding of their financial situation, they will continue to generate cash because the costs will now have been discounted and most of their liabilities, of one form or another, will have been taken on by the Government under whatever arrangement we reach.

I take issue only with the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that even the Conservatives were now interested in how much money was going to be put into the company. I cede to no one in the House the defence of the taxpayer's interests—the Conservative party has a proud record of doing that. A decade ago, the situation for nuclear energy was slightly different. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) is not in his place, as the unfortunate leadership under which the National Union of Mineworkers found itself labouring had much to do with creating the environment of the late 1980s in which the vigorous support for nuclear energy perhaps went beyond the economic case.

I have tabled new clause 1 and amendments Nos. 4 and 5. New clause 1, which is similar to and has the same design as amendments Nos. 10 and 11 tabled by the hon. Member for Twickenham, would limit the liabilities assumed by the Government to the historic liabilities. We have tabled a figure of £2.1 billion, which is the figure for the back-end fuel costs in the April report and accounts for the company, to which the taxpayer's exposure would be limited.

Amendment No. 12 was tabled by the hon. Member for Twickenham and deletes the provision for assistance to the company. Will the Minister explain whether such legislation is absolutely necessary to assist the company were it to go into administration? I do not believe that it is necessary, but I would be grateful for the Government's view.

Amendments Nos. 4 and 5 are designed to tighten up the ways in which the Government can give financial assistance to British Energy by removing the phrase, "by any other means", which seems to be drafted widely. Plainly, the drafting covers any way in which the Government could give money to British Energy. Some perfectly proper ways exist in which they can assist British Energy without having to resort to "by any other means". One is to ensure that if we have something that can properly be called a climate change levy, it is not paid by nuclear generated electricity. Equally, its business rates could be assessed on the same basis as those of any other power generating company rather than under the arrangement introduced in a statutory instrument passed in 2000. We are looking for answers to those questions. Why should the provision on the Government's form of support be drafted so widely? Why cannot the liabilities be limited to the historic liabilities at 4 September 2002 or to £2.1 billion, which is our formulation?

Finally, I want to address the point raised by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) in an intervention on the hon. Member for Twickenham: that the only case for the Government to rescue British Energy in the interests of the taxpayer is that the company may be able to trade out of its current position. The Government would therefore get a return on their investment in rescuing British Energy. Of course, the assets of British Energy—the power plants—have a value in the market. If the Government take a title to the liabilities, they will have first charge, should the company go into administration, over the money that would be raised from the sale of those assets. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect—I know that he is a supporter of nuclear energy—on what will be the future of the nuclear generating industry in this country if it has to be rescued in this way by the Government or if it ends up in public ownership? I think that that would be its death knell.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my hon. Friend tell the Committee whether, in seeking to cap the cost to public funds of meeting those liabilities, and thereby exercising his and the Opposition's fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayer, he is purely motivated by intellectual considerations or is properly responding to representations from other hard-pressed power suppliers?

Mr. Blunt: There have been representations from the renewable energy sector in particular—Ecotricity is one company that springs to mind. I hope that my arguments are also sustained by intellectual credibility. The rest of the electricity industry has ducked below the parapet somewhat, and there seems to be a certain shamefacedness about the consequences of emerging into the open to challenge the Government on this rescue strategy. I think that the industry is waiting to see, perhaps hoping that it might not come to this after all and that the Government will not end up taking such a position in the electricity market and so disrupting it for other electricity generators.

One or two companies made some noises in September when the loan was first made, but they have gone rather quiet since then. It would be helpful to all of us in illuminating the debate as time goes on, not just this afternoon, if the Electricity Association and the individual companies were prepared to be rather more clear about exactly what their position was.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I want to speak specifically about my amendment No. 26, but first I wish to say that I was very sorry not to be here for Second Reading. However, I did read the text of much of that debate in *Hansard*, and it occurred to me that, on this difficult and complex problem confronting the Government, those who argued for the Bill did not divide into either supporters or opponents of nuclear energy. There was an enormous ambiguity in the Government's solution, and so it attracted supporters from both sides. Some opponents of the further development of nuclear power were happy to support the Bill on Second Reading precisely because they

thought that it would hasten the end of nuclear power, and the supporters of nuclear power were happy to support it precisely because they thought that it was the only way to ensure a continued future for nuclear power.

That ambiguity is also present with regard to the amendment, which argues that, under any future financial arrangements whereby the Government put public funds into British Energy, those funds should not be deployed to sustain the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel. Both the opponents and proponents of nuclear energy should support the amendment.

The traditional environmental lobby, in which I broadly include myself, feels that the days of nuclear power are numbered and that, whatever happens to our overall energy mix, nuclear will play a significantly smaller role until or unless we finally discover the secrets of nuclear fusion. We must always ensure that that possibility remains open.

For those of us who are broadly opposed to the further development of nuclear power in its current form, the question of the reprocessing of spent fuel is hugely important, because reprocessing is enormously expensive. We all know the complaints that British Energy made, I think two years ago, about the excessive amount it had to pay to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. for reprocessing spent fuel and the savings that it thought that it could make if it could store its spent fuel.

The economic arguments against reprocessing are extremely strong. It follows, therefore, that those who want a future for nuclear power should understand that its likelihood is strengthened if reprocessing spent fuel is taken out of the equation. The cost to any future British Energy, whether publicly owned or restructured solvently, of storing its fuel would be significantly less than that of reprocessing. As I recall the figures, the savings could be £100 million to £200 million per annum for the next 10 years—a not insignificant amount.

I understand that there have been discussions between BNFL and British Energy. I recall from the Library briefing on the Bill that my hon. Friend the Minister had said as late as December that those discussions had not been concluded, and that there was no agreement about what the future basis for reprocessing contracts might be. It would be very helpful if in his reply my hon. Friend could tell us the latest information on the renegotiation of contracts.

Whatever the economics, and whatever the price of reprocessing spent fuel, it is important to understand—

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Has my hon. Friend made any calculation of the cost of discontinuing reprocessing in the light of the expenditure that has already been made for the plant? How much would it cost to mothball or dismantle it? How much would it cost BNFL if these contracts, which have already been signed and which one would imagine are still in force, had to be written of?

2.45 pm

Mr. Chaytor: I have not made such calculations, but others have. Now that British Energy is no longer a private sector company, and may not continue as a private sector company, the whole question of the space within the Government accounts where the cost of reprocessing appears is quite different. This is a strong argument for ending reprocessing, because the Government now, both as the sole shareholder of BNFL and in their role in controlling the future of British Energy, are in a stronger position to determine what the future will be.

Certainly, in terms of the comparative costs of reprocessing as against the storage of spent fuel, there is no dispute: storage is significantly cheaper. That is why in nuclear power stations across the world, 85 per cent. of spent fuel is stored and not reprocessed. That is why the United States decided in 1977 to end reprocessing. The economics are clear, and they impinge directly on the future liabilities of the British taxpayer, which lie at the heart of this group of amendments.

I should like to speak briefly about the reason for our historic commitment to reprocessing and how the conditions in which the reprocessing decision was taken no longer apply. Forty years ago, the prime purpose of developing nuclear energy was to generate plutonium to build up our stockpiles of weapons during the early years of the cold war. The decision to reprocess was taken when uranium was considered to be in short supply, or to be a fuel that would become so expensive that we needed alternatives. Those days have gone. Uranium is still there and is comparatively cheap.

When the decision was taken, there was no serious debate about the technologies of storage. In the early years of nuclear energy, some fuel had been stored. In fact, some fuel from the Magnox reactors was stored and continued to be dry-stored at the Wylfa reactor. My argument is that the decision to develop a reprocessing industry in Britain many years ago was arbitrary. It could have gone differently. It was based on circumstances that no longer apply and has not been followed by most countries that have a nuclear power industry. We have trapped ourselves into that historic mistake.

The collapse of British Energy, as with so many crises, gives an opportunity to re-evaluate the fundamental assumptions that have determined our thinking for many years. There must be such a re-evaluation. The amendment's purpose is to argue that now, whatever people's views about the total amount of public money that should go into the rescue of British Energy, there can be no dispute that none of it should go into carrying on the reprocessing of spent fuel. Discontinuing it would be cheaper for the taxpayer and for whatever the future form of British Energy may be. It would also be safer in terms of the environment and certainly in terms of the current international problems with proliferation. I cannot be the only Member who sees a contradiction between our view of what is happening in North Korea with the starting up of nuclear plant to generate plutonium, and the fact that that is exactly what we have been doing for the past 40 years.

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): I want to make a point that I have made in similar debates, although without any success. A Treasury Minister should be present because we are talking about substantial sums of public money. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who fluently and ably moved the amendment, tried to remedy that by proposing that he should don the cap of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I think Lloyd George

[Mr. John Horam]

was the last Liberal Chancellor, so there is a distinguished lineage. However, he is not likely to be Chancellor and his brave effort, sadly, failed.

No doubt the Minister would not entirely welcome the presence of a Treasury Minister. There will have been sensible arguments between the Department of Trade and Industry, the Minister and the Treasury. We are entering a period in which the Government's finances look distinctly rocky and the Bill paves the way for a further payment. In addition to the £5 billion or so that we may spend on a war in Iraq, which we heard about earlier, there are other considerable outlays that could not have been foreseen when the Department's budget was originally suggested. The House must take its role as the guardian of taxpayers' money seriously, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) said.

The hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) asked whether the deal has cleaned out the Department's energy budget. Presumably, like every other Department, the DTI drew up its public service agreement with the Treasury some time ago under the spending agreements, to which the Chancellor attaches great importance, and there was a provision for energy. Does the scheme clear out the budget or will there be a drawing down from a separate contingency fund? I shall be interested to hear what the Minister says about that.

It would also be useful to have a Treasury Minister present because, as the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said, we have an opportunity to re-evaluate the differing roles of energy suppliers in the total picture. We know that because the Minister is producing a White Paper, perhaps in the early summer, and the whole energy debate is at a critical point. In many ways, it is a great pity that British Energy has reached its present pass before the Government's views on how the picture may evolve have been made public. There will be differing expenditure consequences as a result of the, hopefully different, choices that the Government may make while they deliberate on the White Paper. I, too, want greater support for renewable energy. That will cost the Government quite a bit, at least in the initial stages. I do not think that renewable energy can solve the whole problem, but it can make a contribution, so I hope that the Government give it extra support.

For all those reasons, I should have liked a more comprehensive assessment of the financial consequences of the measure set against the background of the energy debate and deteriorating public finances generally.

Mr. Weir: I support the case made by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and will support his amendments if he presses them. He made cogent points about the financial aspects of British Energy and there is confusion about the Government's strategy for it. It is unfortunate that the White Paper has not been published.

The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) made a good point about the difficulties faced by both pro- and anti-nuclear energy interests. Had the money for British Energy been linked to a run-down and decommissioning of plants, many of us would have enthusiastically supported the plan, but that is not the case. What is the strategy for British Energy? Is it linked to building new nuclear power plants? Is that why the Government wish to keep it in the private sector and keep it going as a non-state company, because we would oppose that?

It has been stated that nuclear plants cannot be shut down overnight. We all accept that. The policy pursued by the Scottish National party is that all nuclear plants should be shut down at the end of their economic or technological life. We recognise that it takes years to phase out nuclear power plants and that they will continue to operate during that time, but most plants owned by British Energy are due to be decommissioned within the next 30 years. In Scotland, Hunterston is due to shut by 2030 and Torness by 2024. So why put huge sums into British Energy? If we are going to decommission existing stations, would it not make more sense to allow it to go into administration and gradually run it down within that period as the plants come to the end of their technological lives?

Even the most enthusiastic projections for British Energy do not predict that it will be able to make anything other than a minimal contribution to its liabilities over the remaining lifetime of the plants even if they run successfully and at full capacity, which is a major assumption given the difficulties recently experienced at some plants that have had to shut down. The shut-down earlier this year at Torness contributed to the financial difficulties in which British Energy now finds itself.

Mr. Djanogly: As I understand it, if we take out the start-up costs, such companies run efficiently and around profitability, which is the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman claims.

Mr. Weir: I do not know that it is. Both start-up and run-down costs are associated with the company. The problem is that the industry, partly because of its historic liabilities, is uneconomic, so the energy that it produces is uneconomic. Bonds were mentioned and the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) said that the City would set its own level if they were issued. But the Secretary of State noted in her statement on 28 November that British Energy attempted a bond issue in the United States in the summer that was unsuccessful. We must question whether money could be raised in the private sector.

Whatever route we take—whether British Energy remains in the private sector or is effectively renationalised—the taxpayer will pick up the bill. There is little sense in going through the restructuring plan unless the Government intend to expand nuclear power.

Mr. O'Neill: The hon. Gentleman is working on an assumption that he has not explained or thought through. He seems to think that the maintenance costs and the safety obligations diminish as a power station reaches the end of its life, but the opposite is true. We must have proper safety at great expense right up to the moment when the power station closes. There is never a taper. The idea that the financial requirement will diminish is wrong because it will be roughly the same, allowing for inflation, right up to when we say that there

is no more need to put fuel rods into a station. That is why substantial sums need to be provided. It does not preclude investment or require investment in new build.

Mr. Weir: That makes no difference to the fact that the taxpayer will pick up the tab whichever way we go. It does not make any difference whether the taxpayer pays to keep British Energy going in the private sector or in the public sector by effectively renationalising it. If the plants are to close anyway, that cost has to be met. There is no reason to keep it in the private sector unless there is a prospect of expanding nuclear power.

A possible problem with the European Union has been mentioned. In an e-mail this afternoon—perhaps other hon. Members also received it—Greenpeace reassesses the European Commission's decision, although I am sure that the Minister will not accept what it says as gospel. Greenpeace says that the decision

"underlines the requirement that aid drawn down from the loan facility must be the minimum necessary amount to keep the firm in business for the rescue period".

In other words, if British Energy became insolvent or went into administration, the amount required for the minimum safety level would be less than that required if it continued trading, as funds for creditors, bondholders and others would be realised, thus reducing the amount for essential safety and security. More public money would have to go in so, from the taxpayer's point of view, administration is the cheaper option.

3 pm

Dr. Ladyman: Has the hon. Gentleman not demonstrated why this group of amendments is unnecessary? The European Commission is likely to rule that any amount of money put in by the Government has to be the minimum amount necessary. If the Government exceed that, it would be illegal under European law. We therefore do not need the amendments, which tie the Government's hands.

Mr. Weir: The minimum amount will vary, depending on whether the company stays in the private sector or goes into administration. If I understood the hon. Member for Twickenham correctly, the preferred option in the amendments is for the company to go into administration. That would be the best deal for the taxpayer, and I believe that it is more likely to ensure the eventual decommissioning of those stations and stop the expansion of nuclear power. I therefore support the hon. Gentleman's amendments.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I want to draw the attention of Committee members to amendments Nos. 14 and 15, which are similar in intention to amendment No. 26, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor). Our amendments aim to prevent the creation of a hidden or circular subsidy between BNFL and British Energy. A number of Members have already asked whether British Energy is capable of making money if historic costs and/or future liabilities are written off. That debate clearly requires a good deal of technical exploration, because the figures can be interpreted differently. At the beginning of 2002, British Energy's production costs were about £20 a megawatt-hour, but by the end of last year, they were down to £18.50, compared with a wholesale price of about £16 a megawatt-hour. The company was apparently running at a loss all last year, but a lot depends on future costs and prices. Amendments Nos. 14 and 15 do not address that directly.

Mr. Blunt: We are obviously entering an area in which Members cannot claim to be experts. In its annual review, British Energy claimed that its operating costs had already been driven down to £16.70 a megawatt-hour, and said that it aimed to get them down to £16 a megawatt-hour. When I visited its plant at Heysham, I was told that that included depreciation costs, which suggests that when liabilities and depreciation are taken away, the costs are significantly less. British Energy therefore generates cash now, and if the electricity price returns to the long-run cost of generators, it would make a significant amount of cash.

Mr. Stunell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has underlined the point that the figures are open to interpretation. When one is looking at costs, as anyone who has attempted to run a business will know, the final figures depend on what is included and excluded. I do not base my case on any particular interpretation of prices, but simply wish to make the point that the rescue package—if that is what it is—must be based on the best available information. Some information could be seriously affected by the potential cross-subsidy between BNFL and British Energy in the reprocessing contracts. The hon. Member for Bury, North has already referred to that, and there have been difficult negotiations between the two companies over the past 12 months. In fact, the failure of negotiations was the trigger for British Energy to approach the Government and make it clear that it was in grave financial difficulties.

We must remember that BNFL is a wholly Government-owned enterprise which, financially, is on the brink. It could not afford to release British Energy from its contracts—had it done so, that would have pushed it over the brink, rather than British Energy. There are therefore two companies on the brink tussling over a contract. How convenient for the Government and perhaps the Department of Trade and Industry if negotiations between those two companies did not result in a reduction in the cost to British Energy but in an increase in the price paid for reprocessing. Suppose it went up from £250 million to £350 million or £500 million—there is nothing in the Bill to prevent the money injected into British Energy from being used to support that contract, whatever value the negotiations achieve. We have tabled subsequent amendments that address the issue of a ceiling on the amount of subsidy and input that the Government can provide.

The intention of our amendments is to establish with the Government the possibility of a cross-subsidy or circular subsidy that would indirectly rescue BNFL as well as rescuing British Energy. In our view, the contracts that were entered into were foolish—unnecessary work was commissioned, and excessive and pointless amounts of nuclear work have been created. To leave a loophole in the legislation—the failings of the reprocessing concept and BNFL's financial weakness, which could be covered up by additional subsidies pumped through in distorted contracts and prices—would make a bad commercial and environmental situation even worse. That is why we tabled

[Mr. Stunell]

amendments Nos. 14 and 15, and I shall certainly support the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Bury, North.

Mr. Wilson: I urge the Committee to resist the amendments. I was interested in the comment by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) that there is ambiguity about the pros and antis in this debate. Some people are anti-nuclear, but pro the legislation, and vice versa. I recall that there was an ostensible ambiguity at the time of nuclear privatisation. As someone who opposed nuclear privatisation, I remember very well that it was supported by Greenpeace and kindred spirits, as they thought that privatisation would damage nuclear so much that its demise would be hastened. One reason why I am cynical about Greenpeace is that it keeps starting court cases for which it gets cheap publicity before abandoning them in less publicised ignominy. As someone who, for all the right reasons, did not think that British Energy should ever have been privatised, I believe that Greenpeace, for all the wrong reasons, supported something that was greatly against the public interest.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) has just painted a rather bizarre scenario, and if I was as big a conspiracy theorist as him, I might imagine that the Tories were in league with Greenpeace and all sorts of dark forces, and that the whole business of privatising British Energy was a long-term conspiracy. However, I relieve the Tories and the predecessors of the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) of that charge—I just think that they were stupid, short-sighted, dogmatic and, above all, greedy in privatising the nuclear industry.

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Mr. Wilson: Which of those four qualities does the hon. Gentleman wish to comment on?

Mr. Blunt: I thought that I would contest the charge of greed. The Minister said that the company was sold by the taxpayer and has now gone into the private sector. The shareholders and bondholders who lent the company money now appear to have lost all their money. Far from being greedy, my predecessors successfully protected the taxpayer's interest.

Mr. Wilson: I do not want to go too deeply into the matter, but what that analysis omits is the causal relationship between the problems of British Energy and the privatisation, which some people foresaw at the time from different perspectives, and the impossibility of unleashing into a privatised and liberalised market a nuclear company which, for all the right reasons, has irreducible minimum costs.

We have taken up the debate where we left off. Opposition Members, as is their right and duty, are sniffing around in search of a better way, but none of them can argue convincingly for a better way than the one that we propose. Because restructuring and administration are postulated as opposites, Opposition Members have to support administration in order to oppose restructuring. That takes them down a rather curious route. In the case of the Tories, they have to believe that it is better for the company to end up in public ownership than for it to be given a chance to survive in the private sector, but that is for them to sort out.

Mr. Djanogly: Surely the Minister accepts that restructuring is possible and, indeed, normal within administration.

Mr. Wilson: As I said when I wound up the Second Reading debate, we came to the last chapter in Tory alternative scenarios, in which I thought we would be told who was likely to take the company out of administration, other than Government, to which there came no answer. What the hon. Gentleman says may be right in other cases, but there is not much sign of it being an option in the present case.

The debate seems to have proceeded on a misapprehension—that somehow, if we went down the administration route, that would be cost-free, and that administration could proceed without the benefit of the Bill. Let me be clear. We have never been dogmatic about restructuring versus administration. At every stage of the process, we have said that everybody must sign up to restructuring, otherwise administration is an option. The Bill provides the legislative basis necessary to accommodate either eventuality.

We are not saying that one course is absolutely right and the other absolutely wrong. We are saying that, on balance, we think that it is better for the taxpayer, better for security of supply, and better for nuclear safety if restructuring is the chosen option. If everyone signs up to that, restructuring will take place. However, if everybody does not sign up, administration is the alternative way. As a responsible Government, we have to take powers in that direction as well.

Mr. Weir: I am interested in what the Minister is saying. My understanding is that following the privatisation of nuclear energy, if the company was unable to continue, irrespective of whether the Bill was in place, the assets, such as they are, and the liabilities would come back to the Government in any event. The Public Accounts Committee made that point in a report in 1999. Therefore, would not the taxpayer pick up the tab in the event of administration, whether or not the Bill is enacted?

Mr. Wilson: No. The assets of the industry are now in the hands of a private company. If restructuring is successful, they will continue to be in the hands of the private company, and if it is not successful, they will go into the hands of an administrator, who will still have to run the business. The stations will continue to run, as was properly made clear by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), and that will happen precisely because Government have taken the appropriate steps to make sure that funding is available in the form of a temporary loan facility and ultimately—this is the important point—if necessary in the form of funding to an administrator.

The stations will not continue to run if no one is providing the financial support to allow them to run. That would lead to massive problems, which no

responsible Government could contemplate. Whichever route we go down, there will be costs associated with it. Clause 1(a) is framed to provide maximum flexibility, so it could be used for the rescue aid loan facility that we are providing—I emphasise again that it is a loan facility, so we should not play off the definition of a loan against suggestions that this is a cost in terms of grant or support to other industries. It could be used to support BE companies if they go into administration, funded through the administrator, and it could be used to fund trading arrangements, but not nuclear liabilities of BE's operating companies in public ownership if they were acquired under clause 1(b)(i).

3.15 pm

We are taking the maximum range of powers for the full range of eventualities. However, we will not use the authority to fund under clause 1(1)(a) to fund the solvent restructuring. That will be done under the schedule 12 provision, which is specially designed for liabilities. Nor will clause 1(a) be used for subsidising the private sector BE in any way, apart from liabilities that perhaps begin to meet the Hazel Grove conspiracy theory. I stress that, as has been said, clause 1 can be used only to fund to the extent permissible under EU state aid rules.

Dr. Ladyman: I fully support my hon. Friend's approach in trying to give solvent restructuring a chance. The nightmare scenario presented by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) raised the question of what would happen if that restructuring goes ahead but circumstances change. Is it not correct that, in those circumstances, under company law, the fiduciary duties of directors of the company would be the same, in effect, as the fiduciary duties on the administrator—in other words, to minimise the losses and liquidate any assets of the company? What the hon. Member for Twickenham depicts as a nightmare scenario is no such thing, and my hon. Friend's approach is the only sensible one to try.

Mr. Wilson: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. He is right. The hope and the expectation of Labour Members—or most Labour Members—is that the restructured British Energy would be a successful company, and that the measures that we are taking in the context of the restructuring would facilitate that outcome.

There has been some confusion, which the spokesman for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), was helpful in clarifying, about BE's costs. The hon. Member for Twickenham suggested that costs would have to be reduced by 10 per cent. That is the reduction that would be necessary before restructuring, but of course the restructuring plan cuts costs by removing historic liabilities. Together with the projected improvements in output, that would deliver a sufficient cut in costs to ensure profitability. No further improvements would be needed, beyond the restructuring plan. Clearly, the willingness of people to sign up to a restructuring plan is based on that expectation and belief.

I do not accept that the costs of administration are lower than those of restructuring. Administration involves the cost of paying the administrator and impacts on BE's operation. We support restructuring not for any dogmatic reasons, but because it is a pragmatic way of ensuring the continued safe operation on fair terms for the taxpayer. Government support is not open-ended and is limited to nuclear liabilities.

Mr. Blunt: The really clever thing about what the Minister is doing is that not only are consultants and lawyers running up vast fees preparing the plan to rescue British Energy, but it is almost certain that the administrator will run up equally vast fees as well, so the taxpayer will get a double benefit from the Government's strategy.

Mr. Wilson: If that is a policy statement saying that the Tories are against consultants and lawyers running up fat fees, I welcome it as the biggest U-turn in political history. Of course, the best way of avoiding the administrator running up fat fees is not to have an administrator. That is one of the reasons why restructuring of the company is our preferred option.

Mr. Chaytor: On the limitation of funding to liabilities, is not my hon. Friend therefore agreeing with amendment No. 26, which I tabled? The amendment seeks to ensure that the funding will not be used for future reprocessing. Will he deal with the point that I made earlier regarding negotiations between BNFL and British Energy about the future costs of reprocessing?

Mr. Wilson: I do not disagree with the spirit of that intervention, but I should like to deal with the issue in my own way. I do not want to speak for too long, as I am aware that there are other groups of amendments and I do not want to close down debate on them.

Clause 1(1)(a) provides statutory authority for expenditure on British Energy in the situations that I have described. It puts the loan facility that the Government have provided to BE on a firm statutory footing. The facility is currently being provided under the authority of the Appropriation Act 2002, which is entirely proper, given the circumstances. However, the principles of a long-standing agreement between Parliament and the Government spell out that, although that Act can be relied on in the short term, it is a matter of good practice that significant expenditure should have the explicit statutory authority of Parliament. Clause 1(1)(a) gives that authority in relation to the loan facility.

The statutory authority provided by clause 1(1)(a) could be used by the Government to provide essential funding to keep the nuclear business running safely in the event of an administration. That could include funding the administrator. It would also allow the Government to continue to fund the trading arrangements of the operating companies if they came into public ownership.

Paddy Tipping: The Minister has rightly set out the provisions to allow the aid to be made available. What he has not said is how much remains in his energy budget. Although the £650 million is a loan, does it preclude the provision of extra financial aid to other energy sectors?

Mr. Wilson: I do not think that my hon. Friend can throw away the key point merely by including the word "although" in his comments. A loan is a loan, so it is expected to be repaid. The safeguards that the Government have established in that regard are well known. None the less, I would prefer to answer his question on a positive note. As he knows, we had a very constructive meeting today on the subject of coal, which is close to his heart and mine. I do not think that this is a time at which we should try to play off one sector against another. We have obligations and responsibilities in respect of British Energy, security of supply and the safe operation of nuclear power stations. It is up to us as a Government to ensure that those issues are compatible with our other responsibilities. Of course, that will be reflected in the energy White Paper. We are making progress on all those issues, so I say to him that now is not the time to drive in wedges, although I know that that is not his intention.

Amendment No. 12 seeks completely to remove clause 1(1)(a), which exists for reasons that I have explained. Given the points that I have made about the importance of the provision, I hope that hon. Members will not press that amendment.

Amendment No. 10 proposes that clause 1(1)(a) should ensure that financial assistance can be provided to the company only in relation to "qualifying activities", which amendment No. 11 defines as

"financial liabilities generated by a British Energy company prior to 4 September 2002, to a maximum of £2,100 million."

There again appears to be some confusion, as the Government have said that they are prepared to provide assistance for BE's nuclear liabilities. We intend to do that using the power provided in schedule 12 to the Electricity Act 1989, having removed the ceiling using the Bill, rather than under the clause. Therefore, I would say that the provision is separate from funding BE's financial liabilities. In any case, subsection (1)(a) is not specifically aimed at funding financial liabilities. The Government have already made it clear that we do not intend to bail out BE's creditors. Rather, it is our intention that funding should be used for day-to-day operational costs such as salaries or trading arrangements. I therefore suggest that amendments Nos. 10 and 11 are not appropriate to the purpose of the clause.

New clause 1, which was tabled by Opposition Front Benchers, suggests that any expenditure

"under the provisions of this Act shall be restricted to the historic liabilities of British Energy plc as at 4th September".

Again, I strongly disagree with that proposal. As I have continued to emphasise, the provisions in the Bill ensure that the Government are fully prepared for every eventuality. Restricting expenditure to historic liabilities would leave the Government unready to deal effectively with a range of scenarios, including the possibility of having to fund BE through administration or, alternatively, continuing to fund the trading arrangements of the operating companies if they were to come into public ownership.

Amendments Nos. 3 and 4 essentially seek to limit the way in which financial assistance can be delivered to BE. Grants, loans and guarantees are clearly the main ways in which we expect to deliver assistance. However, as I said, the Bill needs to prepare us for all eventualities, so we want to ensure that the provision preserves flexibility to enable us to act appropriately in the circumstances. That is in the interests of taxpayers.

Amendments Nos. 14 and 15 seek to ensure that the Government can commit no expenditure

"on the management, transportation, storage or reprocessing of nuclear waste"

under the clause. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove raised that issue in a somewhat conspiratorial context, suggesting that the provision would act as a conduit to BNFL. Given the checks, balances and safeguards, I do not think that that scenario should be taken seriously. Of course, that is not the intention of the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said that support should not fund reprocessing of fuel. Again, I do not approach the matter from any ideological point of view. Storage might have been cheaper if plants had been built on that basis, but with the exception of Sizewell B, storage facilities are very limited. This is an issue not of principle, but of practicality, and contracts on operational arrangements envisage that some fuel will be stored. I emphasise that I am not getting into discussing the relative merits. From personal experience, I know that British Energy has at some points during its history favoured on-site dry storage. It all depended on the deal that we could get out of BNFL. Storage versus reprocessing remains an operational matter and I am sure that BE and BNFL will communicate any future changes to plans. However, my hon. Friend made his points well.

Amendments Nos. 25 and 26 would provide that support for BE could not be used

"for the purposes of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel".

I have dealt with that.

Let us consider the longer term. We have already said that we shall review the way in which nuclear liabilities are managed when the liabilities management authority is established. Again, that might help my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North, and I hope that he will not press his amendments.

I hope that I have explained sufficiently the problems that are attached to the amendments in the group. If the hon. Member for Twickenham withdraws the amendment, we shall have even more time to discuss the next group.

3.30 pm

Dr. Cable: The Minister began by having a go at Greenpeace. I remember when Greenpeace abseilers demonstrated outside my window on the 21st floor of the Shell centre and I therefore understand how he feels. However, Greenpeace has done an admirable job of conducting research that is not available outside government on the subject of our debate. It is the only organisation to produce detailed and professional assessments of the costs and benefits of both administration and nuclear power production. Given the obscurity of much official data, it has performed a heroic task. My assessment of its role is therefore positive.

Mr. Wilson: I could have a go at Greenpeace under other circumstances, but I simply recalled their historical role. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman's

admiration extends to that body's original support for privatisation of the nuclear industry as a method of destroying it. It has perhaps turned out to be a method of costing the taxpayer a lot of money.

Dr. Cable: As we have said, privatisation is a disaster, but Greenpeace had a good reason for promoting it. Although privatisation's defects are manifest in the nuclear industry, it has at least led to an element of transparency about the costings and economics of nuclear power. That may be lost as the industry returns to some form of public ownership.

The hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) made a brief, common-sense and cogent point. He asked whether the funding was at the expense of other parts of the Department of Trade and Industry energy budget. He did not receive an answer. The letter that the Minister sent all hon. Members about the debate underlines that the £650 million is not a repayable loan on a fixed schedule but a facility. If things go wrong, the sum will remain a major energy commitment, clearly at the expense of the coal and renewables industries, which might otherwise have benefited from modest pump priming. That is important.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) made some helpful, business-like contributions. I shall not repeat them all. He asked whether the Bill would be necessary if we were considering only administration. We did not receive an answer to that. He also emphasised that a problem with the solvent restructuring route is its impact on the competitors in the industry. It is not simply a question of the competitors feeling aggrieved; the Government have created a competitive electricity market, which has been effectively wrecked. None of the participants is confident that there is a level playing field. Their experience will prejudice their long-term investment decisions. The impact on competitiveness and competitors is one of the main arguments against the route that the Government have taken.

We missed the presence of hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on Second Reading because he knows much about the industry. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) helpfully reminded us of the link between the restructuring operation and the reprocessing industry. A link exists; we do not need to propose conspiracy theories. The contracts are being renegotiated and we need to take account of the reprocessing industry. It was right to remind us of the ramifications of that.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) helpfully put our deliberations in the context of the wider budget. The Bill has enormous implications for public finance. We are considering billions of pounds of additional costs when the Government are straining at the limits of financial credibility on both tax and expenditure.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir) asked whether one of the motives for the Government's choice of the solvent restructuring route was maintaining a vestige of credibility for private nuclear power, thus sustaining the hope that the energy White Paper would cover it. That is a plausible motive, although it remains for us to have the debate. However, the hon. Gentleman made a helpful point.

There was not an enormous difference between our approach and the Minister's to solvent restructuring versus administration. He acknowledges that the decision is pragmatic and that the difference between the routes is not enormous, although he could not resist a dig about administration being less acceptable for safety and security of supply. I do not believe that that reflects the Secretary of State's view. However, the Minister acknowledged that we are considering a pragmatic decision that entails costs and benefits on both sides.

Mr. Wilson: I do not want to prolong this debate further, but I must set the record straight. There was never any question but that both routes would be subject to exactly the same regulatory control by the nuclear installations inspectorate and so on. There is not a safety issue, otherwise we would not have postulated them as two viable alternatives, which we have done from day one.

Dr. Cable: That is why I was surprised that the Minister even mentioned the matter, because it is clearly not an issue. He is quite right, however; we are concerned—at least in terms of the first group of amendments, which relate to what is essentially a pragmatic issue. The damage that would be done through the impact on competition and on the other competitors in the industry leads us to prefer the administration route. However, our main reason for pursuing these amendments—and the reason that I shall certainly pursue them to a vote—is that the way in which the Government have gone about this leaves open very large and completely open-ended financial liabilities, and we have had no satisfactory explanation of how they will be capped.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 168, Noes 302.

Division No. 82] **[3:36 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John

Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Trend, Michael
Trimble, rh David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Tom Brake and
Mr. Alan Reid

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Byers, rh Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*

McAvoy, Thomas
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and Dan Norris

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Blunt: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 1, line 7, leave out paragraphs (b) and (c).

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 2, page 1, leave out lines 18 and 19.

No. 5, in page 2, leave out lines 1 to 3.

No. 9, in title, line 1, leave out

', or the acquisition of any securities of or any part of the undertaking or assets of'.

Mr. Blunt: We now turn to the issue of public ownership. The purpose of the amendment is to try to prevent the Government from going down a disastrous path—taking the company back into public ownership. The Minister said earlier that no one had come up with a better way. In fact, a better way would be that suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly)—a framework for the future of nuclear energy. There is no White Paper or other kind of framework on which people can form a judgment about the future of the industry. Indeed, as far as I am aware, there has been no unequivocal statement about the merits of nuclear energy from the Labour party for 25 years.

It is against that background that the industry is faced with such appalling uncertainty. Absolutely the worst outcome would be for the company to end up back in public ownership. Let me explain why that is plainly the case. The option of public ownership is simply not required. There is no threat to the security of supply from the power stations and no practical safety issue. If the company goes into administration, there will be an asset to be sold out of administration, because the stations and their workers generate not only power but cash, even at today's electricity prices. The Government have already said that they will take title to the liabilities under the rescue package that they are putting together with British Energy to keep it as a rescued entity in the private sector. That is a poor option, but public ownership would be a catastrophic option.

Do the Government really think that if the company goes into public ownership they will run it any better? That goes against all the evidence about public or private sector ownership over the past two decades. Aside from British Energy's commercial strategy, its operating performance—the performance of the work force, from plant manager downwards and of the plants themselves—has been very good. Indeed, some people would say that because British Energy has been so efficient at producing more power out of resources and reducing its cost base, it has contributed to the electricity industry's wider problem by producing more electricity into the market at lower cost, which is partly why the electricity industry now faces the problem of too much supply and not enough demand. Those people would argue that British Energy would have been better off investing its resources differently instead of driving its costs down. However, its work force have done everything that has been asked of them to improve their plants' output and operational performance. It cannot possibly be the case that that would be better in the public sector.

[Mr. Blunt]

Let us deal with the consequences of public ownership. First, there would be a complete lack of transparency over costs. It is difficult enough to identify the costs to the Government associated with British Energy's proposed rescue package, so goodness knows what they would be in the case of public ownership, given the company's relationships with BNFL and its tax situation. What would happen in relation to the disposal of fuel from a publicly owned company? The situation would be even more opaque that it is now. Would the company continue to improve its operational performance? No, because it would have no incentive to do so. Its operational performance would almost certainly decline from what has been achieved by British Energy's management and work force in private ownership.

Most devastating of all is the effect that public ownership would have on the future of the nuclear energy industry. That is why I profoundly disagree with the Minister's assessment of why he was opposed to privatisation in 1989. The simple fact is that if there is to be a new generation of nuclear power stations, it is conceivable that that investment would come only from the private sector. However, the private sector would make that investment only if there were a framework that allowed investors to judge performance. The Government have failed to produce that framework.

We do not know what the future price of electricity will be. Investors will make their own judgments about that, and for significant parts of the past year City analysts said that British Energy shares were worth buying and that the company would be successful commercially. Those judgments proved erroneous, but assumptions made last summer about the long-term price of electricity could turn out to be true by next summer if generating capacity continues to be withdrawn. The question of the future of coal-fired power stations after 2008, and the costs of the European directive on clean coal technology and other matters, will also have an effect on the generating sector.

If the industry is put into public ownership, will the Government say that they will build new nuclear power stations? No—I do not for a minute believe that they will. However, designs for a new generation of nuclear power stations might be available in five or 10 years. Those stations would produce electricity and help us to meet our Kyoto obligations in the most economically efficient way. It would be wholly irresponsible if that option were shut off.

In that respect, I depart from Liberal Democrat Members. They want the option to be shut off, and consider that the proper course of action is to run existing power stations to the end of their lives and not replace them. However, choices have to be made about bringing on new generating capacity in the UK. If British Energy were taken into public ownership, we would be deciding not to enable private companies to build new nuclear power stations that could use new designs, such as pebble-bed reactors. That would damage our national interest, as such stations might be the best economic and environmental answer for the UK. That is why it is essential that the company does not end up in public ownership.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has gone on to the matter of engineering new generating capacity. Will he tell me who owns Westinghouse?

Mr. Blunt: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that BNFL owns Westinghouse. That is why the Conservative party will welcome the proposals that the Government will make on the liabilities management authority and the reorganisation of BNFL. If the Government pursue a sensible strategy on those arrangements, Westinghouse will be sold into the private sector, where it belongs. However, it appears that the Govt will produce another hybrid and that another hideous public-private partnership will emerge. Westinghouse designs and builds new nuclear reactors, and the company would be well placed to compete in the private sector with other similar companies from around the world.

If the Government take nuclear generation entirely into the public sector, the message would be that the industry was a lame duck that could survive only with public subsidy. In the end, there would be no opportunity to consider new options for nuclear generating capacity, even if they were in the UK's interests. Those options are at present an open question, and it would be wrong to preclude them now.

What message would be sent to the rest of the electricity market if the company were taken into public ownership? The case about the Magnox reactors owned by BNFL has often been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Richard Ottaway). He is not here at present, but he has pointed out that they are the oldest power stations supplying electricity to the grid, that they are uneconomic on their own, and that they are kept going by subsidies from BNFL—that is, the Government.

I cannot come to a judgment about that, as I do not know enough about the economics involved, or about that particular case. However, if all nuclear reactors were in the public sector, it could be claimed that they were being kept in production unfairly, at the expense of the rest of the market.

4 pm

The point was eloquently made by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), and also by Ofgem in its submission to the Government, that if the Government interfere with the operation of the electricity market, they will raise the internal rate of return for people who want to invest in that industry. If the Government take the company into public ownership, there will be a significant increase in the risk for investors. To offset that risk, they will demand a higher return on their investments in new UK generating capacity.

That is why I urge the Government to make it clear that they do not intend to interfere in the market. It is vital that they stand back and allow the market to work in order to secure the largest possible private investment so that our future generating capacity needs are met.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that he is justified in seeking the Government's assurance that

they do not propose to nationalise, on account both of their treatment of British Energy and of the fact that we are shortly to have the Second Reading of the Industrial Development (Financial Assistance) Bill, which is a further token and indication of the Government's thinking on these subjects?

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he makes the point extremely well.

I entirely part company with the hon. Member for Twickenham in his view of the current state of liberalisation and privatisation in the electricity market, although I am not sure that he meant his remarks to be as extreme as they sounded when he said that the disadvantages of privatisation were manifest. How are those disadvantages manifest? In the 40 per cent. reduction in wholesale electricity prices that has sustained our manufacturing competitiveness? In the 35 per cent. reduction in prices for consumers since privatisation? Those price reductions alone have lifted 1 million people out of fuel poverty.

The privatisation of the industry has been of enormous benefit to the United Kingdom. We are still only at the initial stages of understanding how best to use Ofgem to ensure that the industry remains as competitive as possible, yet there is so much evidence that the lessons have been well learned in the UK and that the rest of the world is following our example—not least the European Union, where there is to be privatisation and liberalisation.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): My hon. Friend makes a powerful case against nationalisation. Is there not another important point? Whenever nationalisation has taken place in the past, it has been at enormous financial risk to the taxpayer. It costs far too much money when it goes wrong and puts money that is needed for teachers, nurses and doctors to a wholly unproductive use, as I am sure that my hon. Friend will confirm.

Mr. Blunt: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. That is true not only of companies that are taken into public ownership, but of the Government's support for British Energy's proposed restructuring package. The value left for the bondholders or shareholders of British Energy if the deal is approved would otherwise have been available to the taxpayer to spend on the services to which my right hon. Friend alluded. Furthermore, staggering amounts of money are being spent on consultancy fees; I understand that, to date, the bills from lawyers and management consultants amount to £9 million and that a possible total of £100 million was suggested in *The Times*. The Minister pooh-poohed that on the radio. He asked where such figures came from, but if the Government have already been presented with bills for £9 million, I should not be surprised if the total were £50 million or even £100 million by the end of the process. It would be a tragedy to throw away the benefits of the industry being in the private sector, when potentially huge damage could be done to the UK's future interests. Privatisation and liberalisation are the right economic answers. Sometimes when companies get into commercial difficulties, investors lose money and the companies go bust or into administration. In this case, there will be assets to be sold out of administration, which will work in the public interest in the UK by generating power and cash for people who choose to buy those assets—which is why British Energy should not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Government.

Mr. Drew: I agree with the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) about the need to keep open opportunities for nuclear generation, but on everything else he talks absolute nonsense. The Government would be foolhardy not to provide for the option of returning British Energy to public ownership if that were the only way to safeguard its basic integrity and, more important, the skills and expertise that are vital in meeting national and international requirements. The nuclear industry's special circumstances require that those skills and that expertise are kept alive.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): I am not suggesting for a moment that the company will be nationalised, but has it not been the case throughout history that nationalisations have resulted from market failure? Not to nationalise in some circumstances would be totally irresponsible.

Mr. Drew: I agree. If the state were not the lender of last resort, who would be? It is a nice idea that one can asset strip and reconfigure the industry, but everyone—whether pro-nuclear, anti-nuclear or agnostic on nuclear—would worry if the industry were split up under the pretence that everything will be hunky-dory. That would be an illusion at best and could be incredibly dangerous, given the times in which we live, so the Government must act honourably and sensibly. I do not believe that the market would have any interest in taking on responsibility. It would look at the financial outcome—certainly not at safety and security.

Mr. Blunt: New nuclear energy needs a framework within which people can invest. It will plainly include some form of payment to a fund to provide for the risks currently being taken by the Government. I refer not to the current decommissioning fund for which British Energy currently provides. The issue that must be addressed is where a company that is meant to contribute from its profits to its back-end fuel liabilities does not make a profit.

Mr. Drew: I wish that I could be as optimistic. The City works within an incredibly short-term framework but the nuclear industry, with the best of intentions, looks to a set of long-term outcomes—well beyond the life expectancy of most right hon. and hon. Members. Bringing those completely contradictory themes together is neither easy nor practicable, so the Government are entirely right.

It is a nice notion also that keeping British Energy in the private sector would in some way make all the calculations, different arrangements and contracts that much more transparent. Anyone who has seen the parliamentary questions that are regularly asked about BNFL or British Energy, which is more difficult, will know that the stock answer is that financial matters are confidential to those companies. That is the way of the world; huge contracts dependent on the negotiations between the different interested parties are involved, and they are not in the public domain.

[Mr. Drew]

The fact is that the way in which the industry was privatised is at the root of many of the problems. The lines drawn between British Energy and BNFL have always been grey. Many of my constituents go up and down the road between Berkeley and Barnwood, as they are employees of those companies. Anyone who knows about the industry will say that it is very complex and that the overlap is always so great that it is very difficult to pretend that there is transparency in the financial operations. More importantly, the companies are so integral to each other that it is very difficult to pretend that there is anything other than a seamless arrangement between them, rather than a join. So the idea that there is transparency is somewhat illusory.

The third point is the suggestion that we would be fundamentally different from other parts of the world. I wish someone would tell me where the nuclear industry operates entirely through the marketplace and where it is entirely about private enterprise. In every part of the world—whether in South Africa, the former Soviet Union states, Japan or even the United States, which is the closest comparison—the state is involved directly or indirectly in determining the strategy, providing the finance and setting the parameters.

Again, the idea that we have a nice, neat division between the private and public sectors is completely illusory, so the Government are entirely right to have a backstop and to be responsible. They must have the means to keep people in the industry so that it can do what it needs to do nationally and, more importantly, internationally.

Mr. Hendrick: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Drew: I hope that my hon. Friend will not mind if I conclude my remarks now.

Even with the best will in the world, I cannot support the amendment, and I hope that it will not be pressed to a vote. If it were accepted, there would be an even greater threat not just to market sensibilities, but to the whole strategic direction of the energy industry in this country and, I dare say, further afield.

Mr. Djanogly: First, I should like to declare a non-registerable interest in British Energy shares.

My first point is technical and relates to the definition of British Energy in the context of the amendments. The Bill defines "British Energy company" as

"British Energy p.l.c. or a company which either is or immediately before the passing of this Act was a subsidiary of British Energy p.l.c. (within the meaning of the Companies Act 1985)".

The Companies Act 1985 uses a control definition of "subsidiary"—normally, if more than 50 per cent. of the company is owned—but a smaller percentage holding could apply if control of the subsidiary were owned through voting rights.

I should like to ask the Minister some questions. Are there any subsidiaries that are not 100 per cent. owned? If so, who owns those minority shareholdings? If there are such companies—for example, joint ventures and so on—will the Government give an assurance that clause 1 will not be used to acquire them? Of course, the fear is that those provisions could be used effectively to pay off third parties and to get around the order of payment that would apply under the normal insolvency rules. If the clause were used to subvert our insolvency rules, there could be great cause for concern and hon. Members would certainly want it to be debated.

Nationalising the company would be a disaster. Clearly, it has had problems. There have been management and strategy failures, and the Government have failed to understand the implications of their own legislation on the market. Ironically, the windfall tax has taken from this sector about the same amount as the taxpayer will need to pay towards British Energy's historic nuclear fuel liabilities.

4.15 pm

We then have to consider the climate change levy and the new electricity trading arrangements. We could discuss the Government's failure to give a clear lead on where the industry is going. Without the energy White Paper, we and the whole energy sector are forced to scramble around in the dark. That will continue until we know what is in that White Paper.

Of one thing I am sure: any attempt to manage this business from Whitehall would certainly not work. That would remove the sector even further from the disciplines of the marketplace, and would load further liabilities on to the taxpayer. The power of acquisition in this clause will send all the wrong messages. This company should go into administration, as any other company in a similar situation would do. The Government have admitted that, either way, they will be responsible for nuclear liabilities. Why, therefore, do they keep digging a hole—a hole that will appear in taxpayers' pockets? That hole will get bigger if the Government start buying up power stations.

The Government view having an administrator as a possibility but, worryingly, the Minister for Energy and Construction is already undermining the role of any such administrator. That role, of course, is to maximise returns for creditors. On Second Reading, the Minister said that the Government were

"not aware of any credible private sector interest in acquiring BE if it were to end up in administration."

He has repeated that view in a slightly different way this afternoon. In fact, he has gone even further, asking why the Opposition had not come up with a purchaser for the business. I felt that he had rather missed the point. If what the Minister said is coupled with the failure to publish the White Paper and to show potential buyers what will happen in the sector and what kind of marketplace will exist, what rational person would want to be a buyer? Could it be that the Government are, in effect, killing the market so that they can buy the assets back on the cheap if restructuring fails?

Again on Second Reading, the Minister noted:

"Any acquisition would of course be a commercial arrangement with the administrator of the same kind that a private buyer might make; the Bill gives the Government no special powers in that regard."—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 588.]

On the face of it, that is absolutely right. I cannot take issue with it. However, in practice, the argument is nonsensical. The Government can manipulate the market, and may have done so already. That being the case, if the Government were to put the provisions that

we are discussing into effect, how could they reach a fair valuation if they were to buy British Energy or parts of it? It would be impossible, and it would give clear cause for shareholder or creditor class action.

From reading many of the speeches on Second Reading, I saw clearly that there had been a general misconception of what administration involves. Most hon. Members seemed to believe that administration could lead to the sale of British Energy, either to a third party or to the Government. The possibility of such a sale is contained in clause 1(1)(b). However, in practice it is rare that administrators will sell assets in the form of shares, because purchasers coming to an administrator want to cherry-pick. They want to choose the assets that they want to buy. In most cases, they will not accept taking all the assets. Even if they do, they will not want to take all the liabilities. As far as possible, they will leave the liabilities with the company in administration. Clearly, that means that buyers may wish to acquire individual power stations rather than the whole lot. Of course, they will do that only if they are not scared off by the Bill, the lack of a White Paper and the threat of nationalisation. They are undermining the whole process.

When the Trade and Industry Committee conducted an inquiry into the security of energy supply, one feature that shone through when we considered the gas market was that the key to its success—it is generally considered to have been successful in recent years—has been its freedom and the adaptability that results from the freedoms that it has. Rather than providing for nationalisation and greater inefficiencies in the market, why cannot we now draw a line on intervention and accept that the market will eventually have its own way and that intervention will fail?

Dr. Cable: I want to say just a few words in this debate, which is essentially about the implications of the possibility of public ownership and the effect that that could have on the industry.

I do not want to dwell on the history of privatisation, but the truth is that it is a very mixed story. The privatised company got its assets at an almost ridiculously cheap price, having written down not just the decommissioning liabilities but almost all the capital as well. Private ownership contained a positive story in respect of plant management, and the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) was right to draw attention to that. However, it was coupled with enormous strategic errors in plant acquisition, failures to diversify and unseemly short-sighted greed. Even at this very late stage, the departing chief executive is scrambling over the terms of his terminal contract in a way that belittles the whole episode.

I do not have dogmatic views about public ownership in general. In some cases, it is probably the most effective and appropriate form of organisation. That would be true in the case of a national network monopoly, and the railway system is the most obvious example of that. However, the energy industry is not that type of industry. It is competitive and there is no particular reason for the Government to own nuclear power plants any more than they should own gas-generating plants, chemical plants or steel factories. There is no reason for that whatever.

Although I do not agree with everything that the hon. Member for Reigate said, he was absolutely right to stress the fact that private ownership has at least the merit of transparency. Companies have to report to the market. Under the listing rules, it is clear when a company is trading profitably and when it is not. He raised the valuable point about the Magnox reactors, which we have not mentioned enough in the debate. They are older and less efficient, but they are happily plodding along while British Energy has been forced to the brink of bankruptcy. That is very odd, and it relates to the way in which the public sector organisation is funded.

The hon. Gentleman rightly said that the position of the Liberal Democrats is not the same as his, but perhaps a double negative is involved. I do not hold a doctrinal view about the future role of nuclear power. From what we know at present, the economics of nuclear power under its present technology is not attractive and does not make sense. That is why I have argued in the past for a tougher approach to the bail-out. I have also said that there may be an argument for premature closure. I do not, however, push that as a matter of dogma, but the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) hinted at why that argument might apply. As plants approach the end of their lives, safety and other costs tend to rise.

If a new set of technologies comes along that enables the private sector to produce nuclear power competitively and cleanly in the long term and to internalise all the decommissioning costs, good luck to the companies in that sector. I would certainly not try to ban them on doctrinal grounds. My concern is much more with the public sector. If the industry goes into the public sector, it is much more likely that the economics of new nuclear power will be fudged and that we will have a new generation of nuclear power stations for bad economic reasons. In that sense, I take the opposite view to the hon. Member for Reigate. None the less, the essence of his argument is valid, and I will support the amendment if it is put to a vote.

Mr. Weir: This brief debate illustrates clearly the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) about the cross-currents between pro- and anti-nuclear spokesmen. I very much agree with what the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) said, but from the opposite angle. It seems to me that there is a logical inconsistency in the position adopted by the Opposition in calling for the company to go into administration and opposing the prospect of it then being taken into public ownership. Inevitably, if the company goes into administration, as I said previously, the liabilities, at least, of British Energy would fall to the Government. I reiterate that the Public Accounts Committee report on the state of British Energy in 1999 confirmed that the taxpayer is the guarantor of last resort, and that if the company falls, the Government must pick up the pieces. Again, the Library research paper states categorically that if British Energy goes into administration, all its nuclear liabilities would fall to the Government.

The effect, therefore, of removing paragraphs (b) and (c) would be that if the restructuring failed and the company went into administration, the liabilities would fall to the Government, but they would not be in a

[Mr. Weir]

position to pick up the assets and renationalise the company. That would be a shame because, from my point of view, as I said earlier, nuclear stations should be gradually run down and decommissioned at the end of their lifetime. The best way to do that is in public ownership rather than private ownership. I will therefore oppose the amendment.

My one worry about paragraphs (b) and (c) is that it is not stated that the companies would be nationalised. Furthermore, the Government are given the option—the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly) had a point in this regard—to take over shares in the company, not from an administration, although it is correct that the administrator would try to sell off assets, but before the company goes into administration. The Government could buy shares in British Energy or one of its subsidiary companies and, in effect, provide more cash aid by the back door. Instead of doing so through clause 1(1)(a), they could take a stake in the company and leave it in the private sector, but invest Government funds in it. That would be undesirable.

On balance, I would be in favour of the company coming back into public ownership to be wound down, and I will oppose the amendment.

Mr. Wilson: I sense a degree of intellectual confusion, if that is not too strong a term, on the Opposition Front Bench. We do not want to renationalise British Energy. We want it to be successfully restructured within the private sector. We have spent most of the afternoon discussing amendments tabled by all the Opposition parties that are specifically opposed to our preference for restructuring in the private sector. Only if those amendments had prevailed, and we had gone down the chosen path of administration while ruling out restructuring within the private sector, would the dread spectre of renationalisation, which was raised by the Opposition spokesman—or public ownership in any form—arise. They are the authors of the scenario—their preferred scenario—of administration, which would be the prerequisite for what they now say that they oppose: the public sector becoming the owner of the company.

Mr. Blunt: That is not the case at all. Is the Minister saying that if the company goes into administration, there are no assets to be put back into the private sector by an administrator? We know that the plants generate both power and cash sitting on their own. Of course there are assets to sell to the private sector. That is what an administrator would do. We are then into a discussion about what liabilities the Government take on, liabilities implicit since the company was formed and put into the private sector, and now being made explicit since the company had to run to the Government for a loan.

4.30 pm

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman has not helped his case. There is no dispute about the fact that if the company is in administration, there is either a public sector direction or a private sector direction for it to go in. Indeed, I would say that if it were in administration, we would still prefer a private sector outcome. The Government as owner would be the last resort, at present the most likely resort, as I do not see queues of prospective buyers forming.

The intellectual inconsistency of what the Opposition are proposing is that those options would not arise if our preferred option of restructuring within the private sector—while always keeping the administration route as an alternative—prevailed. There is no dubiety about this. Only if the administration route is followed does the possibility of public ownership even arise.

Mr. Blunt: When other companies go into administration the Government do not rush to the House to ask for authority to buy their shares and take them into public ownership. They let the administrator get on with it. Why cannot that happen in this instance?

Mr. Wilson: Because nuclear is different. If the hon. Gentleman does not understand that at this juncture in our deliberations, I despair. Other companies, even other power companies, can go to the wall. Though it is sad when jobs are lost, one can turn the key and walk away if nobody buys them, and that is the end of the story. In nuclear power generation that is the one thing that cannot be done. There must be an owner.

The real alternative implicit in the amendment is that if there were no private sector buyer and no Government buyer, the administrator would run the company to the year dot. Of course, that would depend on the views of the nuclear regulators. We cannot just let any old administrator run a nuclear power company. For all those reasons, we return to the argument that we need maximum flexibility to allow for all the options that may arise in the weeks and months ahead.

The daftness of all this is that I agree with many of the premises that the hon. Member for Reigate put forward before drawing entirely the wrong conclusion. I agree, of course, that it would be foolish to close down the nuclear option. I agree entirely that if at some stage there is nuclear new build, it is the private sector that must invest in it. Therefore, there is no vested interest from my perspective in the renationalisation of the company.

I also entirely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about the performance and efforts of the work force in the nuclear power stations. I hope that we all agree that whatever the problems of British Energy, they are in no way attributable to those who work in the plants.

For all the reasons I have given, the fact that 22 per cent. of our electricity comes from nuclear, and because we have the obligation to maintain the entirely safe operation of the stations, we need flexibility in order to respond to the full range of circumstances.

I return to the point that I made in the previous debate and on Second Reading, that this is in no way an ideological Bill. It is a pragmatic Bill, responding to a set of circumstances that are not of our making and not of our desire. We deserve the Committee's support in giving ourselves the ability to respond to all eventualities.

Would it increase political uncertainty and discourage private sector investment if we took this power to respond to the eventuality of the Government having to take over? I do not think that it would. We have said that we stand ready to step in and acquire British Energy as owner of last resort in the event that a

private sector buyer does not come forward. The market—the private sector—understands full well that we are not pursuing a hidden agenda to renationalise British Energy. There is no such signal to interpret.

I was asked whether administration and public ownership would spell the end of private sector investment, so making nuclear new build impossible. Taking British Energy into public ownership, even in the short term, would not preclude private sector involvement in the future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) explained, there are models abroad, specifically in north America, of nuclear stations that are owned by the public sector, which are managed and operated by the private sector. There is no sharp dividing line, as the Opposition implied, between public and private sectors.

Amendment No. 1 and consequential amendments would remove the explicit authority that we require to respond to the full range of eventualities. That would send out the wrong signals. Paragraphs (b) and (c) represent prudent contingency planning by the Government. They are not part of an ideological drive to renationalise the company, but form part of a package of measures that will ensure that the Government are prepared for every eventuality.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 154, Noes 309.

Division No. 83] **[4:36 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Portillo, rh Michael
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and Angela Watkinson

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette

Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Annabelle
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and Charlotte Atkins

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

AMENDMENT OF SCHEDULE 12 TO THE ELECTRICITY ACT 1989

Mr. Stunell: I beg to move amendment No. 18, in page 2, line 26, leave out from 'schedule)' to end of line 28 and insert—

'is amended, such that the upper limit on "qualifying expenditure", as defined in the schedule, is raised to a total of

£3,500 million, subject to provisions that the Secretary of State shall make reports annually to both Houses of Parliament detailing the scale of—

(a) any such "qualifying expenditure" which has been made; and

(b) any such "qualifying expenditure" which is anticipated,'.

The amendment relates to the ceiling on the amount that can be transferred from the Government's coffers to those of British Energy. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the existing limit that applies to Government aid in parallel circumstances is £1 billion and that that maximum can be varied by the House to £2.5 billion. The Bill proposes to change those limits so that there is no limit whatever.

The amendment concedes that the Minister might need a higher ceiling than he is given in current legislation. We are saying that the appropriate new ceiling is £3.5 billion—a 350 per cent. increase on the existing limit. Even in terms of the extended limit that is currently permissible, that would be a 40 per cent. increase. In fairness to the official Opposition, I point out that new clause 2 contains similar provision that would multiply that figure by about three to a very substantial £10 billion.

My question to the Committee is this: how could it possibly vote against the amendment or new clause 2? How could such figures be exceeded? After my previous contribution, the Minister said that it was one of my paranoid fantasies to suppose that money might be channelled via British Energy to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. Perhaps that is so, but what fantasy exists in his mind to suggest that he could spend a larger sum solely on British Energy and solely in the circumstances that he has so far outlined to the House and the Committee? If the money is not for BNFL, will it go to Nirex for underground storage? Does he fear that there might be a massive hole in British Energy's accounts and that it is in a similar position to that of Enron? What can be the justification for a provision that lifts the ceiling on an already very substantial amount to an even greater figure? In fact, the Bill lifts it to an unlimited figure.

The Minister might merely be ensuring that he has got all the elbow room that he possibly needs, but if £3.5 billion or £10 billion is not sufficient, what possible number can he have in mind? What sort of project can he have even in his most extreme fantasies on which he could spend so much money? If he wants more than the £3.5 billion that the amendment concedes that he might be given, surely he is obliged to say what on earth it is for.

I should like to draw attention to another aspect of the amendment: the condition that

"the Secretary of State shall make reports annually to both Houses of Parliament"

detailing the scale of expenditure and his plans for the future. We had it in mind to draft amendments that referred specifically to the National Audit Office or that would have established a specific regulatory regime. However, we received advice that that would not be appropriate in this context and we have accepted it.

Whatever level of spending the Minister is committed to—whether it is unlimited, as he wants, or whether it is £10 billion, as the Conservatives suggest in new clause 2, or £3.5 billion, as we suggest—there is an imperative for the Secretary of State to put in place strong regulatory and reporting procedures. I hope that the Committee will consider our amendment favourably. We shall put it to the vote if the Government do not accept it.

Mr. Blunt: It is a sad and shabby state of affairs when we have to dispense with consideration of clause 2 in order to discuss the House's primary responsibility of exercising its fiscal duty on behalf of the people whom we represent to place some limit on the Executive.

I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell). Surely the Executive cannot come to Parliament and demand an unlimited amount of money for one company. They cannot expect Parliament to write them a blank cheque. That is wholly unreasonable. The amendment would grant them £3.5 billion to support BE. It is inconceivable that they should require such an amount. New clause 2 would establish a principle with a limit of £10 billion. It would also require the Government to return to Parliament if they had to spend more than £2.1 billion, which is the amount of the additional liability—for the back-end fuel—that the Government are taking on.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's explanation of why the Government cannot accept the amendment.

Mr. Wilson: I have not the slightest ambition to spend such large sums of money. The nub of the argument is again the flexibility to respond to all circumstances. We have always said—I challenge anyone to dissent—

Mr. Djanogly *rose—*

Mr. Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman know from what he is going to dissent?

Mr. Djanogly: Yes.

Mr. Wilson: He should hang on and I shall give him something from which to dissent. We have always said that we cannot walk away from the liabilities. I challenge anyone to contradict that. If, despite all that we are doing and all the eventualities that we are covering, BE failed, and assuming that no private company stepped in to take over a station and its liabilities, the Government would have to act to ensure that the liabilities were tackled cleanly and safely. If no one can dissent from that, they cannot put a figure on the Government's response in a worst-case scenario, which I do not envisage.

Mr. Blunt: In the circumstances that the Minister outlines, surely it would be proper for the Executive to come back to Parliament to seek more authority. The idea that the Government should have unlimited authority to spend unlimited money is outrageous.

Mr. Wilson: The option of returning to Parliament is not precluded. It is inevitable that, in the case of a catastrophic collapse, the matter would return to Parliament in many forms.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): A written answer.

Mr. Wilson: We have never dealt with the issue through a written answer. There have been statements,

[Mr. Wilson]

debates, oral questions and a Bill. The Government's handling has been transparent. At every stage, we have told hon. Members exactly what we are doing and the reasons for our actions.

Mr. Djanogly: The powers that the Bill grants the Government are much wider than our debate suggests. The measure could apply to other companies in the same sector as BE. For example, if BNFL were floated , could not the clause allow for its renationalisation?

Mr. Wilson: For reasons that the hon. Gentleman doubtless understands, no public Bill can deal with a single company. The measure is generic, but we are considering BE's circumstances.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Sir Michael. The Minister said that this is a generic Bill that does not refer only to one company. However, from the long title of the Bill, it is clear that it refers only to British Energy. I have attempted to table generic amendments but was advised that they were not in order. I would be grateful for clarification on whether the Bill is generic or applies solely to British Energy.

The Second Deputy Chairman: That is not a matter for the Chair: it is more a matter for debate.

It being five o'clock, THE SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN, *pursuant to Orders [29 October 2002 and 27 January 2003], put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 158, Noes 295.

Division No. 84] **[5:00 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and Angela Watkinson

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Byers, rh Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*

Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and Charlotte Atkins

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

Undertakings to Make Grants Under Schedule 12 to be Disregarded for Tax Purposes

Amendment made: No.19, in page 3, line 16, after 'has', insert 'the'.—*[Mr. Wilson.]*

Clause 4, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill reported, with an amendment.

Order for Third Reading read.

5.14 pm

Mr. Wilson: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank Members on both sides of the House for another lively and interesting set of debates. What with our recent Second Reading debate and today's proceedings, we have given the Bill's key principles a thorough airing. There was a slight frisson of excitement on the Opposition Benches as we concluded our previous debate, and perhaps I should clarify the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). I was referring in particular to clause 3, which, as I said, is generic. The hon. Gentleman's misunderstanding might stem from the fact that although clause 1 relates exclusively to British Energy, the rest of the Bill is not framed so specifically. I hope that that provides him with the explanation that he seeks.

Last week, we had a good debate about the broader principles that underpin our support for British Energy, and perhaps to a lesser extent about the Bill itself. We moved into the realms of wider energy policy, and I can assure the House that there will be a further opportunity to discuss the wider issues in the context of the energy White Paper when it is published according to the time scale that I have already defined.

Hon. Members are now aware that this is a small Bill, and as I have said, it does not stem from any ideological wish to renationalise, or from any particular political direction. It is a pragmatic response to a particular set of circumstances that are not of our making. It will ensure that the Government are well placed to deal with any eventuality in relation to British Energy, whether the solvent restructuring deal announced on 28 November ultimately succeeds or fails.

As I said, the current situation is not of our making. Last week, we had some discussion of the contributory factors to British Energy's difficulties, but the reality is that we are dealing with a company with serious problems. It had to face up to the need for restructuring, and, as I have always acknowledged, it encountered some very difficult market conditions. Equally, it made some serious mistakes, leading to the crisis that came to the fore in November.

Mr. Blunt: Does the Minister accept any responsibility for the Government's contribution to British Energy's difficulties?

Mr. Wilson: I do not think so, at least not in those terms. I suppose that, if one draws things widely enough, everything contributes to the various circumstances in the sector, but I should point out that British Energy specifically welcomed the changes in the electricity market when they were introduced. It is clear that, if it had taken certain steps, or avoided the steps that it did take, it would have been much better placed to deal with the conditions that arose.

I have always made it clear that I am not in the business of recriminations. I have known the company for a very long time, including in its pre-privatisation guises. One thing that we have agreed on throughout these debates is that no fault should be attributed to the people who work in the power stations. They are the somewhat uncertain victims of this situation, and I have no wish to go back into history and point the finger. We are where we are. We have a nuclear power company that contributes very substantially to our energy needs, and anyone else who was standing in my place would have had to respond in a roughly similar way to ensure the meeting of two key criteria: security of supply, and the entirely safe operation of nuclear power stations.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and for responding substantively to points that I raised on Second Reading, but I would like to return to one of them. He rightly said that the Government are proposing a mechanism for sharing revenues whereby 65 per cent. of available cash will go into the nuclear liabilities fund. However, let me put the point to him again, if I did not explain it well enough.

I was suggesting that the increase in free cash, as it were, might originate from one of two sources. It could come from a reduction in costs on the part of British Energy—the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) talked about that—which should be rewarded and incentivised, or from increases in price in the market place, which might give rise to substantial additional cash for British Energy. Does the Minister think that the proportion of 65 per cent. overall may not be quite right, and that it should be lower if it relates to reductions in costs passing through to British Energy's shareholders, or higher if it is simply the result of increases in prices in the marketplace?

Mr. Wilson: No, I think that the balance is about right. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and I can see that there is an argument for a more complex arrangement, but there is a great deal in the restructuring package that incentivises good performance and a reduction in costs. Taking a single figure of 65 per cent. will not militate against that, and, if it is achieved through an increase in the price of electricity, and therefore the greater profitability of the company, it is a reasonable proportion. I have written to him about the matter, and I am prepared to continue the debate, but not in the context of the Bill.

I repeat that no matter who was standing here now, they would have to take steps to deal with a set of circumstances that nobody wants and that came upon us over a period of months last year. If I was in the recriminatory stakes, I would have said a lot more about the role of the previous Government—I have been very gentle and alluded to it only in passing. If that had never happened, we would not be in this position tonight, but let us not delve too deeply into history.

This is a pragmatic Bill that responds to a specific set of circumstances. It gives us the flexibility that we need to respond to all eventualities. There is no renationalisation agenda, but equally, in the absence of any obvious suitors from the private sector, that is a possibility that we cannot rule out. Although I fully respect the right and duty of Opposition Members to

probe and examine our proposals, ultimately we have a lot more in common, as it is recognised that no responsible Government could walk away from such circumstances. In that spirit, I ask the House to support the Bill.

5.22 pm

Mr. Blunt: I can follow the Minister as far as thanking hon. Members for their contributions to the proceedings on Second Reading and today, but I fear that that is about it. I thank the forces of darkness—Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth—for their advice and assistance. When they are lined up with the forces of conservatism, we have an interesting alliance ranged against the Government. I should also commiserate with the Minister. I think that for him this is a particularly sad piece of legislation because of what it will mean for the future of nuclear generation if it is allowed to go through in its current guise.

It is a dreadful little Bill. We, as a House of Commons, have just resisted the principle of any limit on expenditure by the Executive. It is an astonishing state of affairs that the House of Commons can so fail to discharge its obligations to the people who put us here. In Committee, the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said that the situation was ambiguous in that people on either side of the argument could be on either side of the Bill.

Dr. Ladyman: I thought that we established earlier today that European law means that any expenditure by the Government has to be the minimum possible to carry out the restructuring, so we have not abrogated our responsibilities as the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr. Blunt: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the proposed reconstruction of British Energy will be more expensive than putting the company into administration, which is what should happen.

Mr. Wilson: I want to probe the hon. Gentleman a little more on this matter. I made it clear that the possibility of raising or even abolishing the spending limit was only a cover against an extreme set of circumstances. No one wants or expects such circumstances to come about. Will the hon. Gentleman say what the Opposition view is about what should happen if the company failed catastrophically? Its liabilities would still have to be met. Would the Opposition set a limit on the amount of money that could be spent on dealing with the liabilities of the nuclear industry, in the absence of the company that previously had responsibility for them?

Mr. Blunt: The answer is obvious. The company would go into administration, after which an assessment would be made of which liabilities it would be appropriate for the Government to take on, and which could be recovered from a sale of company assets by the administrator. As the Minister made clear in Committee, any immediate charges that fell to the taxpayer would come under the short-term provisions of the appropriations legislation. Any responsible Executive would come to Parliament to seek authority for the expenditure incurred.

In contrast, this Government have come to Parliament to demand an unlimited amount of money, to be spent in an unlimited number of ways. The Bill has been subject to a limited amount of scrutiny. The Minister said that the Bill had been given a thorough airing, but I disagree: clause 2 has not been looked at in detail, because we wanted to put a limit on Government expenditure. The House has not considered the issues involved properly at all, and there has been no explanation as to why the programme motion did not allow proper exploration of the serious contingent liabilities on the taxpayer that will flow from the Bill if something is not done about it in another place.

It is dreadful that no hon. Member, of any party, who is not a member of the Executive has been able to discharge the duty to protect the interests of the taxpayer. That is a pretty sad reflection of what passes for parliamentary scrutiny.

If the Bill is given a Third Reading, the Government will have secured the ability to spend an unlimited amount of taxpayer's money on this exercise. I want to make a formal appeal from the Dispatch Box, on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill). I hope that he and his Committee continue to supervise the affairs of British Energy, and to monitor the way in which the Government go about the company's rescue. Also, I want to go on record with a request to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Public Accounts, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). I hope that he and his Committee, with the assistance of the National Audit Office, will investigate all the expenditure associated with this affair.

Mr. Drew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I hear what he is saying about the financial probity of the arrangement, which should be combed over very carefully. However, the much more important issue is the basis of the nuclear industry. Would not it be possible, if British Energy were put into administration, that its assets could be carved up and sold off? If so, they would be sold only to certain players. Would the hon. Gentleman be happy if those players came from Russia, Ukraine—or even from North Korea? Those countries are home to the key players in nuclear energy around the world.

Mr. Blunt: Before I respond, may I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his proposal to form a parliamentary group on nuclear energy? That would give us another forum in which to discuss these matters. However, I hope that the group will not detain itself too long on any possible North Korean purchase of British Energy assets. It is a little unlikely that a North Korean purchaser would get the appropriate licence to administer the plants involved. It might be an extreme possibility, but I am sure that we can trust the appropriate authorities to ensure that the eventuality suggested by the hon. Gentleman does not take place. If people want to purchase the assets out of administration, they must pass the tests necessary to establish their suitability to operate nuclear plants.

The Minister was understandably defensive when I intervened to ask if there was any suggestion that the Government might have contributed to the difficulties

[Mr. Blunt]

of British Energy. We all know that they have done so; the climate change levy is the main example. I hope that at some point the Government will own up and admit formally that the new Labour name "climate change levy" is utterly misleading, that it is in fact an energy tax and that they will change its name accordingly. It is time that they were honest with industry, the public and Parliament; if it were really a climate change levy, it would not be paid on nuclear-generated electricity.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again, but he cannot have it both ways. He cannot argue that the Government are at fault for distorting the marketplace while saying that the market should sort things out and the company should go into administration. That is completely illogical.

Mr. Blunt: It is not illogical. I am not saying that the Government are entirely responsible; I made it clear during my Second Reading speech that the main responsibility lies with the commercial strategy pursued by British Energy in a difficult market. I also made it clear that we welcomed that market, which has brought substantial benefits to consumers of power in the UK—be they industrial or domestic.

The Government have contributed to British Energy's difficulties, however. The outcome may have been different if they had not introduced the business rate regime, which they imposed by statutory instrument, or if their negotiations with BNFL—a Government-owned company—had been otherwise. Those arrangements have undoubtedly contributed to the difficulties experienced by British Energy, although as I said, the major factor was the failure of the commercial strategy pursued by the company. When private sector companies cannot cope in a difficult market, they go bust and end up in administration.

Whose interests are served by the Bill? The British Energy rescue effort is certainly not in the interests of the taxpayer, although it will enable the bondholders and shareholders to emerge with some value. Ironically, as British Energy will continue to exist, Robin Jeffrey, who has been pilloried by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, will get what is due to him under the terms of his contract. That would not be the case if the company went into administration.

Does our future electricity industry benefit from the Bill? The measure will result in an appalling degree of Government intervention in the electricity market, which will raise the internal rate of return demanded by future investors in private sector electricity generation. That will result in more expensive electricity for industry and for consumers. Not only will the industry lose, but so, too, will every citizen of the United Kingdom. Other producers will lose from the Government's intervention. If the company ends up in the public sector, we shall all lose because the electricity generating industry will be less efficient.

This is an especially sad occasion for the Minister. He has considerable constituency interests in the success of British Energy and in the future success of nuclear generation in the UK. If the Bill is passed, it will sound the death knell for the long-term future of the industry in his constituency and the UK and that is something that we may come to regret.

5.35 pm

Mr. O'Neill: It is unfortunate that the Government have to introduce this legislation and that the company did not anticipate some of the difficulties that it encountered. There were also elements of bad luck but my hon. Friend the Minister pointed out that at the time of ending the pool, no warning was given by British Energy. Indeed, it did not participate in the debate about the pool at the time it was altered.

On occasions, British Energy was irresponsibly generous to its shareholders and insufficient provision was made. When the company did have a large amount of money, it probably did not adopt commercially appropriate courses of action.

We have heard the usual litany today from Opposition Members. It may be that the climate change levy made a difference—but no more than £80 million in any one year. The levy started in April 2002 and the impact on the company would not have been £80 million by September, so the period in which the CCL may have had an impact was relatively short. As to rates, neither are they that significant.

I was surprised that the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) did not refer to the windfall profits tax. If anything hit British utilities, it was that tax. Conservative Members neglected to mention that when a Conservative Government had responsibility for regulation and privatisation in the 1990s, the instruction to regulators was to use a light touch and not go too hard on companies, to allow them to make phenomenal profits.

One of the great surprises for a Labour Government has been the lack of opposition from those who paid the windfall tax to that tax. The opposition was such that Conservative Members did not pick up on it when trying to throw something at the Government today. British Energy shareholders lived a charmed life until September and if the financial rescue goes through, they may enjoy a small degree of comfort in future.

Mr. Blunt: I did not raise that matter because I have not been able to identify a precise windfall tax payment by British Energy. Interestingly, £2.1 billion was taken from the electricity industry—which is at least the amount that will have to go back into British Energy from the taxpayer.

The decision by the directors of British Energy was at the margin, which is where Government intervention may have been effective. At the margin, the directors decided that the company could not trade out of its difficulties because of submissions about the future price of electricity from its own advisers. In previous years, in a different risk environment, the directors might have decided to trade on.

Mr. O'Neill: If there is a different risk environment, that is not necessarily the responsibility of the Labour Government in the UK but probably more a question of the international economic situation and declining stock markets. The Government cannot be blamed. To the extent that there may be a UK dimension, it is considerably smaller than anywhere else because of the relative strength of the UK economy compared with most of our foreign competitors.

I will not follow the example of the hon. Member for Reigate, who spoke at considerable length but had nothing substantial to say.

The Bill is necessary so that we can sustain a nuclear industry not in perpetuity, but until the end of the lifetime of the plants. We do not know how long that will be and, although an estimate has been made, it has been extended when the quality of maintenance and of staff has suggested it could be longer than anticipated. So it is very difficult to be specific about what sums would be required.

One of the glaring omissions from the Conservatives' case is that they have not attempted to estimate what the figure should have been if we had included a specific sum in the Bill. There was no attempt to move an amendment that would have included such a sum. The fact is that those figures are very difficult to estimate with any certainty, so such things must be open-ended.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. O'Neill: I shall finish soon because I am conscious of the time.

I shall give this undertaking as the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry: we keep a watching brief on a number of issues, and the nuclear industry is one of them because of all the concerns that we have about safety and the cost of future development. I will certainly be very anxious, so long as I am Chairman of the Committee, that Ministers and directors will be called to account for their actions because it is appropriate that we look at this issue. One of the problems with the Public Accounts Committee is that it tends to look retrospectively; we can look prospectively at how things may well end up. We will return to this issue over the years, so there will be parliamentary scrutiny in that sense. I would certainly hope that any report that we produce would be debated either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall.

With the appropriate safeguards of parliamentary scrutiny and given the fact that we cannot give a specific estimate of the expenditure, it is necessary to make an unspecific and open-ended arrangement. Anyone who tries to estimate the figure will get it wrong; it will be either too high or too low. However, that does not mean that we will bankrupt the country or, for that matter, prejudice electricity generation across the board.

This year, we will start to discuss not just the White Paper, but the new British electricity trading and transmission arrangements. I hope that those new arrangements will provide, for example, opportunities to make payments for capacity and other issues of that nature, as that will go some way to mitigate some of the worst excesses of NETA, which no one could have anticipated.

We have an opportunity with BETTA to try to improve on the shortcomings that have been so glaringly exposed by British Energy and NETA, the consequences of which no hon. Member anticipated. The Government have made a brave attempt to correct some of those shortcomings, so I welcome the Bill.

5.43 pm

Mr. Stunell: I wish to start by thanking the Minister for the courtesy and help that he has given to those of us who have considered the Bill and for the answers that he has given to me from time to time. Nevertheless, it must be said that the Bill has been rushed and ill prepared, and we have had insufficient time to consider properly what should be done. I saw some heads shaking when I said "ill prepared", but I would draw the Minister's attention to amendment No. 19—the typography was not even right.

The Bill is wrong in principle. It is a Bill too far, and it is too soon. Overhanging the Bill and behind all the speeches that have been made so far is the fact that we shall have the White Paper in a few weeks—perhaps in a fortnight, according to the latest hints—which will, about five years too late, set out an energy policy for this country. The fact that the Bill pre-empts significant parts of that White Paper strongly suggests that it is the wrong Bill at the wrong time.

The Bill is not just wrong in principle, it is also wrong in detail. However, the word "detail" is somewhat misplaced because the Government can do anything that they like to anything that they want so long as the words "British Energy" are in its title or the money can be channelled through British Energy, and they can do so at any cost that they care to nominate.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) keeps referring back to European Union trade restrictions. It is fine for him to do so, but the charge that the Government and the House have abdicated their responsibilities is right. It may be that Europe offers a safety net, but is that good enough? Does the House really want expenditure to be completely unconstrained except by the intervention of European Commissioners? When one has an existing limit of £2.5 billion, which is not a trivial sum, and then opposes an amendment that would lift that ceiling to £3.5 billion—and would, by extension, have opposed a ceiling of £10 billion—the situation is clearly beyond parliamentary control.

The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said that Opposition parties had failed to come up with an estimate. He cannot have been listening because he has missed something. We have provided a ceiling, if not an estimate. The Minister has said that our ceiling does not allow him enough flexibility. His estimate is undefined, but is larger than £3.5 billion. It is utterly outrageous to make the charge that whereas the Government have a nice and precisely controlled budget, the Opposition parties have no grasp of the details. That charge flies in the face of the facts that the House has heard.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman can argue that the House has come to the wrong conclusion, but he cannot argue that the Bill has not been scrutinised. It has been scrutinised on the Floor of the House. Many Ministers proposing Bills, and many Opposition spokesmen opposing them, would give their right arm to have those Bills scrutinised on the Floor of the House. This Bill has had the best scrutiny possible.

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. There has been no time to discuss ways of improving accountability and transparency. Clause 2 deals with the Government's powers to acquire securities but, as far as I can see, there is no limit on the nature and extent of the securities that the Government can purchase. A discussion on transparency would have drawn out that point. The Minister properly pointed out to the

[Mr. Stunell]

House that clause 2 is not restricted to British Energy, but relates to any assets that the Government might seek to acquire. However, that point was not discussed further. The hon. Gentleman is wrong: the fact that the Bill was discussed on the Floor of the House did not mean that it was properly and thoroughly scrutinised. The scrutiny it was given has not produced the right result.

The only thing that clause 2 does not facilitate is the purchase by North Korea of the assets, a possibility mentioned by one hon. Member. However, clause 2 does not prevent the Government from purchasing North Korea's assets as a result of the relaxations that will be introduced.

I want to talk about one of the unintended consequences of the Bill. I have no doubt that it was unintended, but money spent on this project will now not be available for other projects that most of us in this place would regard as more deserving. There is competition for resources—whether they are in the form of investment by the Government of taxpayers' money, or investment by the private sector of shareholders' money. There can be little doubt that the result of this particular investment will be to reduce the Government's capacity to invest in other things, and to undermine the desire of the private sector to invest in energy-related matters.

In the past year, we have seen the virtual collapse of the combined heat and power industry for generating electricity. There has been more than a 75 per cent. drop in the amount of electricity that is generated in that way. As a direct consequence, the Government will fail to meet their carbon dioxide reduction targets. There has been no intervention from the Government on that and no support for investment. However, as a result of this project, electricity generation from the nuclear sector has been artificially sustained, and that has driven down prices further and made it harder for private investment to come in. It is even less likely that combined heat and power will become viable in this country.

The hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) raised the issue of coal. The Minister swept his point aside and said that we should not consider the argument in terms of tit for tat. The Minister said that the two forms of energy should not be seen in competition. I hope that he has said to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, "I have spent £643 million on British Energy but, please, do not let that affect your view of how much I should spend on other aspects of the energy industry."

Mr. Wilson: No one has spent £643 million on the nuclear industry—certainly no one in this Government. Will the hon. Gentleman tell us something positive and give us an insight into the Liberal Democrats' thinking? Faced with the situation in which British Energy found itself, what would they have done? If he is ruling out the loan facility that we granted to British Energy on the ground of security of supply and safety, how would he have met the criteria of security of supply and safety? If he cannot tell us that, everything else he is saying is so much hot air.

Mr. Stunell: Fortunately, I can answer the Minister's question. I refer him to what my hon. Friends and I said on Second Reading, in other debates and in response to the Secretary of State's statement. Indeed, I refer him to what he told us earlier. When we were in Committee, he told us that no one disputes the fact that these generating assets would continue to generate whether they were in administration or bailed out by the Government through the Bill. Let us put to rest the argument that the Bill is about security of supply or safety. They are not the issues.

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman must not misrepresent my remarks. I clearly said that either option was available, but that the second option of administration would be available only on the basis of money being made available to the administrator. We would have to pay the administrator and give him the same facility that has been used for the loan. I return to my original point. Why should we suffer this nonsense when a party will not put forward any positive proposals? Is he saying that, if British Energy went into administration, the administrator should not be given access to the same money to carry out his task? Is he saying that the loan should not be given to British Energy?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. That is a long intervention for this stage of our proceedings.

Mr. Stunell: Rather than answer the Minister's point again, I refer him to the speech that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made at the beginning of the Committee stage. He clearly justified the arithmetic of our case. A careful study of *Hansard* will give the Minister the answer that he seeks. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot have continual sedentary interventions.

Mr. Stunell: There we go; they do not like it. The fact of the matter is that the Bill is a mistake from beginning to end.

I was making a point about the competition for resources, and it is unarguable that, if the money is spent on this project and is not made available elsewhere, there will be a threat to future investment by the Government and an undermining of private investment in the industry. It is hard to escape the fact that this decision falls outside any vision for a future energy policy. The nuclear industry has had a boost of several billion pounds at the expense of the rest of the energy sector.

The Minister was at pains to say that the decision was not driven by ideology or by a preference for one technology over another. He said that it had no connection with the strategic development of UK energy policy. If that was not its purpose, what was it? I suggest to the House that it was a panic Bill; a patch-up, make-do-and-mend Bill. It is a pathetic Bill, which the House should reject now.

5.55 pm

Mr. Chaytor: We all accept that this was a Bill that nobody would have wished to see or experience. I have enormous sympathy with my hon. Friend the Minister for having to confront the issue, which he has done extremely skilfully.

I must take issue, however, with one of the Minister's earlier remarks. He said that the Bill was made necessary because of recent events with British Energy. The fact is that the dubious economics of nuclear power have been widely understood for many years. They were widely understood at the time of privatisation, and voices were raised then about the consequences for the nuclear industry as a result of privatisation, and they were widely understood in the years following. The difficulty—and the main lesson that we must learn—is that, under successive Governments, there was a massive failure by the Department of Trade and Industry to read the writing on the wall. Sadly, the warning voices have come from outside Government—from the universities, independent researchers and academics—where a substantial amount of work has been done analysing the economics of British Energy, British Nuclear Fuels and the other nuclear agencies. Those voices have been ignored. Had previous Governments taken advice from those who knew the reality of the economics of the nuclear industry—and not from the DTI—we would not now find ourselves in this very difficult situation.

Mr. O'Neill: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Chaytor: With respect, there is very little time left, and I must press on.

I want to take issue with the remark of my very good and hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) that there has been adequate scrutiny of the Bill. It is a short Bill, but we have had one Second Reading debate and three hours on the Floor of the House. One could argue that never in the history of British parliamentary democracy has so much money been authorised so quickly by so few.

My final point is that I regret that we did not reach new clause 4, which I tabled, which would have required a review of the liabilities of British Energy—whatever future shape it has—after a 12-month period and, in particular, an analysis of the relative merits of reprocessing and storage as a means of dealing with spent fuel. The fact is that the current mess is entirely due to the utter and complete lack of transparency under successive Governments, for many years, about the economics of the nuclear industry. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can give an absolute assurance that in the years ahead the accountancy regime for the future British Energy will be far more open and transparent than it has been previously.

5.58 pm

Mr. Weir: The main problem with the Bill is simply that it is out of context. My earlier point was that the energy White Paper is necessary to allow us to see the future direction of nuclear energy.

We all accept that we cannot shut down nuclear stations overnight. There is no dispute about that. We do not know from the Bill, however, whether the Government foresee building new stations. Do they need British Energy to continue into the future? Alternatively, if, as the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) hinted, these stations have a relatively short lifespan—30 or 40 years—what is the future of British Energy beyond that? In that circumstance, a good argument would exist for taking it into public ownership for the wind-down.

The lack of context is the real problem with the Bill, and that is why we cannot support it. It gives a blank cheque to British Energy without establishing what is the future of the company or even how long it will be in operation. We could be throwing millions and even billions of pounds down a sink. That is not acceptable, and we will oppose the Bill.

5.59 pm

Mr. Drew: In the 30 seconds available to me, I should like to make one point very clearly. The reason for the need for speed was to think about the work force, whose members are eminently employable. They have to remain within the industry. Unless there is financial stability, the work force will go, and then we shall have to pick up the even bigger liability of dealing with the remaining nuclear industry, not only in this country, but in the wider world. That is why we have to act speedily. It is certainly the reason why this industry is peculiar, one that we have an obligation, as the state, to—

It being Six o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Orders [29 October 2002 and 27 January 2003].*

The House divided: Ayes 274, Noes 157.

Division No. 85] **[6:00 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Byers, rh Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*

Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Charlotte Atkins and Jim Fitzpatrick

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Barrett, John
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David

McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Weir, Michael
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and Angela Watkinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 12th February, opposition business may be proceeded with, notwithstanding paragraph (2)(c)(i) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of Public Business), for three hours or until Four o'clock, whichever is later, and proceedings shall then lapse if not previously concluded.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders (28 June 2001 and 29 October 2002),

That in accordance with the Resolution of the Standing Committee of 4th February 2003, the programme order of 4th December 2002 in relation to the Criminal Justice Bill shall be amended by the substitution in paragraph (2) (time for conclusion of proceedings in Standing Committee) for the words '27th February' of the words '4th March'.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

Question agreed to.

Rate Support Grant (Manchester)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

6.12 pm

Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Yesterday evening, I happily supported the local government grant settlement for the coming year. As the Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) said last night, and as he will doubtless remind us tonight, overall funding has increased by 25 per cent. in real terms since 1997, and the new formula for distribution is now more fairly based on need.

However, this evening, I wish to draw my hon. Friend's attention to an issue that seriously undermines the credibility and fairness of the settlement in Manchester—the wholly inaccurate estimates of population provided to his Department by the Office for National Statistics. That error will have serious implications for the delivery of public services in the city, not just in the coming year, but for at least the next decade. Last September, the ONS published the 2001 census results. The figures for Manchester showed a fall in population from 439,000, counted in the 1991 to census, to about 393,000—a reduction of 46,000 people, more than 10 per cent. of the population. No one in the city of Manchester believes that those figures are true. Any casual observer visiting the city during last summer's successful Commonwealth games would have noticed the extensive business and housing developments that have taken place in recent years. Those more familiar with the city centre will know that in the past 10 years an additional 10,000 people have decided to make their home there. Manchester is a city that is clearly growing, not shrinking. The conclusions reached by Len Cook and his enumerators bear no relationship to any discernible trend in the city.

Naturally, the city's councillors and Members of Parliament wanted to examine the information on which the new census totals are based—an exercise that ought to have been straightforward, but which has turned out to be rather more challenging and complicated than any of us might have expected. Lack of resources, the Data Protection Act 1998, and the difficulty of reconciling data sources have all been given as reasons for delay. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who met Manchester MPs to discuss these issues and helped us speed up the flow of information, at least from "stop" to "slow".

As the information began to trickle in from the ONS, it soon became clear that whichever data source we looked at, the census results are deeply flawed. I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is not responsible for the census or for the way in which it was carried out, but his Department must live with the totals that it produced, so I hope that he will forgive me if I give him some examples of the discrepancies that we found. The council has shown, for example, that about 10,000 properties in the city, for which the council receives council tax, were neither identified nor canvassed by census enumerators. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer)

[Paul Goggins]

explained in an earlier debate, Mancunians are honest and generous, but they do not pay council tax on behalf of imaginary people.

In Manchester we discovered that there are more people in receipt of pensions, more children in receipt of child benefit and more children attending schools than were counted in the census. The census also identified fewer live babies under the age of one than were born in the city during the relevant period. Clearly, Caesar Augustus 2,000 years ago had a more efficient system of enumeration. In 2001 the city's electoral register showed a total of 310,000. Given all the problems associated with registration, with which hon. Members are familiar, particularly in our major cities, most people would probably regard that as being on the low side, but not as low as the census estimate for the number of people aged 17 and above, which is 305,000—some 5,000 fewer people than appear on the electoral register.

The explanations offered by the Office for National Statistics range from complacency to sheer fantasy. The ONS has argued that it is the overestimation in the previous census that is to blame. When discrepancies are discovered, they are passed over if similar discrepancies have occurred in other places. In other words, because the ONS got it wrong in other places as well as Manchester, that should be regarded as corroboration of its results.

Most unconvincing of all is the speculation by the ONS that prior to the 2001 census, there had been an underestimate of the number of young men who emigrate from this country each year. Without substantiating its figures or cross-checking with alternative data sources, such as the international passenger survey, the ONS claims that young men have been leaving at the rate of 50,000 a year. I have not particularly noticed a reduction in the number of young men on our streets, but even if the figure is true, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) pointed out in our debate in Westminster Hall, they presumably do not all come from Manchester.

Whatever view one might eventually take of the efficiency of the ONS, it is clear that full public scrutiny of the census has hardly even started. In relation to Manchester, the ONS has agreed to the suggestion by the city council that Manchester Geomatics based at Manchester university should be asked to help in the property-matching exercise, but that will still take months to complete. Likewise, even though many of the alternative administrative data sources have been made available, the council is still waiting for explanations and clarifications about how the data were applied. At least one source of data, the postcode sample, has still not been made available.

I listened carefully yesterday and I heard my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary say that the ONS is confident about the information that it has presented. I and other hon. Members would be interested to know whether Ministers in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister share that confidence. The letter sent on Tuesday this week by the statistical officer at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is not very encouraging. She confirmed that, for the purpose of grant distribution in 2003–04, the population data for Manchester would be based on the 2001 census. She went on to justify that course of action by pointing out:

"all results for each local authority were the subject of intensive quality assurance which included a comparison with aggregate administrative data such as patient registers, child benefit, school census and pensions data".

I simply do not understand how that statement can be defended in relation to Manchester, given the clear discrepancies that exist in each and every one of those categories.

In Westminster Hall on 15 January, in a debate that was very ably led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), the Financial Secretary asked us not to hold her responsible for the way in which the census results are used by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. I sincerely hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will not try to use that same argument in reverse by claiming that he cannot be held answerable for the accuracy of the census. If his officials are defending the accuracy of the census, I hope that he will tell us what steps Ministers in his Department have taken to satisfy themselves that the figures are robust.

As Tuesday's letter and yesterday's debate made clear, any concerns that may exist have not prevented Ministers from using the results as key inputs to the 2003–04 revenue support grant settlement. In the case of Manchester, using the 2001 census results will mean that there is a loss in revenue support grant of £8.2 million next year. If those figures are not changed, they will apply for at least a decade, leading to the loss of even larger amounts in future. Frankly, that is a loss that the city cannot afford.

Manchester has been very successful in recent years in securing private investment and promoting job creation. Manchester airport in my constituency now handles 19 million passengers a year. We have world-class universities, concert halls and football stadiums. All those things are restoring Manchester to its rightful position as one of the foremost regional centres in the country. Yet we still face enormous challenges. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's own index of deprivation indicates that Benchill in my constituency is the most deprived of all 8,414 wards in England. In terms of income and employment deprivation, Manchester is the third most deprived of the 354 districts in England. We do not whinge about that—Mancunians do not parade their poverty—but we expect a fair deal, and we do not think that the 2001 census gives us one.

In addition, Manchester is not only a city, but a regional centre. We are proud of that role and very happy to play it, but it comes with a price tag. The council rightly invests heavily in facilities such as the central library and other cultural, sporting and visitor infrastructure. Cleaning the city centre streets and providing a modern system of public transportation help to promote the economic prosperity of Manchester and the wider region, but they cost money. The loss of grant arising from the under-counting of Manchester's resident population will inevitably place even more pressure on the mainstream service spending that is vital in meeting the needs of local communities.

I have four questions to which I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will respond. First, will he outline what consideration was given to the

representations made in a letter that the chief executive of the city council sent to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on 14 January? The letter set out in detail the council's concerns, together with a request that, until the agreed joint review of the data that is being undertaken by the ONS and the council is completed, Manchester's revenue support grant for 2003–04 should be based on the 2000 mid-year estimates, rather than the census. My hon. Friend has a well-deserved reputation for courtesy and promptness, but the fact that he replied on 20 January, only four working days later, confirming the Government's intention to press ahead with the census results, may leave some to reflect that the fullest consideration was not given to the views expressed by the council. An explanation of the consideration that was given would be most helpful.

Secondly, it would be helpful to know the steps that Ministers in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister took to satisfy themselves that the census results were accurate. It is incredible that a Department would give £51 billion without being satisfied that the data that governed its distribution were robust. It would be interesting to know why the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister felt it necessary to use the census data so soon after their publication and before external scrutiny had been possible. If Ministers had taken longer to implement the new data, it would have allowed time for resolving disputes. It would also have made it possible to incorporate more refined data, for example, about ethnicity, which have not been included for the forthcoming year.

Thirdly, I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will go a little further than he went in yesterday's debate about the action that the Department intends to take if the work of the Office for National Statistics and the city council leads to changes in the census results. Last night, he said that Ministers would—

"have to look carefully at their . . . impact."—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 401.]

Perhaps he will take the opportunity to offer greater reassurance and confirm that if the census data are subsequently revised, the city's grant entitlement will be fully restored. Such an assurance may not yield immediate money, but it would give the council greater confidence as it sets out its spending plans for the year ahead.

Fourthly, can I tempt my hon. Friend, even at such a late stage, to offer Manchester a short-term solution to the shortfall in grant, which arose from the 2001 census, at least until the data-matching between the ONS and the council is completed? For 2003–04, would my hon. Friend consider making an additional allocation to the city, for example, of £8 million from the neighbourhood renewal fund? The overall grant settlement would not be affected, and the city would not be denied vital resources.

The census is not an academic exercise. It becomes the means whereby resources are distributed and vital services are funded. Common sense and detailed analysis tell us that Manchester's population has not fallen by 10 per cent. in the past decade. The city and its people should not be penalised for errors in the way in which they were counted.

6.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Paul Goggins) on securing this debate on the effect of population on the local government finance settlement. It is of interest not only to Trafford and Manchester, the authorities in his constituency, but to those who are worried about the impact of census calculations and results on the revenue support grant for their authorities.

Hon. Members debated the matter at length yesterday when the final financial settlements were approved. Many hon. Members and local authorities, including Trafford and Manchester, have made representations on the settlement. I note that my hon. Friend signed a letter on the issue from Manchester Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer) has been especially keen to press the issue. Although he cannot be present, it would be wrong to pass over his anxieties.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions was happy to meet a delegation from concerned authorities, including representatives from Manchester. I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East spoke passionately about population estimates for Manchester in the recent debate that my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley) initiated. The Financial Secretary responded as the Minister responsible for the ONS.

We considered all representations carefully before making our decisions. Indeed, one of my hon. Friend's four questions was about that. I recall the letter that he mentioned and I considered its contents. All representations that were made in time were considered carefully. I shall elaborate on the point later, but we must rely on some information on which to base our population statistics. We concluded that the ONS was the best source and the representations did not persuade us otherwise.

Mr. Keith Bradley (Manchester, Withington): The Minister has confirmed that the Government rely on the information provided through the census by the ONS. If, after the exercise that is being belatedly undertaken—especially on property data and the sample matching exercise—those figures prove to be erroneous, can he confirm that the Government will adjust the basis on which the financial settlement is calculated and restore to Manchester the money that it is due this year? If that does not happen, the problem will be perpetuated for many years to come and Manchester will lose grant for year after year.

Mr. Leslie: My understanding of the rules is that we have one opportunity to make an amending report should it become obvious that mistakes have been made in the data used in the financial settlement for local authorities. As I said in the debate yesterday, if the ONS tells us that it was wrong in its conclusions and in those figures, we would have to think carefully about making those adjustments. However, it would be difficult to anticipate those circumstances arising, not least because the ONS has not so far given us cause to doubt its

[Mr. Leslie]

statistics. In the meantime, we have to rely on the information that we receive from it. I have been keen to pass on to the ONS all the representations that have been received from hon. Members and local authorities, when those representations have been made in detail.

My hon. Friends will be aware by now that the area will receive increases in the formula grant above the national average of 6.3 per cent. for Trafford and 6.5 per cent. for Manchester. Those are good settlements for the authorities in my hon. Friends' constituencies and they might wish to compare them with those allocated to other metropolitan districts. It is true that Manchester will receive a lower increase than some other metropolitan areas—which is mainly due, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East pointed out—to the lower population estimate, but that should not detract from what is a very good increase. It is more than twice the rate of inflation in a single year, and it should not be overlooked that that is a good settlement.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): The national settlement is good, but the credibility of the process depends on people accepting that the statistical basis that underpins it is accurate. If that accuracy can genuinely be questioned, that brings into doubt the whole process by which the Government determine the needs of an area such as Manchester. Even given the good settlement, we believe that our population has been underestimated and that therefore, as my hon. Friends have said, we will live with the result for many years. Will the Minister confirm that he will not get locked into a battle to defend the ONS when what he should be defending is the probity of the process of allocating moneys to local authorities such as Manchester?

Mr. Leslie: I know that my hon. Friend is aware of the position of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. We have to draw on several different data sources and must place a certain degree of confidence in the people who provide that data. It is true that it is important to have valid statistics. It is also crucial to have faith in the veracity of the information that we receive if people are to accept that the final conclusions are fair and equitable. As I shall explain in a minute, I believe that that is the case in this instance. I have had discussions with my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary on those matters and she accounted for the ONS—a non-departmental public body—when she spoke in the recent debate in Westminster Hall.

Trafford's position is more complex than Manchester's, which will gain less relative to other metropolitan authorities, as much because of its higher ability to raise tax locally—known in the jargon as resource equalisation—and declines in pupil numbers, as because of population loss. The increases since the provisional settlement, which I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends will welcome, reflect the use of more up-to-date tax base information than was available for the provisional settlement, and corrections to the area cost adjustment data.

On the area cost adjustment, I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends will recognise that high-wage areas exist outside London and the south-east. It was precisely for that reason that we made a change to the way in which area cost adjustment applies to the rest of the country. Now, all Greater Manchester authorities, including both the authorities that my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East represents, get an area cost adjustment factor, bringing increased resources to those local authorities. I know that that will be welcomed.

On the specific issues raised today, our position is clear. We need to use the best, most up-to-date information available to us on a consistent basis for all authorities. For population, we have to rely on the advice of the ONS—the registrar general's office—a body accountable to the Treasury. The ONS tells us that it is confident that the approach adopted for the 2001 census provides the most accurate estimates of the population both nationally and for each of the 376 local authorities in England and Wales. It is difficult for me to comment in precise detail about some of the methodological criticisms of the estimates. I know, however, that the ONS asserts good reasons why alternative sources raised by Manchester and others differ from the usually resident population estimates that the ONS produces. I know that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary was robust in her defence of these detailed points in the recent debate.

The 2001 census results have generated huge interest in the census methodology and in the numbers themselves. The ONS has been responding to the official representations that have been received from local authorities in England and Wales openly and transparently. This has included exchanges of official correspondence, meetings with the national statisticians and the Financial Secretary, and the provision of additional data when appropriate. I am assured that this communication has been carried out under the code of practice within which the ONS operates.

A number of local authorities have visited the ONS for a more in-depth demonstration of the census process and quality assurance, and to discuss further the issues that they have raised. To date, six local authorities—including Manchester—and a number of representatives from other Government Departments have visited the ONS. A large quantity of information has been made available on the national statistics website to provide census users with as much information as possible about the 2001 census results, and I am told that more information will be made available at the end of February.

The ONS does not currently plan to revise its population estimates. However, if it does revise its figures, we will have to look at that position at the time and consider the situation carefully. If appropriate, we will be prepared to issue an amending report. I am confident that such a report could look at enacting retrospective changes, if that were the judgment that we came to make. As for the future, we intend to continue to use the registrar general's estimates. These are the best available at the time. If revisions are incorporated into future mid-year population estimates in time for the appropriate settlement, we will of course use the revised estimates.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East asked whether we could give additional support, either in the form of neighbourhood renewal funds or in some other way, to help to counteract what he claims is the deficiency in the population estimate. I am afraid that I cannot hold out a massive amount of hope for that prospect. We have to assess the support that we give through the neighbourhood renewal fund equitably across the country.

I am also clear that the floors and ceilings mechanism provides all the damping that is required, in terms of support for authorities that suffer from severe data changes. Authorities that benefit from reasonably good settlements such as those received by Manchester and Trafford do not need any damping this year. Indeed, we were subject to considerable pressure from other authorities to remove the protection that "floor" authorities receive against population losses. It was argued that certain authorities had benefited for too long from past overestimates of population. We used the best information that was available at the time, and we have always included all data changes in the protection afforded by the floor. I do not think that it would be fair to change the rules simply because, with the benefit of hindsight, we found that data were inaccurate. Nevertheless, as I told my hon. Friend earlier, if the ONS informs us that an error has occurred we will of course take that seriously.

I hope that I have dealt with most of the problems raised by my hon. Friend. I know that there is a lot of concern about the issue, and I have not failed to observe the detailed representations that have been made and the attention that has been paid to methodological issues. Much effort has been put into Members' arguments in support of their constituency interests when they have spoken to Ministers. If I cannot change the decision, at least I can pay tribute to the thorough way in which Members have aired the issue and drawn attention to their constituents' needs. While we must take account of our best data source, the ONS, it is clear to me that the ONS will need to engage in an exercise of explanation and dialogue with all who want to raise their particular cases. This is a very important—

The motion having been made after Six o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at eighteen minutes to Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 7 February 2003

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

MR. SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

The House being met, and the Speaker having leave of absence pursuant to paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 3 (Deputy Speaker), SIR MICHAEL LORD, THE SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS, PROCEEDED TO THE TABLE, *and after prayers, took the Chair as Deputy Speaker.*

Orders of the Day

Sunday Trading (Scotland) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.34 am

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is simple with one substantive purpose: to extend to shop workers in Scotland the rights that those in England, Wales and Northern Ireland already enjoy. I thank those who have come to support the measure, especially colleagues from England, Wales and Northern Ireland who are here to try to give my constituents some basic rights that theirs already enjoy. Colleagues who have been involved in the campaign far longer than me will wish to speak, and I shall therefore try to keep my opening remarks as brief as possible, while outlining the Bill's key principles.

It is against the law for employers to force shop workers to work on Sunday in England, Wales and Northern Ireland but not in Scotland, where no such legal protection exists. The Bill will give shop workers in Scotland the rights that they deserve. However, it is important to stress what the Bill does not do. It does not accord workers in Scotland preferential or additional rights. It does not extend rights to those who work on Sundays in other sectors. That would be beyond the scope of a private Member's Bill. It does not trespass on the Scottish Parliament's rights to determine the hours of Sunday trading in Scotland.

The law in Scotland does not differ from that in the rest of the United Kingdom because of devolution. The House of Commons decided that employment law would continue to be determined here on a UK-wide basis. That makes the discrepancy in the law all the more anomalous and unacceptable.

The reason for the discrepancy originates in the gradual, some might say tortuous, evolution of the laws on Sunday trading. It would take the entire time allotted for debate to do justice to the history of Sunday trading in this country, even if we started only from the days of Stanley Baldwin. I shall therefore not outline its history. Neither shall I try to make the case that Sunday is a special day that should be treated specially. The House has enshrined that assertion in law. The law also provides that shop workers occupy a distinct place in Sunday working. It is for those who dispute that to explain why the law is wrong. Those who oppose the measure must either oppose the law in the rest of the UK or explain why Sunday is special in England, Wales and Northern Ireland but not in Scotland.

Although I said that I would not retell the epic account of Sunday trading, it is necessary to sketch a thumbprint account to locate this morning's debate. The Sunday Trading Act 1994 liberalised Sunday trading in England and Wales. It did not apply in Scotland because there was no statutory ban on Sunday trading north of the border. The controversial nature of the reform led the Government to allow the Commons a free vote on a series of options. Cabinet Ministers had the freedom to support or reject different options. It has been said that those who do not learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat its mistakes.

The debates on the 1994 Act were deeply felt and prolonged. I do not wish to encroach on the impartiality of the Chair, but you feature prominently in them, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Party allegiances did not matter. Some hon. Members wanted no liberalisation and some supported partial regulation, while others wanted complete deregulation.

However, one thing united every speaker. Irrespective of their views on how liberal the law should be on Sunday trading, all speakers made it clear that any move to deregulate Sunday trading hours must be accompanied by new rights for Sunday shop workers. Not one speaker suggested that no additional protection was required to allow shop workers the choice not to work on Sunday. Although the Government granted a free vote on Sunday trading and the options on the extent of its deregulation, there was no choice about whether to give workers additional rights. The then Government whipped that vote, such was their determination to ensure that Sunday shop workers received additional rights.

The then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), on Second Reading of the Sunday Trading Bill in 1993, said:

> "There is a distinction between the issue of which shops can open on Sundays, which cuts across party lines, and employee rights. There will be a free vote on the choice between the options, but the Government have a clear employment policy and we shall defend that policy vigorously . . . The rights will apply whichever of the options for reform is chosen by Parliament.
>
> When the Act comes into force, existing shopworkers will have the right not to be dismissed or suffer detriment through refusing to work on Sunday, and can surrender those rights only by agreeing in writing to work on Sunday."—[*Official Report*, 29 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 818–19.]

Seldom have I agreed more with the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Indeed, so commendably and forcefully adamant were the Government on this point that I went on to read the response of the then Labour Opposition with some trepidation. They were, however, equally unwavering that safeguards for shop workers be built into the law. I am delighted to report to the House that I support every single word that the then Opposition

[David Cairns]

spokesperson said in that debate. The fact that it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) is utterly irrelevant to my total support for his wise position. The shadow Home Secretary—as the Prime Minister then was—said:

"we should fully protect the rights of those who work on Sundays in order that we may shop then. For me and for many of my colleagues, employee protection must go hand in hand with the freedom to shop. The two issues are not distinct". —[*Official Report*, 29 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 822.]

If employee protection must go hand in hand with the freedom to shop in England and Wales, it must also go hand in hand with the freedom to shop in Scotland.

But just as the Sunday Trading Act did not apply in Scotland, neither did the additional rights. It could be argued that, as Sunday trading had never been illegal north of the border, there was no need for extra legal protection. Indeed, this was a commonly held view among many who spoke in the debates, but the argument was flawed on two counts. First, it overstated the level of Sunday trading that then took place in Scotland. Secondly, and crucially, it ignored the effect that liberalising the market in England would have in Scotland.

Some particularly prescient hon. Members quickly realised the implications of such a move. It will come as no surprise to the House that the first to notice the danger was my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), who raised the matter with the then Home Secretary on Second Reading, when he said:

"If the House agrees to total deregulation, that will mean that we will get universal opening in Scotland, which we do not have at the moment, contrary to what was said earlier . . . There are multiples that do not open in Scotland because they do not open south of the border.

Surely the protection in the Bill, . . . the right to refuse to work on Sundays, should apply also to Scotland. Will it be possible to amend the Bill in Committee to enable that section to apply to Scotland?"—[*Official Report*, 29 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 821.]

Sadly, the answer was no, but had we listened to my right hon. Friend then, we would not be debating this issue now. More importantly, had those rights been applied to Scotland, people who have since lost their jobs would not have done so.

That brings me to what the excellent House of Commons Library briefing on my Bill refers to as the "Argos saga". I do not propose to dwell on this matter, for two reasons. First, others who were far more involved than I was are better placed to recount the episode. I am especially pleased to see in their places my hon. Friends the Members for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) and for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), who, more than any others, have brought this issue to light and shone a torch on the need for reform.

Far more importantly, I entirely refute the suggestion that this law is being introduced to punish a particular company. It is not. I believe that Argos has acted poorly, to say the least, but the case has served simply to highlight starkly the inadequacy of the current law. Now that this anomaly has been so publicly exposed, it would be wrong—a dereliction of duty on our part as lawmakers—to cross our fingers and hope that no one else loses their job for refusing to work on a Sunday. It is the lack of legal protection for shop workers in Scotland that motivates me, not a desire to punish one particular company.

I turn now to the specific measures in the Bill. When we were drawing up the Bill, I told the parliamentary draftsman that all I wanted to do was amend the relevant section of the relevant Act, effectively adding the words "and Scotland" where applicable—nothing more and nothing less. That is essentially all that the Bill seeks to do. The protection first contained in the Sunday Trading Act is now found in the consolidated Employment Rights Act 1996, and it is that Act that I am seeking to amend.

Clause 1 deletes the words "in England and Wales" where appropriate, and arranges for the current law to be extended to Scotland. Eagle-eyed Members will spot that subsection (3) highlights the difference between English and Scottish law over the legal term for alcohol. In England, it is referred to as "intoxicating liquor", whereas in Scotland it is referred to as "alcoholic liquor". Even the magnificent efforts of the House of Commons Library have been unable to establish the origins of this distinction. I am considering running a competition for the most ingenious suggestion. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland has already suggested that, although the drink may be alcoholic, Scots are never intoxicated. Answers on a postcard, please.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It seems self-evident that this relates to the effect of alcohol. Clearly, the Scots are much more capable of holding their drink.

David Cairns: I think that that is the essence of what my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary was saying, but I am happy with the hon. Gentlemen's suggestion.

The other clauses deal with commencement and an allowance for any provisional or transitional arrangements necessary. That is basically it. Should this Bill succeed, those who currently work in shops on Sunday will have the right to inform their superiors that they no longer wish to do so. This law has worked well in England and Wales for more than eight years. There is not a shred of evidence that it has affected profits or productivity. No one, to my knowledge, has even suggested that the law, as it applies in England and Wales, should be repealed. If businesses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can make these provisions work, Scottish businesses will certainly not struggle to do so. Good companies have nothing to fear; they would not dream of forcing their employees to work on Sundays against their wishes.

The Bill will have an impact on businesses, however, so I welcome the Government initiative to launch a wide-ranging consultation. The Scotland Office has more resources than I have, so I am happy to allow the consultation to be the major route through which opinion can be expressed, although I remain happy to respond to direct approaches from interested parties. The deadline for the consultation should be before the Bill is debated in Committee, and I will readily consider any amendment that may be necessary as a result of responses to the consultation.

This is a straightforward and, I hope, uncontroversial measure. It extends legislation enacted by the previous Conservative Government, and enjoys support in all parts of the House. At heart, it addresses a basic unfairness. It is simply unjust that shop workers in Greenwich enjoy rights that shop workers in Greenock do not. The time has come to end this unfairness. I commend the Bill to the House.

9.49 am

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I shall be brief, not least because there are other Bills before us. I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on a welcome Bill that commands widespread support among Liberal Democrats, and probably on both sides of the House.

I was one of those who, in the debate on liberalising Sunday trading, voted for the most liberal outcome. I accept, however, that the universal view in the House at that time was that people's right not to work on Sundays should be protected. I also accept that many of us realised that an anomaly would arise in Scotland in due course.

Some of the Argos employees affected were constituents of mine, and the matter was drawn to my attention. I am frankly astonished that Argos managed its affairs so badly: that was bad people management, regardless of the law.

For all practical purposes—this argument applied at the time of the last debate, but I think that it is no longer relevant—there has been no difficulty in finding people who are willing to work on Sundays. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, some prefer to do so. The ability of any business to manage more liberal trading hours in ways that still respect the rights of its employees not to work on Sundays if they do not wish to is transparent. In those circumstances, it is surely right to introduce a Bill that will harmonise the laws.

As the hon. Gentleman says, this is a reserved matter for the United Kingdom. It cannot be right for England and Scotland to have different rules for the protection of workers. The Bill is well timed and has been well presented. I hope that it has the full support of the House.

9.51 am

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow on his success in the ballot, and on his choice of subject. The Bill, as he said so eloquently, addresses a serious anomaly.

I have an interest apart from my general interest in employment rights. Three of the 11 Argos workers who were threatened with dismissal for refusing to accept the company's terms were my constituents. I contacted Argos when the issue arose, and was shocked at the response that I received from Mr. Terry Duddy, its chief executive. I was shocked for two reasons. There was a suggestion that consultation had taken place, although all the information received from my constituents and from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers indicated that there had been virtually no consultation. There had been discussions, but they were take-it-or-leave-it discussions.

I was also shocked by what Mr. Duddy's letter said about the rights of staff. He wrote:

"All staff with religious or extremely difficult family situations have been supported and excluded where necessary."

An arbitrary rule was being applied. My hon. Friend contrasted that with the situation in England and Wales, where workers have the right to choose whether to work on Sundays. As the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) pointed out, many workers choose to work on Sundays, but at least they have the right to choose. Managers do not apply tests arbitrarily to their work force.

I met USDAW representatives with local officials and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), who, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown), has pursued the campaign. They too should be congratulated on the way in which they have conducted it. I see the Bill as a noble outcome to that campaign. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland took up the cudgels, but my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow has dealt with the details very appropriately.

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): May I point out for the sake of clarity that our hon. Friend's constituency is Greenock and Inverclyde?

Mr. Doran: When I arrived here in 1987, it was Greenock and Port Glasgow, but I thank my hon. Friend for correcting me.

I will not go into the details already dealt with by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns), but, as I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State took up the cudgels. She gave the Argos chief executive what could be described as a good talking to, as only she can. That produced a very positive result: Argos withdrew. As my hon. Friend said, however, this is not about one company but about fundamental rights for workers.

I want to make two straightforward points. My hon. Friend made the pertinent point that at the time of what became the Sunday Trading Act 1994 there was a consensus in the House about those fundamental rights, but during the pre-legislative consultation they were not included in the Bill. A strong campaign was required, partly by the Opposition but mainly by the shop workers' union. It was led by the union's then assistant general secretary, Sir Bill Connor, now general secretary.

Two things are notable. First, the then Conservative Government recognised the importance of the issue and accepted representations on it. Secondly, the Bill could not possibly have been passed in its original form, because just as many Conservative Members as Opposition Members were concerned about employees being forced to work on Sundays.

My second point is that there is a fundamental reason for the reserving of employment rights to Westminster. They are reserved because they are seen as fundamental. The Government's current employment policies could be summarised as an attempt to create a flexible labour market with minimum standards. Those standards, too, are fundamental: that is why we introduced the Employment Rights Act 1999, the minimum wage

[Mr. Doran]

legislation, the working time regulations and the parental leave provisions. All those were introduced to provide a floor for employment rights.

The Argos case has highlighted the difficulty caused by the difference between the arrangements in Scotland and those in the rest of Great Britain. That difference is unacceptable, because it breaches that principle of a floor of minimum standards, and because it removes the level playing field that should exist in employment rights. We cannot afford to allow different terms and conditions of employment in different areas. As those of us with trade union connections know very well, if managements want to save costs, the first thing they look at is terms and conditions. We cannot allow that to happen on a cross-border basis.

Angus Robertson (Moray): I agree wholeheartedly with what the hon. Gentleman has said so far and I support the Bill, but given that we now have a European single market, does it not make sense to extend minimum rights throughout not just the United Kingdom but the European Union?

Mr. Doran: I do not think that Sunday trading is a problem on the continent. It is certainly not a problem in the way that it has been here, but of course there are certain basic rights that should apply throughout the European Union. A number have already been implemented: one of the Government's first acts was to sign up to the social chapter, since when we have progressively implemented other rights. Mine is a simple point. These are basic rights, and we cannot afford to allow regional variations.

The consensus reached in 1994, which gave important employment protection to shop workers by statute in England and Wales and by agreement in Scotland, was broken by Argos. It is no accident that Argos took that action. It was necessary only to read the financial pages to see that its trading performance was causing concern. The management looked for cost savings, and looked first where—as I said earlier—most managers look: the terms and working conditions of their employees.

If it had not been Argos that broke the consensus, however, another company would have. The lesson to learn is that there are certain fundamental rights that workers should have by law. One is the right for each individual to decide whether or not to work on Sundays. The last Conservative Government gave that right to workers in England and Wales; my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde—with, I am sure, support from this Labour Government—will give it to workers in Scotland.

9.59 am

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): It is a pleasure and a privilege to be able to speak in this important debate. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on introducing this Bill. I can assure him of my support, and that I will enter the Lobby with him to ensure that this Bill is passed today.

Probably the great majority of us in this House would agree that for the sake of the institution of marriage, and of couples, families and children, it should be a priority that such people have one shared day a week when they can be together to do as they please—be it going to church or whatever else they may choose to do. That is especially important in the United Kingdom, which has the highest divorce rate in the European Union, and by far the largest number of dependent children in single-parent households. I mention that because, given that 34 per cent. of lone parents with dependent children usually or sometimes work on a Sunday, many children are left with no parent at all on that day. In fact, the situation is even worse, because many of those parents have to work on Saturdays as well, so thousands of children effectively have parentless weekends. Moreover, given that some of those children may be of school age, very large numbers are in effect not seeing a parent at any time at all during the day. As someone who will continue to argue that family breakdown and its various causes is perhaps one of the most significant problems facing the UK today, I consider this an issue of great concern that needs to be brought to hon. Members' attention.

We have heard that this debate is about giving people choice as to whether they work on Sunday—the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) has mentioned this point—and I agree that they should have that choice. However, he should be aware that according to the evidence in a publication produced jointly last year by the National Centre for Social Research and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, some 70 per cent. of lone parents who work at weekends would prefer not to. That is significant, because it shows that there is little in the way of choice. Indeed, I shall argue that, good as this Bill is, we need to go further. The rights provided to shop and betting office workers are not strong enough; nor do I see a reason why this measure should be confined to just those workers.

Although I welcome the Bill, I would argue that the protection given to shop and betting office workers in England and Wales is in fact more imagined than real. The powers that exist in England and Wales are not working particularly well. Since the introduction of the Sunday Trading Act 1994, there has been only one such case in which a worker has won a claim for unfair dismissal against his employer. Mr. Paul Charnetski had worked for Safeway for some time before 1994, so he was in fact a protected worker, albeit with the statutory opt-out right, which is not particularly relevant in this regard. He did not want to work on Sundays, and Safeway dismissed him in 1999 for refusing to do so. Only in August 2002 did he finally win his industrial tribunal case against Safeway, and I shall quote briefly from his barrister's comments at that time. She said that the evidence given by Safeway suggested that it has

"ridden roughshod over the statutory rights of hundreds if not thousands of their low-paid staff."

The reality is that most shops have brought in five-out-of-seven-day working contracts. In effect, if they want to work in the retail sector, most shop workers have to sign a contract that, in requiring them to work five days out of seven, does not provide that either of the two days off be a Sunday. So their days off could include a Monday, a Tuesday, a Wednesday, a Thursday or a Saturday, but they do not have to include a Sunday. That is the reality for most retail workers in this country.

It is also true that, for those who want to get such a job in the first place, if they show any hesitation during the interview about working on a Sunday, they will

probably not get it. Employers no doubt cite other reasons, but there is a lot of evidence to suggest that, if people show such hesitation, they are less likely to get the job. If they suggest, once in a job, that they would prefer not to work on Sundays, a lot of pressure could be brought to bear, and their chances of promotion could be severely reduced as a result. There is pressure and coercion, and a lot of employees do not necessarily have another job to go to; indeed, a shop worker will probably find exactly the same set of circumstances in the next supermarket or shop with which they try to get a job.

As I have said, why are we considering legislation just in respect of shop and betting office workers? Existing legislation has not worked particularly well, as the evidence shows. Only one case has been brought to an industrial tribunal in the past eight years. Some 9 million of our fellow citizens work on Sundays, and I do not believe that all of them are happy in doing so. Nor is it not just shop and betting office workers who are affected. Do we realise that the delivery people—the drivers of vans and big lorries who bring the goods to shops—are not covered by this legislation?

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman might clarify his argument. As I understand it, according to current legislation shop workers should have the absolute right to refuse to work on a Sunday without fear of dismissal, redundancy or any kind of detriment. The legislation also states that they should have the right to opt out of Sunday working, and should be able to do so again within three months with exactly the same safeguards. Does that principle not operate?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. Section 42 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 does indeed give them that right, and the provisions of the Sunday Trading Act 1994 are incorporated in it. However, although that statutory right is given, the reality is that the onus is entirely on the employee to complain, and to be the brave person who stands up to the employer. The management, and perhaps those of their colleagues who are happy to work on Sundays, apply great pressure on them not to sign up to that right. The fact that only one such case in eight years has successfully been taken to industrial tribunal supports my argument. Some 9 million of our fellow citizens work on Sundays. As I have said, a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the National Centre for Social Research shows that 70 per cent. of lone parents would rather not work at weekends—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Andrew Selous: I will take interventions in moment, but I just want to finish this point. I want the requirement to be placed not on the employee but on the employer. It is not employees who should have to fight for their rights, be brave, battle on their own and perhaps not win a tribunal.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but he has to understand that for many people, a job is job. It is important, and it keeps life going for them, and sometimes people are very reluctant to speak out. I hope to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that I can make a small contribution, and in doing so I hope to give the hon. Gentleman some idea of certain practices that make people afraid of taking on their employer.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. He seems to be reinforcing the arguments that I have just made, so I thank him very much and look forward to his contribution on this very point.

As I have said, why are we concerned only about the rights of shop and betting office workers? If we as a nation believe—as most of our constituents do—that a shared day off a week is important, why is this principle important only for people who work in betting shops and retail outlets?

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are debating this Bill today because of an anomaly in the way the law works? Other workers do have certain protections under the law, but shop and betting office workers do not. That is why we are addressing this particular issue.

Andrew Selous: As I said, I am delighted to support the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde. His Bill is clear and simple; it represents an advance and it has Government support. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's interest in the subject and his rationale for proposing the measure is not limited to one group of his constituents. He has, rightly, introduced the Bill to address a specific anomaly, but I am sure that his concern—like mine—is for all his constituents. The hon. Lady said that other workers have rights in such cases; her intervention came just as I was about to argue that they did not.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): I am extremely interested in the hon. Gentleman's contribution; he makes some excellent points. May I suggest that he become a member of the Standing Committee so that he can also make them at that stage?

Andrew Selous: I shall certainly express an interest in serving on the Committee and I hope that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have taken note of the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

I realise that many hon. Members want to speak, so I shall not detain the House longer than necessary, but I want to draw its attention to the case of Mr. Stephen Copsey, which came to light only last month. Mr. Copsey was a team manager at a quarry, where he had worked for 14 years. He had worked for the company ever since he left school, had an exemplary work record and, until recently, was a highly valued employee. However, in April 2002, the company introduced full seven-day working and refused to make any exception for Mr. Copsey. He was given the choice of either working on Sundays or losing his job—which is exactly what happened. He tried to negotiate, but his employer refused to consider either alternative employment or the introduction of a flexible shift system. On 31 July 2002, Mr. Copsey was dismissed without even the minimum statutory redundancy pay, although I realise that that is a separate matter.

[Andrew Selous]

Mr. Copsey said:

"It was difficult to describe the pressure and hostility that I was shown."

Shop workers, too, are subject to that pressure and hostility, which is why only one case on such matters has been taken to an industrial tribunal in eight years. Most shop workers are probably not brave enough to go through with the process.

Mr. Copsey continued:

"I have been treated despicably after 14 years of service."

The matter has gone to an industrial tribunal and the evidence is currently under consideration. I understand that Mr. Copsey's barrister will use the Human Rights Act 1998 to argue that Mr. Copsey, who is a churchgoer, should have the same rights as Muslims, Hindus and Jews, who enjoy some protection under the Race Relations Act 1976. The barrister will argue that section 2 of the Human Rights Act is relevant in the case and that may ensure that there is some progress.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the circumstances of that individual could have been resolved if he was a trade union member? Trade union protection is extremely important when people are pressurised to work in conditions that they consider unacceptable. As a trade union member he would have been represented in the workplace and at the tribunal, and would have been better able to defend his right not to work on Sundays.

Andrew Selous *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman replies to that intervention, may I remind him that the Bill relates to shop workers and betting workers, not to quarry workers?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to you for that reminder, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I mentioned the case only to show that betting and shop workers are not properly protected either. I shall conclude my remarks shortly.

To respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan), I certainly support responsible trade unionism. Mr. Copsey may be a member of a trade union and, in that case, I am sure that he would be well represented. In fact, he has extremely good representation, and it will be interesting to know the outcome of the case.

Mr. Swayne: I agree entirely with the sentiments that my hon. Friend has expressed. He cited the Rowntree evidence that most single parents who have to work on Sundays would prefer not to do so. My concern is about people who can work only on Sundays, even though they might prefer to work on other days. What evidence is there to suggest that jobs would be available to people who were able to work only at weekends?

Andrew Selous: I am not sure exactly what examples my hon. Friend refers to. My thesis is that people should have free choice in the matter. I have no problem with people choosing to work on Sundays. We should remember that we all rely on people who have to work on Sundays, such as those who run nuclear power stations or work in the emergency and accident departments of our major hospitals. Many people have to work on Sundays so that society can function, and I am simply arguing for free choice in the matter. The reality for shop and betting workers is that they do not have that free choice.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the fact that only one case on this issue has been brought before an industrial tribunal over the past eight years is a testament to the existing legal protection for workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland? If that level of protection is not extended to Scotland, does he agree that it will be even more difficult for Scottish workers to take their cases to an industrial tribunal?

Andrew Selous: As I said earlier, I am delighted to support the measure, and the protections—such as they are—that affect England and Wales should certainly be extended to Scotland.

I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, however; if he were to make contact with the Keep Sunday Special campaign, it would provide him with a mass of evidence to show that many, many shop and retail workers feel that they have been pressurised—indeed, coerced is not too strong a word—to agree to contracts whereby they have to work five days in seven and neither of their days off is a Sunday.

In the perfect labour market of classical economics, employees would have a vast range of job offers. Indeed, when the economy is strong, people may have more choice; but the reality for many people is that there is no choice. As the whole supermarket culture rests on the same attitudes to staff and all supermarkets operate similar contracts, there is in fact no choice. On that point, I conclude my remarks.

10.18 am

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on introducing the Bill. Many of us would have chosen to promote protection for shop workers and betting workers in Scotland, if we had been chosen in the ballot.

I was intrigued by my hon. Friend's definition of the difference between intoxicating liquor and alcoholic liquor. I am sure that he and colleagues from other Scottish constituencies would agree that the vast majority of people in Scotland tend just to call it a bevvy. As a nation we have always been keen to keep things simple.

The Bill has only four clauses but its passage through Parliament will make a tremendous difference to people. My only regret is that we are unable to legislate retrospectively. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, people had been losing their jobs for many years before the recent fiasco that brought the matter to our attention. Despite the reports in the national press, I am not convinced that all those who walked away from an employer who was happy to exploit, not a loophole, but a major gap in the law, which disadvantaged shop workers in Scotland, have been able to return to their jobs.

My hon. Friend has given the history of Sunday trading and what it has meant. Sunday is a special day. Many families chose to spend time together on Sundays. It is traditionally seen as a day of rest by many people. After all, it is the Christian Sabbath and a traditional day of worship. If my wife were here today, she would say that it is a day when she would desire to drag me around stores and especially garden centres. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) says from a sedentary position that I love it, but it is probably one of my pet hates—I put it no stronger than that.

Mr. Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman accept from another father that he is letting the side down? *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but may I say— not only as a father, but as a grandfather—that I like to spend time with my grandchildren, which is the real excuse that I use to avoid garden centres?

As has been said, this issue came to light when the major store, Argos, attempted to enforce changes in its 37 stores across Scotland, and the store in Dumfries was no exception. I have said previously in an Adjournment debate initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) that that was a penny-pinching exercise, as has been hinted at again this morning, and I shall return to that, but I shall explain what happened.

People were quite happy to work on Sundays. The store in Dumfries had never been short of staff who were quite prepared to give of their time to work to keep that store open and to satisfy every shopper in and around Dumfries who wanted to shop in the store. That was never the issue. In fact, one of my constituents was distraught about what was happening because she was the sole breadwinner in the household, and she saw Sunday as a normal working day. She was quite happy to give up other time because an additional payment was involved, which made the difference between, I suspect, surviving and having a good quality of life. Sunday was important to her. Suddenly, because of that major change, she would have to work some Sundays, but there would be no additional payment for doing so.

In fact, things became worse because my constituent's working day was five hours. The store was open 12 o'clock to 4, and people ended up in the ridiculous situation where they were asked to come in for an hour before the store opened to do some kind of work to make up their five hours. They got a day off in the week, but there was no additional payment. That was the downside for those who were prepared to work. Of course other members of staff were quite happy to let their colleagues do their work, and their weekend—Saturday and Sunday—was precious to them, especially the Sunday because they spent that time with their partners.

Only this morning, before I came to the Chamber, I contacted the store and spoke to a colleague who said, "Let's hope that the politicians can do something for us here in Scotland and give shop workers some protection." The House should take on board that important message.

There is another element to the issue. A few days ago, one of my colleagues called together a group of Members of Parliament to consider establishing an all-party group on dignity at work, and the very issue considered then was bullying and harassment. It would be fair to say that many people have witnessed some bullying and harassment. People are told, "You will work. You have no option."

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has made excellent efforts in her discussions with Terry Duddy, the chief executive of Argos. After a real face-to-face discussion with that gentleman, my right hon. Friend was convinced that he was about to change his mind and offer some sort of concession to his employees. Many of us went away from Westminster after that meeting thinking that we had a solution to the problem and that the company had backed off.

About a week later, I discovered that the staff of the shop in my constituency had been visited by one of the regional managers, who walked in and said, "Whatever has happened in the last two or three days makes no difference to you." He said that, if they had a good reason to show that Sunday was special to them on religious grounds, fine, the company would consider it, but, beyond that, there was no real difference. I applaud the valiant efforts made by the Secretary of State for Scotland in trying to change that company's view.

I want to mention the consultation document, which was also alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde. It is interesting that there is a consultation process, and people are taking part. Of course, as well as congratulating my hon. Friend on what he has done today, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers must also be congratulated on everything that it has done.

Many hon. Members have been wary of the so-called voluntary arrangement that has allowed shop workers to opt out of Sunday working in Scotland. We have always felt that the arrangement offered no protection to shop and betting workers and that it would last only as long as employers were prepared to put up with it. We saw that crunch towards the back end of last year with Argos.

I firmly believe that Scottish shop and betting workers should have the same protection as their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is only fair. The proposals in the consultation document published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would provide exactly the same rights, with the exception of the protected shop worker.

When the Sunday Trading Act 1994 was implemented on 26 August 1994, all shop workers, except Sunday-only workers, whose contracts had already started were automatically protected from any requirement to work on Sundays, whereas shop workers who started after the implementation date had to go through the opting-out procedure to become a protected shop worker. The same is true of betting shop workers, but their implementation date was 3 January 1995. That date was chosen because of the lack of operation in Scotland on the first and second day of January in any year. Protected shop and betting workers who wanted to work on Sundays had to opt in by giving written notice to their employers.

[Mr. Brown]

USDAW accepts that the system of automatically protecting shop and betting shop workers is not appropriate to the current situation in Scotland. Before it was introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom, Sunday trading had been illegal, so it was right to give shop workers a clear choice when they attained the new right to work on Sundays. That is not the case in Scotland, where Sunday trading has been legal and widespread for many years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) has commented on regional variations, and I want to say how important it is to have one structure throughout the United Kingdom. He and I sat together during the consideration in Committee of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, and we saw attempts to consider regional variations. I made the point that, coming from the part of Scotland with the lowest pay, I did not want there to be regional variations that might condemn workers in my constituency to being less well paid than elsewhere. That is why I am very much in favour of a firmer and more secure provision, which offers real protection for people. What I witnessed towards the end of last year was the opening of a new out-of-town retail centre. It was a pleasure to see that coming, and it offered new employment opportunities. What I discovered, however, was that some of the new employers coming to the area had approached Argos to discuss how it had set about operating its working arrangements in relation to five out of seven days working. That gives out a clear message: Argos, as a company, started something.

Malcolm Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Does he also consider that the activities of these multiples have a knock-on effect on smaller shops, which are effectively forced to put the same pressure on their workers to survive in a highly competitive environment? That is why we must have legislation that will curb the more aggressive retailers and protect workers in smaller or independent outlets who would otherwise come under the same pressure.

Mr. Brown: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman's excellent point. For my part, I have looked around and learned a lot in the short period I have been here. In particular, I have looked at the retail sector and supermarkets and some of the things that happen in everyday life as a result of pressure from what we call the big boys. Pressure is imposed by reputable companies, or companies that are seen as reputable, which has a knock-on effect. That hits home in the more rural areas. At one time, some of the new stores that were about to open were struggling, and it may be a cause for congratulation of this Government that unemployment in my constituency has fallen significantly. With unemployment being so low in my area, it is difficult to find people to take up the job opportunities that come along. That may be good in one respect, but it creates difficulties in another. It is extremely worrying, however, if employers can see a chink of light that allows them to exploit an opportunity. That is why this is seen as a loophole, although I see it as a major gap. Something must be done to make sure that the working environment and life for people who give of their time to serve the public in shops and stores are made much better.

In conclusion, I once again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde—the constituency used to be Greenock and Port Glasgow. If we think that we have difficulty in determining who represents which constituency, that is nothing compared with what we will see once the Boundary Commission for Scotland finishes its exercise. Obviously, there will be fewer of us, and, as I have said for a long time, not many members of the public will shed tears at the thought of 13 MPs suddenly disappearing. Perhaps that is an argument—and a battle—for another day. I also congratulate other parliamentary colleagues, on both sides of the House, on coming here this morning. It is important that we offer the same protection to shop workers—and betting shop workers—in Scotland as we have done to others who work in that sector elsewhere in the UK.

10.33 am

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on both his good fortune in achieving such a favourable placing for his Bill and his good sense in introducing such a splendid measure. However, I dispute the history that is given as the official version in the documents supporting the Bill.

The Christmas and Sunday trading factsheet issued by the Department of Trade and Industry consumer and competition policy directorate states:

> "Sunday trading has been legal in Scotland for many years and, in consequence, many Scottish shop workers had become accustomed to Sunday working. It was the Government's view that the reform of the law on Sunday trading in England and Wales was not necessary in Scotland. These arrangements seemed to work to the satisfaction of all, without the need for further legislation."

Even the explanatory notes—which do not form part of the Bill, and for which the Department, not the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde, is responsible—state:

> "No modern Scottish statutory provisions specifically relating to Sunday working exist. Sunday opening had been so long permitted in Scotland, that a view seems to have been taken that workers in Scotland had no reasonable expectation of avoiding working on Sundays."

That is absolute nonsense. I well recall my childhood in Scotland, but I do not remember any shops—other than the small corner shop—being open.

Malcolm Bruce: Will not the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the real version of the history is that Sunday trading laws did not exist in Scotland because the power of the Church was sufficient for people to withhold Sunday trading voluntarily?

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Gentleman is quite right, and I shall come to that later. I can recall a time, however, when one could not get a drink in Scotland on a Sunday unless one was a bona fide traveller and one went to a hotel. I hasten to add, however, that at that time I could not legally purchase a drink. Nevertheless, that was the case.

As the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) has pointed out, such were the cultural and religious certainties that Sunday trading did not take place, so there was no need for the law to protect Scottish workers.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am glad that my hon. Friend has touched on what he describes characteristically as cultural and religious certainties. One of the things that has always intrigued me about these debates, which occur from time to time, is the comparison with the United States. As he knows, religious observance is much more prevalent there than in this country, as is church attendance, yet the American people manage to combine a belief in God, church attendance and a relaxed Sunday, on which many of them shop—and work and shop—perfectly satisfactorily.

Mr. Swayne: They are fortunate indeed.

Mr. Forth: Sensible.

Mr. Swayne: I, too, credit them with good sense. The reality is, however—I suspect that this is based on my prejudices rather than my knowledge—that religious leadership in the United States is somewhat more robust than it has been in the United Kingdom. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that it is infinitely preferable that workers' rights should be protected by cultural values and certainties than that we should have to have recourse to the law to make up for deficiencies in that regard.

Mr. Tom Harris: Does not the hon. Gentleman accept that a more or less informal agreement among shop owners in Scotland has only recently broken down? It is only because of the betrayal of Argos that this new legislation has had to be introduced. Previously, a voluntary agreement existed.

Mr. Swayne: I entirely accept that the hon. Gentleman is right. I will deal with that point shortly.

As briefing material for this debate, I sought a statement from the Lord's Day Observance Society. It provided me with a very lengthy statement, from which I will extract just one or two lines:

"Sadly we have witnessed in our nation over the past 50 years a steady decline in the application of this 'one day in seven' principle, which was intended for our good—the Sabbath, was made for man. The result of neglecting this gift is all too obvious in society. We are now reaping what we have sown. Sunday has become like any other day and, increasingly, people find that they are expected to work on Sunday—sometimes, against their will."

The society goes on to catalogue a long list of what it regards as direct consequences of Sunday working. I would go as far as to say that Sunday working may have been a contributory factor in many of those social phenomena, but I do not think that the finger can be pointed to it as the main cause. It is probably a phenomenon in itself rather than the root cause of many of society's evils.

I would like hon. Members to keep in mind the telling phrase in the Lord's Day Observance Society statement about our

"reaping what we have sown".

I shall shortly come to the issue of Argos in that regard.

Mr. Forth: I am intrigued to know whether my hon. Friend thinks that the long-term decline in church attendance in this country is a long-term secular trend that one can trace far back. Does he detect any acceleration in the decrease in church attendance since the Sunday trading provisions were changed in England or Scotland?

Mr. Swayne: There has been a very long-term decline. My right hon. Friend may wish to go back to the days when there were recusancy fines in England to ensure that people attended church, but I suspect that he does not. In church last Sunday, my vicar, who had recently attended a conference on the issue, gave us depressing statistics about the precipitous recent decline in church attendance. I cannot remember the figures—they were stark—but he suggested a parallel with the increase in Sunday trading. The reality is that there are many more things that we can do on Sunday. Even a churchgoer like me often thinks of many things that I would rather be doing when I listen to a sermon. Other opportunities exist.

In a society that is so fractured, I draw attention to one factor that did not exist to anywhere near such an extent 20 years ago. Sunday has come to be regarded as father's day for all those fathers who do not otherwise have access to their children during the week because of the breakdown of marriage. It is unlikely that they will spend that precious day in church with their children when they could go to an open shopping centre and enjoy all the facilities there. That is a powerful factor in the figures.

Anne Picking (East Lothian): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Sunday is special to our constituents for all sorts of reasons? Above all, the Bill should be about employment rights and against discrimination.

Mr. Swayne: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. She is absolutely correct and faultless in her analysis.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) pointed out, the provisions of the Sunday Trading Act 1994 and the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 are now subsumed into the Employment Rights Act 1996. However, the provisions for shop workers and betting shop workers in the 1996 Act do not extend to Scotland. Therefore, the Scots can call on the general provisions against unfair dismissal as their only statutory right, with all the impediments involved thereto. For example, one has to be in work for at least a year before one can call on the provisions against unfair dismissal. The burden of proof with regard to Sunday working is on the employee to show that he has been treated unreasonably.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) pointed out, protection in Scotland has relied exclusively on the existence of a voluntary agreement. I am in favour of voluntary agreements. After all, the voluntary principle protected Scottish workers for many years when there was no need whatever for the law to step in. It is sad when the law has to step in to shore up what society has failed to achieve by voluntary means.

[Mr. Swayne]

The Scotland Office's consultation document of December 2002 on how the voluntary agreement was working said:

"Generally speaking, the voluntary arrangement in respect of shop and betting workers in Scotland has operated well but could be open to manipulation. The Government has had increasing concerns about the capacity of the non-statutory approach to guarantee equality of treatment as between relevant shop workers in Scotland compared to the rest of the country . . . companies in Scotland are basically in the position of being able to require Sunday working and by the same token, workers have no automatic rights to opt out of Sunday working for religious, family or any other reasons, bringing the risk of discrimination against shop workers."

The document concludes:

"There is a clear risk therefore the Scottish workers could be discriminated against in a way that would not be legally possible in the rest of the country."

That is absolutely right, because those workers were discriminated against.

As the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde said, the Bill is not the anti-Argos measure. However, there is general agreement that what happened at Argos focused the debate and crystallised this issue. It is an important issue, so I return to what I said earlier about our

"reaping what we have sown".

When the Argos issue blew up, the bishop and leader of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Most Reverend Bruce Cameron, wrote to Argos. He said:

"Neither I nor the church I represent would want to preserve Sunday for religious purposes alone."

Oh no, certainly not for religious reasons. He is saying, "I might be a bishop, but I certainly would not want to preserve Sunday for religious reasons." How is that for falling at the first fence or selling a pass? It gets worse. The letter adds:

"Many of use welcome the wider opportunities offered to people to spend their weekends in leisure and shopping."

The hon. Member for Gordon blamed it all on the multiples—the big boys. Did it occur to the bishop why Argos had taken this action? As the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde made clear, those multiples that trade in England and Scotland began to trade in Scotland as a consequence of the huge increase in activity in England. However, they did not open in Scotland just to spite Scottish workers. They did it in response to the demands of ordinary Scottish people to trade, buy and sell on Sunday.

Mr. Tom Harris: My memory may be failing me, but it is my experience that shop trading in Scotland was a normal part of life for many years, and long before legislation was introduced in England to allow the multiples to trade in England and Wales. Sunday trading was going on in Scotland long before it was introduced in England.

Mr. Swayne: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he pointed out that the issue was crystallised by Argos and by the big multiple chains opening in shopping centres on Sunday. There was no problem when small shops opened in small towns so that people could get their messages done on Sunday. The problem for workers rather than for the proprietors of small shops results from changes in the way we live. We do our shopping and leisure activities on a Sunday. I am entirely at ease with people's desire to do that, but I resent the fact that the bishop has suggested, "I'm in favour of protecting workers and aren't these multiples awful and wicked?" when in the same breath he says that he supports, wants and enjoys the greater freedoms that result from the liberalisation of the Sunday trading laws. The one leads as a direct consequence to the other.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a theological and doctrinal element to the argument that we ignore at our peril? There is a contradiction between the classic, rather narrow, Scottish Calvinist attitude towards the Sabbath, especially in the far west and far north of Scotland where a rigid approach is taken, and the more modern approach that allows people to combine a proper amount of worship, observance and church attendance with other social and family activities. Does he agree that in some people's minds that is an unresolved dilemma?

Mr. Swayne: That is right, and as my right hon. Friend introduces doctrinal matters to the debate, I say to him:

"Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest . . . whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death."

They did not take prisoners in Exodus, and of course I eschew that attitude. There is a balance to be had between enjoying a leisurely Sunday and enjoying the benefits of Sunday as a special and different day. There are, of course, liberalisations implicit in such an approach, and hon. Members cannot escape the reality that has caused the Bill to be introduced.

If we expect large multiple stores to open on Sunday, someone has to staff them. Someone has to sell the goods and work. It is right that the Bill should bring legal protection to those people. I am 100 per cent. in favour of it. However, I share the concern expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire that, once we introduce a measure of protection, the motivation behind the Bill in Scotland will turn out to be the tip of an iceberg and huge employment pressures will be brought to bear on people to work on Sunday in spite of their statutory rights.

I end with the Commandment itself:

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates".

That is the important point. We cannot expect not to work and to have the day off if we are not prepared to allow that right to thy maidservant and thy manservant. Everything that we expect to be available to us and open to us on Sunday has a consequence for the maidservants and the manservants who have to staff the shops when they, quite properly, would rather be doing something else.

10.53 am

Mr. Calum MacDonald (Western Isles): I welcome the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns). His

presentation of it and the tone that he set will, I hope, result in unanimous support for the proposed change in the law. I also congratulate those organisations that have brought the issue to prominence in the past few months, and in particular the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers on representing its members, and the Lord's Day Observance Society on the way in which it has made its case. I remember a meeting convened in one of the Committee Rooms on behalf of a joint delegation from USDAW and the Lord's Day Observance Society following a campaign that culminated in a ten-minute Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) that highlighted the issue, and I congratulate him on that.

We organised the meeting and a number of colleagues attended. It was highly successful and showed that there was wide support for a change in the law, not just on religious grounds, although they were hugely important for people who held such strong beliefs, but on the grounds of equal rights north and south of the border and of the quality of life for employees and workers, and in particular the protection of family life, which is a theme that has run through the debate. It is possible that we think that the position of shop workers is special because a disproportionate number of women work in shops and they play an important role in family life. That is why securing protection for shop workers is so profoundly important.

I commend the Scotland Office on the way in which it has taken up the issue. Following the lobbying meeting attended by the LDOS and USDAW, it seized on the issue and met Argos management. I congratulate it on the energy and weight that it has put behind the argument for securing the rights of shop workers. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) said that, sadly, there has been some backsliding, not perhaps by Argos as a whole, but in certain stores, which reinforces the argument that the conventions can no longer be relied on and we need to change the law.

I also commend the Scotland Office for its support of the process by undertaking its own consultation. Many of my constituents have responded and have copied their representations to me. I encourage members of the public from every constituency in Scotland to take advantage of the consultation to make their views known.

Jim Sheridan: Does my hon. Friend agree that if there were no Scotland Office, which is what some hon. Members want, such a Bill would not have the same high profile, priority and effort afforded to it?

Mr. MacDonald: My hon. Friend is right. It is a tribute to the influence of the Scotland Office and the Secretary of State that their intervention brought about the change in attitude by senior Argos management.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) mentioned the attitudes of the far north and west of Scotland. Those hon. Members who have visited my constituency over the years will have noticed that in large parts of it on Sundays there are very few shops open and very few trading opportunities. The picture painted by the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) of the Scotland of his childhood prevails in large parts of the Western Isles. Even in the Outer Hebrides conditions are changing: in the past year Sunday flights have been introduced, and that will undoubtedly bring other changes in its wake. It may well be that as the years pass shops will begin to open on Sundays even in the Outer Hebrides. I do not imagine that Sunday opening will ever reach the level that it has in mainland Scotland, but the Bill will provide protection for that eventuality.

I acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) in his excellent contribution, that the proposed change will not be foolproof, just as the system in England and Wales is not foolproof. However, it is an essential step forward to bring Scotland into line with the conditions south of the border. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde for promoting the Bill.

1.2 am

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on getting a good place in the ballot and on his choice of a Bill, which in principle is very sensible. I hasten to assure him that I do not want to resist the Bill, although there are issues that we could usefully consider; they are relevant to this Bill just as they were relevant to the original debate on Sunday trading in 1993–94.

I welcome the Minister to the House. Our paths have crossed before, and this is our first encounter since she had to endure 39 sittings of the Standing Committee on the Proceeds of Crime Bill, in which I spoke at considerable length. I hasten to reassure her that I shall not inflict another of those experiences on her.

Mr. Forth: That is disappointing.

Mr. Wilshire: My right hon. Friend should not tempt me.

I am deeply conscious—in fact I am proud—of being an English MP and an Englishman. I am well aware that there are occasions when people from other parts of the United Kingdom object to Englishmen poking their noses into what those people consider to be their business.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): As one who has pursued a case like the one mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) in my own constituency, may I ask the hon. Gentleman whether he agrees that one of the most inspiring features of the support for the Bill is that USDAW in every part of the United Kingdom, not just Scotland, supports it?

Mr. Wilshire: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, but inviting me to wax eloquent about the activities of a trade union is possibly pushing me a little further than I want to be pushed on a Friday morning. I note

[Mr. Wilshire]

what USDAW says, and I agree with it, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will understand that my enthusiasm may stop at that point.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a classic case of, "Well, they would, wouldn't they?"

Mr. Wilshire: I am in a charitable mood, so although I was tempted to say that, I chose not to. My right hon. Friend has said it for me. One always hears about vested interests, and we shall leave that matter be.

As I said, I am conscious of being an Englishman involving himself in Scottish business. I can only say in my own defence that, day after day, week after week, I notice Scottish MPs getting involved in issues that concern only England, or only Surrey or perhaps even only my constituency. On this occasion, I make no apology for my involvement because I am simply learning some of the tricks of the trade from the right hon. and hon. Members from Scotland.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Will my hon. Friend please note that our Member from Scotland does not vote on English and Welsh legislation?

Mr. Wilshire: I am delighted to have that drawn to my attention. It is a fair point, and I can say only that it would be interesting if his principled and honourable stand were to be copied by others. I would welcome some people keeping their nose out of my business.

Mr. Tom Harris: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that this is not a Scottish Bill but a United Kingdom Bill and every Member of the House, wherever in the United Kingdom they are elected, has the right to take part in the debate.

Mr. Wilshire: That is absolutely right. I am not disagreeing with that; the hon. Gentleman was trying to anticipate where my train of thought is going. This is indeed a House of Commons matter, and I find it almost amusing and certainly ironic that despite the much-vaunted arguments about devolution and the identity of the Scottish nation, every so often Scotland still has to return to the good old mother of Parliaments and acknowledge that, on occasion, we are a unitary state. Scottish Members come here, as necessary, to put things right in what they would argue is their country. This is not an important issue, but I touch on it for a moment to explain why the Bill comes before this House and why those in favour of it argue, "We need this in Scotland as well as in England".

The website of the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde is quite interesting. In an argument that he repeated this morning his website says about the Bill:

"It is quite simply wrong that shop-workers in Greenwich enjoy rights that those in Greenock do not."

[Interruption.] Hon. Members can tell that I am an Englishman when I say "Greenock". I invite them to think about how they would pronounce place names such as Staines, which you would pronounce differently, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sure. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) was quoted on the BBC news on 1 July explaining why the loophole needs to be closed. He said:

"They are discriminating, in particular, against people with family responsibilities or religious objections, but in general against people simply because they live in Scotland."

I find the last part of that comment fascinating. I do not quarrel with it, but I find the argument interesting in the context both of the Bill and of this Parliament. If the argument is that shop workers in England have protection that is not available to those in Scotland, so it is reasonable for shop workers in Scotland to say that they want that protection, I support it, and that is why I support the Bill in principle. However, we must think about the benefits that people in Scotland enjoy that people in England do not. I gather that students in Scotland have a different deal from those in my constituency.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde has advanced an argument for a worthy Bill in which he says that in this unitary state it is entirely right that the shop workers of Scotland have the same rights as those of England. I accept the argument that what is right for England should be right for Scotland, but I sincerely hope that when my colleagues and I argue that we ought to have the same benefits as are enjoyed in another part of the unitary state, he will support our argument and make sure that the Government give us the same deal as they are giving Scotland.

Mr. Savidge: I find the hon. Gentleman's point rather difficult to follow. Surely this is a non-devolved issue, so it is proper for it to be dealt with in this Parliament. If this Parliament thinks that it would be good to apply in England a measure passed in Scotland, it would be proper for that to be discussed in this Parliament.

Mr. Wilshire: I accept that this is not a devolved matter, but that is part of my argument. The other part of the argument is simply that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde have advanced as a justification for the measure the proposal that the shop workers of Scotland should have the same benefits as those of England. That is a separate issue from which Parliament should consider the matter.

I shall try to get the hon. Gentlemen to understand: all I am saying is that if a Scottish Member argues that the justification for the measure is simply that the same rights should apply in Scotland as in England, the same argument applies in reverse—whether or not the matter is devolved. I hope that they accept that if some people in one part of this unitary state have benefits that my constituents do not, I will argue that the benefits that apply in Scotland, which is part of the same country as mine, should apply in my constituency as well.

David Cairns: I do not wish to detain the House, but the Scottish Parliament has powers only because this House devolved certain powers to it and decided to retain others. The Bill falls slap bang in the middle of the powers that the House decided to retain and we would not debate here any issue devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so the hon. Gentleman should not say that we can discuss the matter irrespective of which Parliament is involved. The issue is for this Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) said, we seek not to pass a Scottish Bill, but to amend a UK Bill. That is the crux of the matter.

Mr. Wilshire: I quite understand that and, as I said at the outset, I have no objections to the Bill in principle. It comes here because it has to, and I support it, but that is not the point that I am seeking to get the hon. Gentleman to understand. All I am saying is that what is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander. If the argument is, "This is unfair to Scotland. Please put it right," I am happy to put it right, but I look forward to the hon. Gentlemen supporting me when I use the same argument against him by saying, "What is good enough there ought to apply to my constituency of Spelthorne."

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): One thing that we are proud of in Scotland is that we still have a vibrant comprehensive education system, so I look forward to the hon. Gentleman thinking, "That is such a good idea in Scotland, why shouldn't it be applied in England?" Will he come to the House to advocate that as a way forward for changing the education system in England and Wales?

Mr. Wilshire: I would love to debate the failure of the Government and their education policies, but I suspect that I would not get far before you stopped me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Lady wants the benefit of my views on her Government's failure to get education right, I am happy to give them to her, but in the Tea Room or somewhere else, not here and now.

Mr. Forth: We are paying for that system. If we were to enjoy the same education expenditure per head as Scotland, all our taxes would have to go up dramatically.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest that the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) takes the advice that he gave himself a few moments ago.

Mr. Wilshire: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I sensed a degree of restlessness and was about to do exactly that.

May I move on to the Sunday Trading Act 1994, which gives rise to the Bill? I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Home Office Minister responsible for taking the legislation through this place. If the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde looks closely, he will see that some scars that Sir Peter Lloyd and I acquired remain fairly visible. It was quite an experience.

Mr. Swayne: I hope they still hurt.

Mr. Wilshire: They do, sometimes. I am very aware of the arguments surrounding the principle of Sunday trading.

We must be careful that when we approve the Bill, as I hope we will, we are conscious of the shortcomings that will be introduced to Scotland. The principle of making the provisions apply there is right, but those that are being added to the protections of Scottish workers are not the ones that I would want in an ideal world. I shall give the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde an example.

Earlier this week, we witnessed a series of free votes. If Members ever want to know what headless chickens look like, they have only to watch this place on a free vote night. Most Divisions in the Chamber on the Sunday trading legislation were on free votes. The result was that one or two proposals got majorities, but one or two were defeated—a result that Members, whichever Lobby they voted in, may not have intended. At the end of the process, colleagues, particularly Lord Alton, saw a series of amendments dealing with worries about the legislation defeated one after the other. All of a sudden, we were overtaken by a feeling of sorrow and pity for Lord Alton.

Andrew Selous: I am aware that my hon. Friend is a member of the Opposition Whips Office, but I very much relish the opportunity for a free vote. I am sure that I am not the only Member here who believes that we think hard and seriously about which Lobby to enter on a free vote. I would not equate the term "headless chickens" with that exercise.

Mr. Wilshire: I have no doubt that my hon. Friend and a number of other Members think deeply about that and get it right, but, watching from where I do, I see one or two people whom I shall not name who are not quite so certain in their minds about what to do on such occasions. People may have argued for a free vote for a long time, but the entire argument is undermined when, as a Whip, one is approached outside the Lobby and asked, "What do we do?"

What happened on that occasion is relevant to the present Bill. Towards the end of a series of votes, we took pity on Lord Alton, thinking, "He has lost so much, we will give him something." That was the unspoken thought, however. Everyone went into a Lobby, but we managed to wreck the busiest day for garden centres by making them close on Easter Monday. We did not intend that, so when we got up next morning and read in the newspapers what we had done, we thought, "Blimey. That was not what we thought we were doing."

As long as the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde is aware that importing that English and Welsh provision to Scotland means bringing a problem with it and as long as he is happy to do that, I am happy to support him. If ever I get any complaints from Scotland about not being able to buy plants over Easter, I shall blame him and say, "It wasn't me, guv." If the hon. Gentleman knows what he is doing, he has my support.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): There is a tactical reason for acting in that way. I am a sponsor of the Bill, and I was assured that the rights to be given to workers in Scotland would be exactly the same as those in England. I am sure that my hon. Friend supports that point of view.

Mr. Wilshire: Absolutely right. All I seek to do is ensure that the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde is aware that the Bill is not a perfect panacea and that by importing the benefits that we in England have he is importing one or two problems as well. As long as he takes responsibility for the problems when

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garden centre owners beat him about the head and say, "Look what you have done to us," I am happy to support him.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Anne McGuire): May I reassure the hon. Gentleman? In Scotland, Easter Monday is not a national holiday. It is catered for under the local holiday provision. Easter Monday may be a holiday in Glasgow, but people who live there can still go to garden centres in Edinburgh, Falkirk or Stirling.

Mr. Wilshire: I am interested in that, but will the Minister reflect on whether it would be possible if the Bill became an Act? I genuinely do not know the answer, but we can leave that be. If she wants to write to me, I would be interested to hear from her.

As I understand the situation and as I remember the debates from all those years ago, two arguments were used as to why Scotland could safely be left out. One was that Sunday trading had been so long established there that it was part of Scottish life and should be left alone. Indeed, a number of Members on both sides of the House thought it a useful exercise of a weekend to travel for the purposes of observing Sunday trading in Scotland to discover whether we wanted the situation in England to be like that in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

A number of people had interesting weekends, shall I say, in those cities, and they came back to report that Scotland seemed to be perfectly all right with its shops open. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, and the general view was that the arrangements in place in Scotland appeared to work. The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde has put a good case for saying that they do not any longer, even if they did then. That is another reason for me supporting him in principle.

Another argument that was used at the time is that the English were probably heathen while the Scots still understood the importance of the Sabbath. I did not need much persuading of that because when I was much younger I used to stay with my sister, who lived on the Moray coast. One of the summer activities that I used to enjoy was going down to Lossiemouth harbour at about quarter to midnight on a Sunday night and watching the local people shout "Heathen!" at any boat that dared to slip out of harbour before midnight.

Mr. Swayne: Quite right!

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend says, "Quite right", but I am neutral. I simply observe that when the argument was used that the Scots still respected the Sabbath, I found it quite a telling argument; I remembered that experience, so it seemed quite reasonable to exclude Scotland from the provision. However, it may now be that the fishing boats—if there are any left in Lossiemouth after the Government have sold the fishing industry down the river—go out on a Sunday and there is nobody left to shout "Heathen!" because they are all busy shopping.

I am in favour of voluntary agreements, which are far better than being dictated to by the nanny state. It seems to me that, for a period at least, the voluntary arrangements in Scotland appear to have worked. The issue arose only recently, so since 1994 the position appears to have been all right up to a point, but we then had the Argos episode, which was at best unfortunate—other words could be used to describe it. Like everyone else, I welcome the fact that Argos has backtracked, though perhaps not as much as some people would have liked. Perhaps it has learned a lesson, but it was a bit late in the day. The Government were absolutely right to carry out a consultation exercise as a result of that episode as a problem was clearly developing. There are valid arguments about why shop workers in Scotland do not have the same protection as those in England, so the Government are entirely correct to consult. I note that the deadline for comment is 14 March, which is a month or so away. Knowing how Governments of all political persuasions work, I am sure that we will not get their considered opinion on 15 March, or even 15 April. Although the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde says that when the Bill is considered in Committee he will listen, I am concerned that today's debate may be premature, and that it would have been better to discuss the matter after the deadline and in the light of the Government's comments; perhaps we could then have had a fuller debate on the issues. It may just be that when the Bill reaches Committee, debate will be limited by the time scale. The Government love guillotines; they do not like democracy, so they trample on our ability to debate issues. The Government may still be thinking about their consultation exercise when the Bill has to come out of Committee. What should we do then? There is an argument for saying that we are debating the Bill prematurely.

It is not as though we cannot wait a little longer. It is not as though there is no protection for shop workers in Scotland. There is the Employment Rights Act 1996. I understand the difficulties and I know that it can be a tortuous process for a worker who is sacked for not working on a Sunday to go for a general argument of unfair dismissal. I know the difficulties in getting a tribunal to accept a claim are greater. I realise that this is not an isolated issue and that all sorts of other issues can be brought in, but if we waited a few months until the Government had finished their consultation exercise, it is not as though there would not be at least some protection. It is not as though there is currently no protection for people who are sacked for refusing to work on a Sunday. I wonder whether the Minister or the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde can tell us whether the general protection offered by the Employment Rights Act has failed, or whether it has been successful up to a point. If it has been successful up to a point, there is a better argument for waiting for the results of the Government's consultation exercise.

The Bill raises some issues that need to be explored further. One that concerned me in 1994 continues to concern me now. Suppose that someone applies to work in a shop and the manager explains, "This shop is open seven days a week. We expect people to work five days out of seven and we have a rota." Suppose the applicant replies, "I entirely happy with that. I am very willing to do my share of Sundays" and is given a job on that basis. At any time afterwards, that shop worker can change his mind and give three months' notice that he no longer wants to work on a Sunday. At the time I thought that that was unreasonable and I am still worried about it. In the case of a relatively small operation that was

nevertheless big enough to be caught by the square footage limit, the bishop to whom my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West referred could suddenly arrive on the scene and convert all the workers who could then all give notice that they no longer wished to work on Sundays. That independent retailer would be in a difficult position because all the people who suddenly decided not to work on a Sunday and were protected by law would be those who had originally given an undertaking to work on a Sunday. I thought at the time, and I think now, that someone should give an indication at the point at which they are offered a job: they are entirely protected at that point.

Mr. Savidge: The Bill became law in 1996. Before we take his point too seriously, can the hon. Gentleman tell us how often this extraordinary circumstance has occurred. How many instances of people suddenly being converted and refusing to work on Sundays have actually occurred in England and Wales?

Mr. Wilshire: I lament the fact that the Churches in England do not seem to convert many people these days, but perhaps there will be a religious revival and we will have that problem. We must think not only about the past but about what might happen in future. Along with a number of hon. Members, I would like to see a religious revival, but I suspect that you will not let me get very far with that argument, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There is another general issue on which the hon. Gentleman needs to reflect for a moment or two. Some employers offer more money to staff who undertake to work on Sundays. It is not just extra payment for Sundays. Some employers are prepared to negotiate an arrangement where staff get more money in return for a guarantee that they are prepared to work on Sundays. Suppose that employees enter into such an agreement and take the extra pay for two or three years and then decide they are no longer prepared to work on Sundays. Has the hon. Gentleman thought about whether he wants to encourage that situation? I am concerned that the Bill as it stands would import that potentially difficult scenario into Scotland. It certainly arises here in England.

Another issue that the hon. Gentleman needs to contemplate involves the arrangements for bank holidays and Christmas day. The Bill protects staff against being made to work on Christmas day only if Christmas day falls on a Sunday. In my judgment, that is one of the Bill's shortcomings. I do not think that we should be able to force shop workers to work on Christmas day, but at the moment the legislation is such that the protection will apply only when Christmas day falls on a Sunday. When the Bill reaches Committee, the hon. Gentleman might give some thought as to whether or not it could be amended. I should also say that when he has achieved protection for Christmas day in Scotland, I shall demand that it is applied to England too.

Andrew Selous: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's sentiments about no one being forced to work on Christmas day, whichever day of the week it falls on, but I hope that he will be reassured by the fact that I learned only this morning that this Christmas there was a voluntary agreement between all the major supermarkets that none of them would open on Christmas day and that agreement seemed to work satisfactorily.

Mr. Wilshire: I am delighted to hear that. In view of my strictures against the nanny state, if such a voluntary arrangement works, I am content with it.

Mr. Forth: Presumably that also gives a market opportunity to shops that are owned and run by people of other faiths or no faith to provide a service for people who want to obtain much-needed supplies even on Christmas day.

Mr. Wilshire: That is so.

That brings me to the next issue that the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde should consider carefully. The Bill offers protection in general terms to Christians because it applies to Sundays, and to people of the Jewish faith because there is the provision that if they respect their Sabbath they can work on a Sunday but decline to work on the Sabbath. I applaud that. That is right. I am a publicly confessed Christian, so I am glad that my faith is respected in that way.

Not all that long ago, there were debates in the House about making religious discrimination an offence, and I suspect that that issue will return. An Act that discriminates in favour of Sunday or the Jewish Sabbath but no other holy day in a week would fall foul of religious discrimination were it ever to become an offence. I can imagine how offended I would feel if I were not a Christian or a Jew that people of some faiths receive protection when those of my faith did not.

Andrew Selous: May I take my hon. Friend back to the points that I made about Mr. Copsey, whose barrister is arguing that whereas Muslims, Hindus and Jews are protected under the Race Relations Act, it would appear that Christians are not similarly protected with regard to not wanting to work on Sunday, and so it may be the Human Rights Act that finalises the matter in terms of British law.

Mr. Wilshire: I hope that it is not the Human Rights Act that settles the matter because that Act is responsible for all sorts of things that I do not support and I would rather settle things by having a debate on the issue.

Mr. Forth: Surely my hon. Friend will agree that there is a danger of our confusing race and religion, to which he made a passing reference. I hope that he will resist robustly any effort to entangle us yet further in the miasma that so-called race relations legislation has become—to the extent that it is now reaching out into other unnecessary parts of our lives.

Mr. Wilshire: I agree wholeheartedly, but I sense that there would be some restlessness were I to start debating racial or religious discrimination.

That brings me to the quote from the Most Reverend Bruce Cameron, to which my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) so eloquently drew the House's attention. When we debated the Act that this Bill seeks to extend to Scotland, I well remember a

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large number of ministers of religion lobbying all of us, and I would always pause before responding to consider how curious it is that a minister of the Christian religion, whose contract of employment requires him to work on Sundays above all days, and who has an obligation to work on Sunday, should tell me why it is wrong for people to work on Sunday. That contradiction has always bothered me slightly.

Like my hon. Friend, I was bothered by the view of Rev. Bruce Cameron of the Scottish Episcopal Church, that

"Neither I nor the church I represent would want to preserve Sunday for religious purposes alone."

Why ever not? I do not particularly want to, but why on earth should a bishop of an Episcopal church whose job it is to convert people to Christianity and to respect the Sabbath be prepared to wash his hands and say that that is not what it is all about, that he does not really believe in all that, that it is incidental? That is half the reason why pews are so empty in churches in Scotland and England at the moment.

What about the comment,

"Many of us welcome the wider opportunities offered to people to spend their weekends in leisure and shopping."?

Why only weekends? What is wrong with having time off on a Tuesday or Wednesday if one is no longer arguing the religious case for having Sundays off? Oh dear me. Here is someone supporting protection for people with regard to Sunday working who wants to go shopping on a Sunday. The reverend gentleman cannot have it both ways. If shopping is a wonderful activity, he should not be surprised if employers require people to be there so that when he goes to the shop, it is open. I worry about such arguments.

I have listed the matters that I believe to be relevant, which I sincerely hope the Committee will consider. It is right and sensible to want the same protection in Scotland as in England, but I flag those issues up because the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde should understand that while he is importing the benefits from England he is importing one or two problems as well. As long as when problems come back to haunt him in his surgery he can say that he is not surprised because although he knew about them he did not believe they were sufficient to undermine the Bill's principles, I will have done my job of helping him to consider these things. If he understands the difficulties and is content, he has my support.

11.36 am

David Hamilton (Midlothian): I want to take a moment to consider what we are debating, because we seem to have lost track of that during the past half an hour. We are here today to debate a simple issue—the need to afford the same rights to every worker throughout the United Kingdom irrespective of what part they come from. I shall spend only one or two minutes on that because one or two issues need to be reinforced.

We in Scotland are part of the United Kingdom and every hon. Member present—the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) is not present—wants to maintain that United Kingdom. Irrespective of what some might think, we have different cultures. There are different cultures throughout England, never mind between Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland, and that will continue to be the case. But in saying that, employment rights are a matter for the United Kingdom Parliament and they should be afforded to all.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), in his very good contribution, talked of the rights of the individual and the pressures that many shop workers are under. It is the pressures that one does not see that so often come through. I know many in my constituency who are under pressure for different reasons. That is why they should all join the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and make sure that the protection offered by a trade union is there for them. I would encourage every worker to do that.

Argos has been mentioned on several occasions because, as a major company, it did what some small companies do on a regular basis, but let us look at the other side of the coin. There are many good employers. My area was the first in Scotland in which IKEA opened and it gave workers the opportunity to work the hours that they chose. It was able to take on several hundred people within a short period at hours that were beneficial to the employee. That is extremely important. That was quickly followed by Tesco, which opened a 24-hour shop in Midlothian. It employs 450 people, many of them working hours that suit them. That means that single parents can work during the day while their children are at school, allowing them to earn sufficient money to keep their children in the way that they need to be kept. It allows mothers and grandmothers to care for the children at night and at the weekend.

There are many such examples. It is important to recognise that the major companies set a trend for all the small companies. That is why the Bill is an excellent way forward.

Mr. Forth: For the avoidance of doubt, is the hon. Gentleman saying that, if the matter is dealt with properly and responsibly, it is perfectly possible to get people voluntarily to work what are sometimes loosely called antisocial hours on a Sunday or even in the middle of the night? That is what suits some people in their individual and family circumstances, and it has been demonstrated to be possible if it is dealt with on a voluntary basis by a responsible employer.

David Hamilton: I accept that point. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman makes the very point that I made earlier. There are certain unscrupulous employers, however, and I believe that Argos went too far, as the voluntary code that he mentions was not adopted. That is why I believe very strongly that all employees should seek recognition.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) mentioned tribunals and said how complicated the circumstances could be. I may be the only person in the Chamber who has been to a tribunal. I recognise how important proper legislation is, as the guidance that is given at tribunals is based on trade union rights and other matters set out in legislation. That is why that aspect is very important. Part of the problem for Argos workers in seeking a result at tribunals is that they are

based on existing legislation and not what the legislation should be. That is why there should be a right for all. I was one of those very fortunate people who won their tribunal, but that was possible because the legislation was very clear and because the National Coal Board had breached it as it saw fit. That part of the proposals is extremely important.

Mention has also been made of the Scotland Office and the work that it has done, for which I commend it. As I have pointed out previously, that shows what sort of work the Scotland Office can do in taking an issue and highlighting it on behalf of people in Scotland. I recommend not only that hon. Members take note and report back to the inquiry that is under way—I think that the closing date is 14 March—but that we should get word out to the various organisations, shops and employees and ensure that they make their views known.

We should recognise that where there is low unemployment, as in Midlothian, many companies are fighting for people to come in and conditions are improving. Indeed, in my area, the local authority, which is the biggest local employer, is struggling to try to bring people in to work because of the various competing interests and the flexible working that is allowed by major companies. Let us not attack all companies; we should recognise that there are many good organisations out there and reflect that better image.

11.42 am

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on procuring the Bill, on the excellent publicity that he has obtained for it and on a speech that was witty, lucid and comprehensive.

It was my intention to be brief, and if I understand the pressures that I think I am getting from the Procrustean bed of the usual channels, I think that that is still my intention. Furthermore, I have already spoken on the same subject in an Adjournment debate and in introducing my own ten-minute Bill, others have already covered the topics adequately and I am conscious that there are other Bills on the Order Paper. Indeed, I am especially conscious that that is the case because I am in that rather odd position of having introduced in previous Sessions two Bills that feature on today's Order Paper, as my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) is reintroducing the Health and Safety at Work (Offences) Bill, which I know we may not reach today, but which I hope will reach the statute book. As my hon. Friends the Members for Greenock and Inverclyde and for Scarborough and Whitby can both claim paternity of the Bills, I am not sure what relationship I can claim. Perhaps I should say that it is grandfatherhood, before somebody suggests something slightly less delicate.

That is a good example of what should often happen in politics, as a lot of significant things in politics are achieved through a co-operative effort by a large number of different people. We often end up in politics with people claiming or being given individual credit, but a lot of people are often involved in the greatest achievements. I should like to give credit to a number of the people in that regard. First, I join my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) in paying credit to the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scotland Office for the help that was given both in private and in public. I am grateful to Department of Trade and Industry Ministers for being ready to be persuaded of the importance of the issue with which the Bill deals, and also for the work that was done with Argos and the consultation, of which I am sure we will take full and proper account in Committee.

Mr. Forth: Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that one of the reasons why the Bill has an excellent chance of succeeding is that it is a classic private Member's Bill—it is modest in scope, identifies a real problem and sets out in a succinct and uncontroversial way to solve that problem? That is the basis on which most private Members' Bills tend to succeed.

Mr. Savidge: I am happy not only to agree, but to say that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed that point very succinctly and worthily.

I also give credit to the Bill's various supporters. USDAW has already been mentioned, as has the great support given by various churches and religious organisations. I give particular credit for the fact that some of those organisations, including some of the strictly Sabbatarian ones—I say this with particular regard to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne)—not only argued on religious grounds, but took into account the social concerns of people who did not necessarily share their beliefs. I was disappointed by some of the criticisms made of Archbishop Bruce Cameron, whom I thought wrote an absolutely excellent letter that recognised that while some in his Church would want a purely religious Sunday, others would want an only partly religious one. He also recognised that, in a pluralistic community, others would take a completely different view and have a right for their social concerns to be taken into account. I thought that the letters from Archbishop Cameron and many others were excellent in expressing support. At one stage, I began to wonder whether the hon. Member for New Forest, West was going to try to be Hampshire's answer to the Taliban. When he began to talk about the commandment and the death penalty, I began to worry that he might be reintroducing a situation in which people were getting stoned in a fashion that had nothing to do with alcoholic or intoxicating beverages.

I should like to pay special credit to the Argos workers, especially those who lost their jobs. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central referred to the workers in Aberdeen, whom I obviously know best, but my impression was that they all behaved with great courage and dignity. I found it particularly impressive that, after they had lost their jobs and found employment with other companies, they still wanted to continue campaigning because they believed that there was a principle to be established for other people. If the Bill reaches the statute book, as I hope it will, particular credit should be given to those Argos workers.

The extent to which the Bill has cross-party support was illustrated by the early-day motion on the same subject, which was supported by more than 200 hon. Members. Tremendous support has been given by hon. Members throughout the House. In particular, I want to

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mention my hon. Friends the Members for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) and for Western Isles (Mr. MacDonald) but I shall not mention all the rest of them, as the Procrustean bed is acting.

I rush on, therefore, to say that I do not wish to deal again with the whole Argos saga. The Bill brings to Scotland what the House introduced under a Conservative Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde pointed out. The idea is that it will give proper flexibility to everybody. It gives flexibility by allowing retailers to trade on Sundays and allowing shoppers to decide whether to buy on Sunday, but it also gives flexibility by allowing shop workers to decide whether to work on that day. I think that that is a proper way of proceeding, as it protects the rights of those who have religious beliefs, as well as the rights of couples and families who want to get together and people with caring responsibilities. As family and caring responsibilities fall on women in particular, it gives important protection for women. Indeed, it was noticeable that it was mostly women who suffered in respect of Argos. The Bill also extends to people who are resident in Scotland the same proper protections that are enjoyed in England and Wales.

On 5 November, in my concluding remarks when introducing my own Bill, I said:

> "Today, I hope that we can set down a marker for legislation in the next Session that would, I hope with the support of the whole House, extend to shopworkers in Scotland the protection that is currently enjoyed by those in the rest of the United Kingdom."—[*Official Report*, 5 November 2002; Vol. 392, c. 145.]

I give my very best wishes to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde in his efforts to achieve that objective.

11.49 am

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): It is good that legislation that affects Scotland is being debated in the House. We are, after all, in a unitary state. We look forward to further legislation—for example, legislation on the numbers of Members of the Scottish Parliament and, perhaps, on the implementation of the Norton report. That would ensure that the House was clearly seen to be representing a unitary state.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): Get on with it.

Mrs. Lait: The more barracking I get from Whips, the longer my speech will take.

I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns). I apologise on behalf of those from English backgrounds who pronounce Greenwich and Greenock similarly. We changed the law so that the hon. Member could get here and, with this Bill, he is stamping his name on legislation. Along with many others, I congratulate him on that. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), who called himself the grandfather of this Bill and did not wish any other name to be applied to him. "Donor" may be another appropriate term, but we should not go any further into that. The hon. Members for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran), for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) and for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) have in their constituencies workers who have been affected by the Argos saga. I congratulate the hon. Members on the work that they have done. I do not think that any of us would not support the stand that the Argos workers took; and I think that that reflects the nature of the support for this Bill on both sides of the House.

Mr. Doran: In a long list of congratulations, the hon. Lady conspicuously omitted the shop workers union. She may wish to congratulate the union as well.

Mrs. Lait: USDAW took up the workers' point but it was the strength of the workers that drove their case forward.

Many people have talked about the history of this issue and about why we have a particular problem in Scotland. Sitting here and listening to hon. Members' contributions, I have been reflecting on the age of some of us Scots in the Chamber. Probably only those of us who, like me, were born in the 1940s and brought up in the 1940s and 1950s—[HON. MEMBERS: "Never!"] That is very kind of hon. Members, but I am afraid that it is true. We are the only ones who will have realised why the point that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) made about reaping the whirlwind goes back further than the opening of shops on a Sunday.

Those of us who were born in the 1940s and 1950s in Scotland will remember what I once read described as the "cosmic boredom" of a Sunday afternoon. I was brought up in a small village in west Renfrewshire. It was so small that the only entertainment was a tennis club, and, on a Sunday, the tennis club was closed. There were no cafes, there was no church, there were no cinemas, no trains and no buses. One could do nothing. When one is a teenager, one does not want to spend one's afternoon washing the car or doing the gardening—despite what the hon. Member for Dumfries said about garden centres. Garden centres did not exist in those days.

Perhaps because of such experiences, and perhaps because, as the hon. Member for Gordon pointed out, the dominant culture in Scotland at the time was that the Sabbath was kept holy, there was no legislation. This point may encourage my hon. Friends, but only in the 1970s, through market forces, did the public demand shopping on a Sunday, as an antidote to being able to do absolutely nothing else.

At the time, some of us—dare I say it?—looked towards England. In England during the 1950s and 1960s, museums were open, it was possible to play some sports including tennis, one could go to the cinema and one could actually eat out. Reference has been made to bona fide travellers, and to the drinking houses with one or two bedrooms attached, as ways in which people could get a drink in Scotland on a Sunday. Many of us forget what Sunday was like in Scotland in those days.

Jim Sheridan: As the Member for West Renfrewshire, may I invite the hon. Lady back to enjoy the scenic beauty of West Renfrewshire and the pubs, clubs and shops that are now open on a Sunday?

Mrs. Lait: The hon. Gentleman will soon be receiving a letter from me to say that I will be visiting his

constituency in the very near future. I look forward to going back to the village where I was brought up, Brookfield. I suspect that there will still not be much more than the tennis club. It was a lovely village and I enjoyed a very good upbringing, but there was the cosmic boredom of a Sunday afternoon.

It was because of the dearth of things to do on a Sunday that ordinary people said that they wanted something to do. Shopping was the easiest answer and that is how the problem emerged that the Bill seeks to deal with. There had been no legislation because of the dominant cultural and religious belief that nobody would want to do anything on a Sunday. I have since checked this, but my recollection was that Edinburgh was the first place to allow the opening of a significant number of shops on a Sunday. I can see one or two hon. Members on the Labour Benches nodding, agreeing that my recollection was right. I checked with a former Member of this House, Sir Malcolm Rifkind. He was on the council in Edinburgh between 1970 and 1974, when those shops started to open. His memories were similar to mine. He felt that there was no need to change the law and that shops could just open. The council did not have to change licensing or anything of that nature to allow that to happen.

Looking back, it amazes me that it took England so long to catch up. Often, Scotland gets there first. That has happened in a number of areas, but I am sure that Mr. Deputy Speaker would pull me up if I went into them. However, I would not say that I would want the current state of the health service in Scotland to be emulated down here.

It was eight or nine years ago that England deregulated. Other hon. Members have referred to the difficulties in achieving that deregulation. In the 1980s, we had private Members' Bills and a Government Bill. I am sure that hon. Members here, and yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will remember that that Government Bill was defeated in this Chamber. Our then Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, was not a happy lady.

Shops were flouting the law because of the demand to shop. I remember that local authorities gave up the unequal battle of trying to police the shops, because people wished to shop. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has referred to the arguments made by the Keep Sunday Special organisation. The organisation was very effective in arguing against a very free opening. In due course, it was agreed that there was a need to ensure that people could act according to their beliefs and refuse to work on a Sunday if they did not want to.

I was interested in what the hon. Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) said about enlightened employers. He praised IKEA and Tesco for their flexible employment policies. I was slightly sad that he did not mention B&Q, which was one of the leaders in the campaign to open shops in England.

David Hamilton: B&Q does not have a store in Midlothian.

Mrs. Lait: It may not be in Midlothian but it is in many other parts of the country. It is in the lead in retailing in terms of employing people who are over the age of retirement. We do not call such people "retired"—and very valuable they are too.

We had to ensure that, if they so wished, people had the right not to work on Sundays. Eventually, we brought in the Sunday Trading Bill, which became the Sunday Trading Act 1994. The Act gave protection to workers. We have already gone through the arguments as to why Scotland was missed out, and I commend the hon. Members who made those points. I supported the widest possible access to shopping but I also voted for the restriction to protect workers.

I am sure that all hon. Members receive much constituency mail; we certainly all hold surgeries, and Sunday trading does not appear on the radar. Despite the anxieties of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire, people are broadly happy. He made the valid point that only one case went to an industrial tribunal. The Argos case was settled out of court.

It would be interesting to know the number of cases that have been settled out of court. That would be another indicator of the issue's importance to constituents. Perhaps Labour Members can present evidence from USDAW about the number of workers' cases that it has taken up. That would be a litmus test of anxiety about the subject.

Most people are happy to shop on a Sunday. I do so because, like most hon. Members, I work on Saturdays. We probably all work on Sundays, too, but our contracts of employment do not cover that. Our constituents would be horrified if they believed that they could not contact us on a Sunday.

Our task is to get the Bill through all its stages. A point was made about the consultation paper. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North first raised the matter in July, but the Scotland Office did nothing. He presented a 10-minute Bill in November. Again, nothing happened until the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde won a place in the ballot. The consultation document from the Scotland Office swiftly followed, and responses must be in by 14 March. I am no longer in the Whips Office, but I used to be a Whip. Given the cross-party support for the Bill, I shall be interested to know the results of the consultation. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) mentioned that.

Mr. Savidge: In case the hon. Lady's words are misunderstood, I emphasise that every time I raised the subject, I received sympathetic responses from the Ministers involved, including the Leader of the House and Department of Trade and Industry Ministers. In private, I received total support from the Scotland Office.

Mrs. Lait: I accept that. However, despite sympathetic responses, no action was taken until the consultation document was published, and that happened when the Bill was introduced. Perhaps "unfortunate" is too strong to describe the timing. However, unless the Minister plans to delay the Bill's passage and spend weeks on it in Committee, it is possible that the consultation will finish after the Bill has

[Mrs. Lait]

left Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne referred to that. Is the Minister planning to pre-empt the consultation?

Mrs. McGuire *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Lait: I therefore hope that when the Minister replies to the debate, she will solve the conundrum of how we can take account of the consultation's results if the Bill has left Committee before its completion.

The hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. MacDonald) said that many of his constituents had responded to the consultation. Perhaps everyone supports the Bill. In that case, there is no problem. The websites of the CBI in Scotland, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry did not refer to the measure. One therefore assumes that they are content with it. However, it would be difficult to amend the Bill in the case of substantive objections unless the Minister expects the House of Lords to make her amendments for her. If the Minister could give us some answers as to why the consultation is so out of kilter with the progress of the Bill, it would be very useful.

I will finish—[*Interruption.*] If I get any more barracking, I shall continue at great length, so I would suggest that there be no more barracking from a sedentary position by any hon. Members, let alone those on the Government Front Bench. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what she plans to do about the consultation. This is a small but important Bill. No one has so far mentioned whether Members of the Scottish Parliament support it, but I am pleased to place on record that the Conservative MSPs do so.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde on introducing the Bill, which will almost certainly be on the statute book by the end of the year. He announced a competition to find out where the term "intoxicating liquor" had come from. I would like to put it on a postcard that it came from the time of either Cromwell or Victoria, because those were the two periods in history when alcohol was a naughty word in England. The Bill brings Scotland into line with England. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing it, but I have just one caveat. Bearing in mind the horrendous experience of the legislation that set up the Child Support Agency, which was supported by all the parties but from which great difficulties ensued, I hope that no difficulties flow from this Bill.

12.06 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Anne McGuire): I feel that we have been round the houses this morning. I had not realised how much I had not missed the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) until he spoke for 34 minutes today. I wonder whether, when he was a child in Lossiemouth, anyone ever asked him if he would just haud his wheesht for a while. I will translate that later for those who do not know the expression.

I am also aware that there seems to be some misunderstanding about what happened in Scotland in relation to Sunday trading. I suspect that most of us here remember the wee shops, as we would call them, being open on a Sunday. I expect that my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Rosemary McKenna) would have had an ice cream in Jaconnelli's café on the Maryhill road on a Sunday, and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would probably have wandered down University avenue and managed to buy half a dozen rolls on a Sunday morning and have a wee coffee—I am not sure whether they had invented coffee when he was at Glasgow university—in the university café. Certainly, Crolla's would have been open, on Parliamentary road. I remember our shops in Easterhouse—I should say that we did not have any tennis courts in Easterhouse—

Mrs. Lait: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. McGuire: No. Let me get into my flow, please.

I remember going round on a Sunday to collect some messages from my mother. On one occasion, I had to get some bleach. While we did not have tennis courts, we always managed to buy bleach for the toilets on a Sunday. I remember spilling the bleach on my new Sunday shoes, and I found out that my mother believed not only in Sunday trading but in corporal punishment, as she gave me what we called a clatter across the lug.

We have had a grand tour here today, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) on being so successful in the ballot. The Scots have been very successful in the ballots for private Member's Bills this year, because in the top 10, we also have my hon. Friends the Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) and for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan). That is an indication that Scottish Labour Members see this as a United Kingdom Parliament and are willing to participate in its affairs.

In view of the comments from the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) about how much she welcomes the fact that we are a United Kingdom Parliament, perhaps she will encourage the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan) to start voting as a United Kingdom Member, and to vote now and again on Scottish issues, as we are doing today. He, like the hon. Lady, makes such a virtue of the fact that he did not vote on some legislation that it would have been nice to see him today—especially in the light of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown), who said there had been difficulties in his area, part of which he shares with the hon. Gentleman.

Mrs. Lait: I do not want to embarrass the Minister, but my hon. Friend the Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan) is not present because of the arrival of a rather high-profile family in his constituency.

Mrs. McGuire: I accept that, but I would mention that the hon. Lady raised the issue of who votes where and then decided to complicate matters by mentioning that ours was a United Kingdom Parliament. Let us leave that aside, however.

I especially congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde on introducing a Bill that is short but that will bring considerable benefit to

workers in Scotland. I also congratulate those doughty hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) and for Dumfries, and all those who gave sterling support to the Argos workers last year. In fact, I think that we should thank Argos for highlighting a gap in the law. I understand that "lacuna" is the parliamentary term. I am pleased that the Bill appears to have been given a fair wind by Members on both sides of the House.

As hon. Members have said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has taken a direct interest in the position of shop workers and betting shop workers in Scotland, and the risk of discrimination against them in relation to Sunday working. The background to the legal position has been well rehearsed by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde and by others and I shall not repeat what they said, but I want to reinforce what has been said about the then Government's position in respect of the 1994 Act.

As my hon. Friend said, it is interesting that, although there was a free vote on the deregulation of Sunday trading, it did not apply to the extra legal protection for workers. I am therefore delighted to echo the tribute that my hon. Friend paid to my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) for his prophetic words at the time. He clearly perceived the likely effects of the lacuna in a law that did not extend legal protection to workers in Scotland. Admittedly, the voluntary agreement has worked for a number of years, but the then Conservative Government had an opportunity to extend the legal rights to Scotland and decided not to take it.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's involvement with the issue arose from representations on behalf of a number of former Argos employees in Scotland who had lost their jobs for refusing to work on Sundays. She met the Argos chief executive, Terry Duddy, and senior management to discuss the issues. I wish that I had been a fly on the wall, and I am sure many other hon. Members feel the same.

It was clear that the company had decided to take advantage of the different legal situation in Scotland to require its employees to face the prospect of regular or occasional Sunday working even when individuals had objected. Argos stores in the north-east of Scotland were the focus of particular publicity, and I acknowledge the contribution of hon. Members who represent that part of the world. I will not comment on the right of Argos management to seek to deploy workers in whatever way suited its business needs, because, as I said earlier, its actions highlighted the gap in existing legislation. I certainly do not wish to criticise the company for taking account of commercial considerations, and choosing to depart from a voluntary agreement which—as many Labour and, to be fair, Opposition Members have recognised—paid dividends to workers.

Mr. Russell Brown: My hon. Friend mentions the commercial considerations, and under normal circumstances such considerations might have been appropriate. However, the commercial considerations of Argos at that time were no different from those that other businesses had to take into account.

Mrs. McGuire: I accept my hon. Friend's point, but the reality is that Argos identified a gap in the law. It took a decision for its own best reasons, and although I do not accept them, it was Argos's decision and it had the right to take it. In that sense, we need to be at least halfway generous towards Argos.

I should say that I have no axe to grind so far as Argos is concerned. I have a couple of sofas from Argos that are really quite comfortable, and other Members probably do as well; then again, perhaps not. I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. MacDonald) that, in addition to being able to book online with it, Argos delivers to the Western Isles via the fish lorries. I have had sofas delivered to the Western Isles, for which Argos charges a very modest additional sum. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) wishes to comment on Argos's trading agreements with Orkney and Shetland, I should be delighted. *[Interruption.]* When a Minister offers to give way—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Lady has done sufficient advertising for the time being.

Mrs. McGuire: *[Interruption.]* I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), who is the Minister with responsibility for aviation, has arrived.

I want to deal with a couple of specific issues that were raised about the consultation, particularly by the hon. Member for Beckenham. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland launched the consultation on 19 December last year. It was designed to seek views on the case for extending the relevant legal provisions in the Employment Rights Act 1996 to afford shop and betting office workers in Scotland the same legal rights as those in the rest of the country. She also offered a number of key stakeholders among employers and employee representative organisations a chance to meet Ministers in the Scotland Office to discuss the proposals. As the hon. Member for Beckenham rightly said, the consultation exercise invites responses by 14 March, and we have already had a number of requests for meetings with groups and organisations to discuss the consultation paper.

I want to take this opportunity to reassure the House that we will be able to feed in the results of that consultation before our debates in Committee. As I understand it, the first meeting of the Committee is scheduled for 4 April, and we shall certainly make the results of the consultation available.

Mrs. Lait: I am delighted for those who have sent in responses to the consultation that the date is 4 April, but if I were the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) I would be most upset, because the chances of his Bill's getting through are very limited if the Lords take a dislike to it.

Mrs. McGuire: That is the current scheduling as I understand it, but as a former Whip the hon. Lady will recognise that sometimes such dates are moveable feasts. To reassure her, what I am trying to explain to the House is that we are confident that the results will be in the hands of Members before the Bill goes through its various processes in this House.

I welcome this opportunity to inform the House that I am arranging to have published today a regulatory impact assessment, setting out the estimated costs and

[Mrs. McGuire]

benefits of a measure to change the law in Scotland on Sunday working. As is often the case, we have had to make certain assumptions and calculations about the precise impact on financial and human resources, and it is in some ways difficult to predict just exactly how many workers may choose, at the end of the day, to exercise their right to opt out of Sunday working. Where Sunday working cannot be covered by other employees, however, it will be largely a matter of transfer costs for employers as they will not be obliged in law to find a weekday alternative for anyone who decides to opt out of Sunday working.

I am arranging for a copy of the RIA to be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses today. Copies will also be issued to everyone who received the direct consultation paper in December. A copy will also be placed on the Scotland Office website.

I am delighted for various reasons—some of which I have briefly highlighted—that the Government fully support the principles embodied in the Bill. As well as thanking individual Members, especially on the Labour Benches, for their vigour, energy and dedication in sponsoring the measure, I also congratulate Members who promoted the consultation exercise in communities in Scotland. As a result, many organisations contributed views and comments both to Members and to the Scotland Office. The consultation has provided a good model to show how MPs can discuss with their local communities matters of direct and specific interest to them.

We shall work closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde to ensure that responses to the Government's consultation exercise on Sunday working are carefully considered. In the course of the remaining stages of the Bill's progress, we undertake to table amendments where we consider that they will improve the arrangements set out in the measure.

I am sure that other hon. Members will join me in thanking my hon. Friend for giving priority to this important measure from his advantageous position in the ballot. In a modest but important way, his measure would change for the better the working lives of many employees in Scotland who want to opt out of Sunday working without the risk of losing their jobs. The Government and the trade union movement, especially USDAW, have accepted that basic tenet in relation to workers in the retail industry. The Bill will have a place in the raft of measures being pursued by the Government to help to improve the work-life balance more generally, and I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland wish it a fair wind.

12.22 pm

David Cairns: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall be brief. I understand that on these occasions it is the custom for Members in my position not to respond in detail to every point that has been made but to restrict themselves to a few general remarks.

I reiterate my earlier comments in thanking the hon. Members who have come to the House today to support the measure, especially those whose constituencies are outwith—a fine Scottish word—Scotland. I am extremely grateful for their support. Mention has been made of the excellent campaigning work undertaken by the shop workers union USDAW. I am more than happy to join in those tributes. The union has been a credit to its members and has fought the campaign all the way. I am grateful for its support, too.

Like other speakers, I pay tribute to the tenacity and courage of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. She is a doughty champion of the rights of Scottish workers and it is no coincidence that even today she is in her constituency fighting to protect 1,000 jobs that are under threat. We all wish her every success in that difficult fight.

Some hon. Members, especially those on the Opposition Benches, have urged me to go further and make the Bill much wider. The other day, someone said that in life one either ends up as a good example or a horrible warning. It is my desire to be a good example to future winners of the ballot for private Members' Bills by introducing a Bill that is narrow and focused and that addresses a particular, pressing injustice. That is what the Bill does and, once again, I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Aviation (Offences) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

12.24 pm

Mr. Frank Roy (Motherwell and Wishaw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I thank hon. Members for being present today on what is obviously a very busy constituency Friday for all of us.

Antisocial behaviour by passengers on aircraft, commonly known as air rage, has become an increasingly common problem for people who fly and in the media in the past few years. Incidents have been reported in the media and the travelling public—our constituents—are now well aware of the possible danger that air rage incidents can cause while flying.

For many people, flying is already a stressful enough experience without having to worry about the behaviour of someone sitting in the next seat. We all know people who are terrified when they go on planes—they are terrified on take-off, when they are up in the air and, of course, when they land—but being confronted by a drunken and disruptive passenger sitting beside us is terrifying, too. It is terrifying to meet someone like that in the street as we go about our normal business or in pubs and clubs, or even family restaurants and fast-food stores on street corners.

Many of us naturally tend to step away from disruptive behaviour to find a safety zone because we are frightened for ourselves, our families and the people with us. We do not want confrontation—there is also an element of embarrassment about taking on such hoodlums—but when we are in a steel tube, flying at 500 mph, 30,000 ft in the air, it is a totally different problem. Where do we go on an aircraft? The disruptive behaviour is right next to us; we are aware how far off the ground we are and how fast we are travelling, but we have nowhere to go. Unfortunately, air rage has become more prominent in the past few years. Incidents of air rage can, if they get out of hand, have serious consequences for life, whether on a small aircraft or a 747.

Figures show that there has been a 400 per cent. increase in air rage incidents worldwide since 1995. More than 10 per cent. of those incidents have led to violent confrontations. In the United Kingdom, a total of 1,055 incidents were reported in the year up to March 2002. The Civil Aviation Authority categorised 50 per cent. of them as significant and a further 5 per cent. as serious. I repeat that 55 per cent. are significant or serious.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): How many of the significant events actually involved smoking in the loo?

Mr. Roy: Unfortunately, I do not have those figures, but I know that the CAA would be happy to get them for the hon. Gentleman. However, he is right to mention smoking because it starts a series of events on aircraft, and I will say more about that later. About 45 per cent. of the air rage incidents were categorised as alcohol-related.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Does the hon. Gentleman feel that Sir Richard Branson is setting a bad example by suggesting that Courtney Love, who has behaved disruptively and abusively on a plane, is welcome at any time to fly on his aircraft? Is that really the message that should be given?

Mr. Roy: No, it certainly is not the right message. I do not care whether people are famous or infamous—they should behave, and if they do not behave, as a fellow passenger, I would not like to see them back on an aircraft that I was on.

I had not realised the trouble that has often been caused and what has actually happened in air rage incidents. Worryingly, there are many times when an aircraft must divert to another airport while on its flight, or discontinue take-off and taxiing procedures and return to its stand at the airport. We also know of incidents in which passengers had to be physically restrained by handcuffs or straps at the order of the airline captain. Alternatively, a member of the crew or a fellow passenger who came to the aid of the crew had to sit beside that disruptive passenger to calm them down or, depending on their size, to frighten the life out of them to make sure that they do not carry on with their behaviour. I ask all Members: how would they, their families or their constituents' families feel if that happened just two rows away from them? It must be an absolutely horrendous experience.

Fortunately, serious incidents are rare, but we must remember that it is often the hard-working cabin crew who bear the brunt of air rage: those who earn their living by serving passengers and helping them to enjoy their flight as much as possible. When air rage occurs, a cabin crew member, perhaps a young female or a young male, will find themselves up against an unruly passenger.

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): I commend my hon. Friend for this worthwhile Bill. Will he agree that a number of air rage incidents are dependent on what happens prior to getting on the aircraft? Last Friday, when attempting to get home to Scotland from work, we were subjected to the worst kind of congestion caused by 2 in of snow at London Heathrow. People were subjected to disgraceful conditions. It is any wonder that there are problems on aircraft when people are treated like that?

On the specific point about staff, the way staff at Heathrow airport were treated by the general public—and by some first class passengers, who were certainly not first class citizens—and some of the comments to which they were subjected were disgraceful. My hon. Friend is right: they suffered the brunt of the incompetence at Heathrow last Friday.

Mr. Roy: My hon. Friend is quite right. Sometimes, the bad behaviour and nervousness starts before people get on the plane. There is no doubt about that. When I first considered this Bill—for the record, I am teetotal, but I am not against drink—I asked myself whether taking alcohol off flights was the answer to some of the drunken and destructive behaviour. That would not be right either, however, as people enjoy a drink, many find it relaxing, and I have been told by the industry that it defuses the situation for many, as a glass of wine offers an escape valve. It is not the alcohol that causes the problem but the people who drink it and how it affects

[Mr. Roy]

them. There is absolutely no doubt, however, that people's behaviour pattern starts at the airport if they are held up on their way or are badly treated, as they were last Friday.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I strongly support my hon. Friend's Bill and what he is saying. For the great majority of people, a drink on an aeroplane is a pleasure, and they behave well. It is the tiny minority of people for whom alcohol induces aggression about whom we are concerned.

Mr. Roy: Absolutely. Alcohol is a pleasure for many people. As the airline industry has said, it helps people to relax. Very nervous people, for example, might like to drink one or two glasses of whisky or wine to calm them down. That is not the problem. The problem comes when people take it too far. From speaking to the industry over the last couple of weeks, I know that it lays great store by cabin crew assessing the situation quickly and seeing the danger of someone drinking alcohol on a flight. Indeed, earlier this week, I was lucky enough to be shown a training video of a conflict management course produced by Air 2000. I was greatly impressed by the professional training given to cabin crews. The video showed how the staff were able to recognise potential problems and to calm people down, and it also showed the wrong way to calm people down and to remove potential conflict. Air 2000 attaches such great importance to conflict management that, when its staff take the course, it insists on a 90 per cent. pass mark.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Has the thought occurred to the hon. Gentleman that it might be helpful for him to invite the Lord Chancellor and the Leader of the House to a conflict management course?

Mr. Roy: The right hon. Gentleman speaks for himself. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps he could run the course—or he may have even caused the conflict.

In addition to requiring its staff to obtain a 90 per cent. pass mark, Air 2000 asks them to come back once a year for a refresher course. No matter how long someone works in the airline industry, things change and it is possible to become complacent. It is right for the company to carry out reassessments annually. I have also been acquainted with some of the training schedules carried out by British Airways and many other airlines. Over the past couple of months, they have all emphasised to me their ongoing concerns about air rage.

Should an incident occur, both cabin crew and passengers have the right to expect the law to be an effective deterrent. Offenders should be arrested and ultimately prosecuted. The Bill is intended to make enforcement of the law much more effective than it is at present.

The Bill has its origins in the report published in 2000 by the UK airports police commanders group. In recognising the potential of disruptive behaviour to endanger the safety and security of the travelling public, the Association of Chief Police Officers commissioned a group of senior officers from airports throughout the country to investigate the adequacy of police powers to deal with aircraft and airport offences.

The report concluded that the powers of the police and the courts to crack down on air rage offences were inadequate. It highlighted the fact that the police were prevented from taking effective action, because they did not have the necessary powers to search and arrest many of those suspected of committing criminal offences on aircraft and at airports. In addition, the report found that a number of potentially serious offences carried relatively outdated minor penalties.

A number of offences in UK law relate to disruptive passenger behaviour on aircraft. However, quite unbelievably, none of those offences carries a statutory power of arrest. When an offence does not carry such a power, the police may arrest suspects only if they are likely to injure themselves or others, or if their identities cannot be established. In this day and age, the latter is unlikely because passengers carry passports or, on domestic flights, different forms of identification.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): My hon. Friend's comments on the Bill's impact throughout the United Kingdom, including Scotland, are extremely important. Does he share my disappointment and anger that no Member from the Scottish National party, which purports to stand for Scotland, is here to take part in this very important debate?

Mr. Roy: I am very surprised and disappointed. Aviation law affects everyone in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The 5 million people in Scotland will be very disappointed that the Scottish National party has divorced itself, as it normally does, from anything to do with the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Swayne: Disgraceful.

Mr. Roy: Disgraceful indeed.

The lack of powers to detain suspects creates a number of practical problems for the police. It means that they are unable to search, fingerprint or question suspects or take witness statements. For charges to be made, the police must travel, for example, from the airport areas of Luton, Manchester, London or Cardiff to a suspect's address, which may be hundreds of miles away in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales or any region of England. The police have to do the same thing when they take statements from witnesses. Once witnesses get off a plane, they go to all parts of the country, and the police have to follow the complaint up.

An incident that is well known in Scotland took place on 13 December when a football charter flight from Vigo in Spain to Glasgow airport was diverted to Cardiff. The captain issued a mayday call because he and his cabin crew thought that they had lost control of the passenger area.

Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): I have personal experience of air rage. However, during that incident, I have been assured by constituents that

the pilot overreacted. Perhaps part of the problem was the lack of a criminal charge, which the Bill would rectify.

Mr. Roy: I understand my hon. Friend's remarks. Indeed, I have spoken to one or two people who were on the flight and they emphasised that the pilot overreacted. However, eight people have been arrested.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): My hon. Friend will not be surprised to know that I have not talked to anyone who was on that flight. However, in the spirit of friendship, I agree that the pilot did perhaps overreact slightly. It may be that he did not understand the songs.

Mr. Roy: Perhaps my hon. Friend is right. I am surprised that he has an interest in European football.

Eight people have been arrested and a lot of police time has been wasted travelling between the Glasgow area and Cardiff. Frankly, the last thing the police in Cardiff needed was to waste their time on that case.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): My hon. Friend gave facts and figures on the number of air rage incidents. Can he break them down to determine how many have been on UK internal flights and on overseas flights?

Mr. Roy: I do not have the specific figures, but the industry told me that it is a problem throughout all classes of travel, whether it be economy or first class, domestic or international.

On the destructive behaviour in December, many Labour Members know that I am greatly interested in football. I have regularly attended European matches abroad for nearly 30 years, although I usually go only once a year, because my team does not normally do very well. I have spoken to the airline industry and other sports bodies about the growing phenomenon of people being drunk on aircraft. It used to be the case that many people from Scotland who went to football games abroad stayed overnight because it was not possible to return until the next day. Now a club can expect to take 4,000 or 5,000 supporters to a game and return immediately after it. That contributes to the growing problem and we need to address it. No drink was allowed on the flight from Vigo to Cardiff and I am glad that drink is not allowed on most similar flights.

Hon. Members should think about what happens when constituents go to watch their football team on a day trip to Spain or wherever. If, for example, the flight leaves Glasgow airport at 7.30 am, people will have been in the airport since about 6, and they will have got up at 3 or 4 to get there. If the flight is to Spain or central Europe, people will arrive in the centre of the destination town by midday. I like to go to the museums, cafés and other social areas in any town that I am visiting, but many people will spend their whole time drinking in pubs and cafés. They will have been drinking before they got on the plane and they will spend the afternoon drinking.

The football match may not be until 8 o'clock at night. People will drink during the game and then will return to the airport at about midnight. We must remember that they have been out of their bed since 4 am, and many of them will have been drinking all day. The security people at the airport are not concerned about whether people are drunk or whether they enjoyed the game; they simply want them off the bus and on to the plane as quickly as possible. It makes no difference whether people are drunk or sober.

On many occasions during the past few years, I have seen people who are far too drunk to travel being put on a plane. They fall asleep, and they wake up when they arrive back in the United Kingdom. Even worse, in Porto a year and a half ago, I saw someone who was absolutely out of his mind with drink being carried up the steps to the plane and being put into a seat. Some people think that that is funny; they say, "Look at that guy. He's obviously had a great time." But we must ask ourselves what would have happened if there had been an emergency on that flight.

People who are that drunk would be incapable of strapping themselves into their seat, following instructions or vacating the aircraft quickly, so they would be a danger not only to themselves but to everyone else. On a plane carrying 300 people, even if 10 per cent. of the passengers have far too much drink in them—and hon. Members know that that is a conservative estimate—the potential for disaster is great.

I hope that the airline industry takes note of this warning, and I hope that it speaks to football and rugby clubs. It must stress that their members have to be treated the same as every other passenger, and, if they are not to commit an offence, they also have to behave the same as every other passenger. For their own sake, and for everyone else's, they should not be allowed to board the aircraft if they are drunk and incapable.

Sandra Osborne (Ayr): It gives me great pleasure to support my hon. Friend's Bill. Does he agree that many people flying to football matches in Europe are likely to go from Glasgow Prestwick airport because there are so many low-cost flights available? That has opened up access to people who could not previously have afforded to go to such matches. Does he agree that the majority of people who take those flights have every right to do so safely and that they should not be adversely affected by the minority who cause trouble?

Mr. Roy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have been talking about the football charter flights that go from Glasgow international airport, but the same number of people will travel from Prestwick with companies such as easyJet and Ryanair to the airport that is nearest the football game. However, such flights are used not only by boisterous football supporters—I am not saying that they are unruly, but they will certainly have been drinking—but by passengers who are travelling on business or on holiday. Those people may be with their husband or wife or their children. Such flights can be a frightening experience. That is why both chartered airlines and scheduled airlines must take account of this ongoing problem.

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): My hon. Friend is making a persuasive case, but as one who does not have his experience of travelling abroad with his football team, mainly because my team does not have

[Mr. Frank Doran]

the same opportunities, although we are working on that, I am concerned about the heavy responsibility on the airline industry.

From my hon. Friend's remarks, I take it that he feels strongly that the airlines are not meeting that responsibility, although the problem is not new, as we have had it ever since the railways were invented. British Rail was forced to have a railways police, and that became part of the provision for passenger safety. Does he see the need for a similar arrangement to be made on our airlines, with them paying the cost of policing?

Mr. Roy: That is a good idea, and it is worth looking into. If a company charters a plane, it gets two or three part-time stewards to go to the game and steward people all through the day, but they cannot, with any authority, tell people what to do on the flight.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon): I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says, and he makes a valid point about the mix of family and business travellers who perhaps get caught up in the culture of a weekend away for football followers; but what are his feelings about flights that, over the summer months, are increasingly dedicated to sybaritic behaviour as people fly out to clubs in Ibiza or Majorca? They are encouraged to go clubbing all night and return the next morning, and that must have a bearing on what he suggests.

Mr. Roy: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right—that is a problem as well. I mentioned it to the industry and asked whether the Ibiza flights are worse, but it said that they are no worse than family flights to Florida, Tuscany or anywhere else. That surprised me, but the industry also said that the problem certainly exists with bigger groups of perhaps 10. The peer pressure is slightly different and people are noisier, which tends to create problems. It also said that, equally, domestic arguments and domestic disruptive behaviour on flights are a problem. It is embarrassing if a husband and wife start arguing or fighting beside people. They say, "It's nothing to do with me," but at 30,000 ft it has to do with them.

Mr. Swire: I fully take on board what the hon. Gentleman says, but there is a distinction between what I would call mixed flights and those dedicated to sybaritic behaviour. I am not seeking to be Cromwellian—if people want to fly out of Exeter or anywhere else to spend 24 hours clubbing at Manumission, or whatever it is called, in Ibiza and then come home, that is entirely up to them and to be encouraged—but their behaviour has an effect, perhaps a potentially negative one, on the cabin crew, although not necessarily on the other passengers, who would probably largely be in the same state. I am concerned about the security of the cabin crew.

Mr. Roy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I hope that the airline industry reads the debate and takes on board everything that has been said.

The Bill would put into law recommendations made by airport police commanders in respect of in-flight offences. Clause 1 would introduce police powers of arrest to deal with drunk or disruptive passengers on aircraft. In England and Wales, an arrest by a police constable without a warrant can be made only if the alleged offence is classed as arrestable under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. To be arrestable, an offence must carry a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment or more. However, the offences cited carry only a maximum two-year penalty. Therefore, to make them arrestable, it is necessary to include them in a list of specific arrestable offences.

As PACE covers only England and Wales, to make the new offences arrestable in Northern Ireland and Scotland they must be inserted at the end of article 26(2) of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and after section 82(3) of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which covers Scotland.

Clause 2 would amend the Civil Aviation Act 1982 to allow the possibility of introducing a maximum penalty of five years for an offence relating to endangering the safety of an aircraft or a person in an aircraft. That is clearly serious compared with drunkenness or disruptive behaviour, and the current two-year penalty is insufficient for such a serious matter. Increasing the maximum penalty to five years would automatically make this offence arrestable. Although the Bill is short and modest in its scope, the changes that it proposes would undoubtedly make enforcement of the law more effective.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Once the Bill becomes law, the offences will be arrestable, but who will do the arresting on the aircraft? Does the hon. Gentleman envisage that no extra powers will be given to anybody on the aircraft? As very few aircraft carry policemen, these people will have to be restrained somehow by the cabin staff or other passengers and then await arrest at the airport; in which case, does the Bill improve the situation in the air?

Mr. Roy: As the Bill stands, the people doing the arresting would be the police at the destination airport.

Mr. Swayne: I am interested in the arrestable offences set out in schedule 1A to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act. I notice that throughout that schedule references are made to any person being able to carry out the arrest. I would expect that if a passenger is doing something serious enough to be restrained on the aircraft, that would amount to an arrest.

Mr. Roy: Obviously in the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes, there could be a citizen's arrest, or the captain could order an arrest, but under normal circumstances arrests would be carried out by the local police at the destination airport.

The Bill would implement recommendations made by the police and supported by airline trade unions. From the many meetings that I have had, the Bill also has the complete support of those in the airline industry including the Civil Aviation Authority, the UK Flight Safety Committee, the British Air Transport Association, British Airports Authority, the Board of Airline Representatives in the UK, and such airlines as British Airways, Britannia Airways, British European Airways and Virgin.

I hope that hon. Members will agree that this is a sensible and non-controversial proposal. It is designed to protect hard working airline staff and all our constituents, no matter where they live in the United Kingdom. It is a proposal that may one day save people's lives.

12.57 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) has undoubtedly tried valiantly to explain to us why this Bill is desirable and what its effect would be, but so far he has not quite persuaded me. I do not think that he has persuaded my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) either, but we shall return to that.

At one level, as I said briefly about the previous Bill, this is a model private Member's Bill. It is succinct and narrow in its focus and the hon. Gentleman has explained why we need such a measure at this stage. For those reasons, such a Bill would normally be welcome. I am not yet saying that this one is not, but my slight suspicion is that it has that whiff of the Government handout disguised as a private Member's Bill—a practice that I have always deprecated. Because they cannot or will not find time in their own legislative programme to do something that they want to do, the Government wait for the private Member's Bill ballot and find a hapless or willing volunteer to do their work for them. That may not be exactly reprehensible—

Mr. Tom Harris: My hon. Friend is the last person to need my defence, but the right hon. Gentleman should at least acknowledge that his record on campaigning on aircraft safety and other regulations is second to none. This is not a measure that has been forced on him by any Minister. I know personally that he has a long interest in the subject.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw is grateful for the hon. Gentleman's stout defence. I shall not press the point unduly. I am saying simply that when Bills seem to have a provenance such as I am about to describe, one has reasonable grounds for suspicion that they may be Government Bills coming through the private Member's Bill procedure, and I would certainly deprecate that.

Mr. Swayne: I do not know whether this information will assuage or inflame my right hon. Friend's suspicions, but I draw to his attention the remarks of Lord Whitty on 1 September 1999, then a Minister with responsibility for transport, when he said:

"I shall be considering with the Home Secretary increasing the maximum penalty to five years for endangering an aircraft or its passengers. This increase would be subject to parliamentary time being available."

Mr. Forth: I did rather have that in mind when I was coming to my conclusion. We need not get bogged down in this, I am just saying that it is something that I bear in mind when I come to the House on a Friday, as I do whenever private Members' business is on, unlike other hon. Members who seem to have other things to do than legislate, because I am not sure that we should be making the Government's job easier and easing their legislative programme by allowing them to get part of it through the private Member's Bill route. One approaches a Bill such as this with some scepticism.

Mr. Leigh: This is an interesting constitutional point. My right hon. Friend occupies a distinguished place in the House. Is he suggesting that when the next Conservative Government are elected we will see rather fewer handout Bills?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. We are debating the Aviation (Offences) Bill.

Mr. Forth: I certainly hope that we would see far fewer aviation Bills, or indeed Bills of any other kind, that is for sure.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw rightly dwelt at some length on the problems caused by what has loosely become known as air rage. Let us redesignate it gross misbehaviour on an aircraft. I fly frequently myself and I fully understand what he is saying. Not only is it a cause of some fear and discomfort to other passengers and to the cabin crew, as has been mentioned, but ultimately, if it is a sufficiently serious incident, it could endanger the aircraft itself and be a danger to life.

Mr. Swire: Does my right hon. Friend believe that this would be a better Bill if it also addressed the behaviour of the pilot and the cabin crew? We recently had evidence of yet another captain of a commercial airliner being pulled off a plane at the last minute because he was allegedly under the influence of alcohol. If it did that, would it not be a better Bill?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend raises an important point, to which I shall come later when I start to analyse the Bill. However, I am only at the preliminary stages of my preamble to my analysis of the background to the Bill. I shall come to the Bill itself in due course. I have it here in my hand. In clause 1, proposed new paragraph 11A of schedule 1A to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 refers to

"specified behaviour by a person in an aircraft towards or in relation to a member of the crew".

I shall want to discuss later whether that person could also be a member of the crew, in which case my hon. Friend's point might be covered. However, I am getting ahead of myself and I am sure that he would not wish to disrupt the rhythm of my thoughts or my remarks.

Jim Sheridan: The right hon. Gentleman has just said that he is a frequent flyer, and I assume that he means from an English airport. Given his unsustainable and false accusation in the previous debate that somehow England subsidises Scotland, is he aware of the overpricing of flights from Scottish airports compared with those from English airports?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is going wide of the Bill.

Mr. Forth: I am almost sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you have rightly prevented me from

[Mr. Forth]

engaging in that discussion. It may be for another day, but let us park it, as I think they say in modern parlance, and press on.

What puzzles me is not only what happens on the aircraft, but what happens before people board it—a point that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw rightly mentioned—and when they disembark. We need to get it clear in our minds how far we believe that provisions such as those in the Bill will affect those different stages of the journey in relation to misbehaviour, whether brought about by alcohol consumption or anything else. I shall broadly characterise those issues—with my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough sitting beside me, I am slightly nervous to do so—as the jurisdictional elements.

However, before we even get to that matter, what puzzles me is whether the number of incidents is increasing. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said with great conviction that incidents of so-called air rage were increasing, although I do not think that he provided many figures to support that assertion. My figures do not bear that out, and I do not think that the circumstances are necessarily quite so simple. Indeed, I have some figures suggesting that the number of incidents has decreased in the past two or three years, partly because of the measures already taken by the airlines themselves, for which we must give them due praise.

Mr. Roy: The number of incidents did indeed decrease for a while after 11 September, after which they started to increase again.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which is helpful. My figures refer to the 1,055 incidents in the year to 31 March 2002 that I think he mentioned. That represented a decrease on the 1,250 incidents in the previous 12 months. I do not want to fall out with him about that issue, as it is not crucial. There are a lot of incidents, they are a problem, and that is what must be dealt with, so I do not want to get distracted too much by whether the figures are going up or down.

On the seriousness of the incidents, my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) asked whether a significant number were caused by people smoking in lavatories. The figure that I have is 36 per cent., or one in three. That activity may be in breach of the law—for example, United States federal law certainly prohibits smoking on aircraft over the United States—and it may or may not be a hazard, but I would not have thought that it falls into the category with which the Bill is concerned. We must be circumspect about considering all incidents in the same way and threatening to apply similar penalties in respect of each of them.

Mr. Swayne: I wonder whether smoking itself might be an issue. The fact is that people who smoke tend to become tetchy if they are denied the ability to do so for a substantial period. A more liberal smoking regime might solve part of the problem.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Funnily enough, it relates to what the promoter said in the context of alcohol. We can all agree that drinking in moderation can help to settle people's nerves and make them less nervous on aircraft—or anywhere else. The same may apply to those who are addicted to nicotine. The issue arises when they go beyond that and move from being relaxed by a drink or a cigarette to becoming violent. However, I am not aware of many violent smokers, so the issue applies only to drink. That is what we are considering, although I do not think that we should be sidetracked into reopening the issue of whether smoking on aircraft is a good or a bad thing. In the United States, a solution that has been tried is all-smoking flights. That is an interesting thought, but I do not think that the idea ever got off the ground.

Let me return to jurisdiction. My brief tells me that the 1963 Tokyo convention established jurisdiction over offences committed on board aircraft and involved the extradition of offenders. Apparently, the country in which the airline is registered has the authority to apply its own laws to passengers on board. If anything happens on a United Kingdom-registered aircraft when the doors close, UK law is applicable. We have jurisdiction over any aircraft that lands in the UK. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw graphically described the lacuna in that: people who misbehave or drink excessively before they board the aircraft cause the problem after boarding that the Bill is intended to tackle.

Sadly, I cannot understand how the measure will deal with such a problem. If the authorities on the ground do not prevent people from boarding, can the people in charge of the aircraft deny access to it? My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, with his extensive legal knowledge, may be able to help, but I fear that the Bill cannot tackle the problem. Perhaps the Minister can help us.

If those in charge of an aircraft in another country were able to deny access to it, that would solve the problem. For example, if I am in Malaga, have too much to drink and attempt to board an aircraft but the people in charge say, "You cannot come on board in your condition," that would go a long way to resolving the difficulty that the promoter identified. I shall deal with drinking on the aircraft later.

Clause 1(1)(b) relates to

"a provision which prohibits a person from being drunk in an aircraft".

One reading suggests that access to the aircraft could be denied to someone who had drunk excessively, but another suggests not. If the person has not boarded the aircraft, the Bill may not apply. I hope that the Minister can help us with that important point.

Mr. Swire: I broadly agree with my right hon. Friend. Does he agree that if someone on board a domestic airliner in a foreign airport is to be given the power to refuse entry to passengers who are inebriated or pose a threat to others, it should be the captain? He or she should make the ultimate decision.

Mr. Forth: That sounds right, and I am grateful for my hon. Friend's helpful suggestion. It ties in with the matter that my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough raised earlier about the identity of the person who will have the new power of arrest under the

Bill. The promoter implied that only Mr. Plod had that power. Perhaps the captain of an aircraft should be the person to whom the powers in the Bill are granted, or perhaps a citizen's arrest can be effected. However, the Bill does not provide for that. That may pose a difficulty in Committee.

Mr. Leigh: It is not up to me to try to explain the Bill, but the opening description of it was inadequate. The law is clear: the Bill will make no difference to the powers of anybody on the aircraft to let people on the aeroplane or to arrest them when they are on board. Existing common law and rights of property will deal with that. The Bill will simply allow the police to arrest someone who has caused a disturbance once the aeroplane has landed in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's explanation, because I was afraid that that was the case. If the Bill is a Government measure, the blame attaches to the Government, not the promoter. Worthy though it may be, it will not do much good.

Mr. Swayne: I disagree. I hope that the Minister will clear up the confusion. I understand that the Bill tries to create an arrestable offence, which carries a five-year penalty or falls within schedule 1A of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. The schedule makes it clear that the offence is arrestable by any person, not necessarily a police officer. I presume that that applies to all arrestable offences.

Mr. Forth: I am partly encouraged by that helpful comment, although it could lead to some interesting possibilities. If we are talking about what I, in my layman's terms, would call a citizen's arrest—

Mr. Swayne *indicated assent.*

Mr. Forth: In that case, we are talking about anyone on an aircraft being able to arrest anyone else. Once we open up that possibility, life really does get interesting. What if the person who was misbehaving attempted to arrest a member of the crew? I am not sure that my hon. Friend has been as helpful as he intended to be. The schedule to which he has become so attached may not help him in this matter. Perhaps he could have another look at it, and expand on the idea when he seeks to catch your eye later—as I hope he will—Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for his efforts, but I am not totally sold on his idea.

My next point links in to what my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough said a moment ago. I have here a list of cases in which action was taken effectively to deal with these problems. I will not go through all of them, but one involved a flight from London Gatwick to Montego Bay in Jamaica, on which a group of passengers became disruptive and demanded alcohol. Another passenger complained and threw a drink over one of them—he did not try to arrest him; he just threw a drink over him—and an altercation broke out, and the cabin crew had to restrain them. When the plane landed in the United States, the FBI boarded it and removed the offenders. They were returned to the United Kingdom and one was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment for endangering the aircraft. Cases such as this—one or two others are mentioned in this briefing document—suggest that adequate powers to deal with them already exist. I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw is arguing that these powers should come into effect only in extreme cases.

I do not want to go through the entire list of incidents that I have here, but recent history seems to suggest that there is a fair degree of discretion and powers to deal with these problems. As I said, that flight was going from London to Jamaica, and was diverted to the United States. The US authorities exercised their powers and the people were returned to the UK—I guess it must have been a UK-registered aircraft—and one was then sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment. I am unsure whether the hon. Gentleman has yet made a case for the additional powers in the Bill, taken against the background of what already seems to be happening. A new offence has already recently been created, and despite his valiant efforts, I am not persuaded that his case has been made beyond doubt.

We are always very ready, in the House, to have a knee-jerk reaction and to say that, if there is a problem of social misbehaviour, criminality or whatever, we should increase the penalties available. I would not normally shrink from that, but we must be pretty certain in our own minds that simply increasing the penalties will have the effect that we desire.

Mr. Swayne: I was just wondering whether my right hon. Friend's attention had been drawn to the list of incidents that have already taken place. I notice that one of those involved, Victor Mardell of Wood Green in north London, who was indicted by a grand jury for being abusive and trying to open the door during a flight, now faces up to 20 years in prison in the United States and a fine of £163,000. I am not sure that penalties, of themselves, will provide a sufficient deterrent, bearing in mind the fact that people are often drunk when they do these things.

Mr. Forth: This is the time-honoured debate about deterrence, and about how clearly the kind of people who are prone to this kind of misbehaviour on an aircraft will be thinking about the penalties that they might suffer if they misbehave. Almost by definition, they are unlikely to do so.

Mr. Swire: Would not one way of dealing with repeat offenders be for airlines to refuse to carry them for a fixed period—five or 10 years, for example—and to make the necessary information available to other airlines? Such people would thus be effectively grounded

Mr. Forth: I suspect that airlines can do that already, and no doubt they do. One hears of cases in which either one airline or all airlines ban people, as I am sure airlines are free to do. I do not think we need the Bill for that purpose.

Mr. Swayne: In fact, the exact opposite has taken place in the last few days. Courtney Love, having created an incident on an aeroplane, was detained by the police for some hours and as a consequence received four tickets entitling her to travel on Virgin Atlantic Airways.

Mr. Forth: I am reluctant to become too involved in that, but I think I am entitled to comment briefly.

[Mr. Forth]

Whether Sir Richard Branson was wise to do what he did is something I hope he will think about, because the next time there is an incident on one of his aircraft he may find it rather difficult to explain the action that he is reported to have taken recently. I shall say no more, because although this is relevant, I do not want to be diverted too far.

I now want to talk about what happened following the publication of the December 2000 consultation document on air transport policy entitled "The Future of Aviation". I have no doubt that it is dear to the Minister's heart. According to my brief there were only 92 responses to the document, which does not seem very many to me. I should have thought that if the problem dealt with in the Bill was as widespread and as serious as has been suggested, the document might have elicited a few more responses than that.

Anyway, apparently the majority of those 92 felt that passengers should be prohibited from drinking alcohol other than that supplied by the carrier. I am not sure how that came about. Presumably, it means prohibiting—or trying to prohibit—passengers from consuming alcohol before they board the aeroplane, and then giving them alcohol.The document goes on to say—is this not typical of a Government consultation exercise?—that the majority were in favour of further action. Well, well, well. That really takes us forward, doesn't it?

Apparently, safety is paramount. So far, this does not seem to have been a terribly fruitful consultation exercise.

We are also told, much more helpfully in the context of the Bill, that respondents felt that powers of arrest and punishment were inadequate and needed to be strengthened. That is exactly what the Bill would do: we are getting on to something a bit more positive here. It was also felt that the police should have powers of arrest for offences under an air navigation order, not just the power of caution. There was mention of increasing the penalty to five years, making drunkenness on board an aircraft an arrestable offence, and making threatening or interfering with crew an arrestable offence as well. Excellent! All that is highly relevant to the Bill.

Apparently—I mentioned this earlier—many respondees suggested that drunken passengers should not be allowed on board aircraft, and that there should be guidance for aircrew and ground staff to screen out drunks, prohibit them from boarding and refuse to serve them on board. It was also felt that offenders on board should be left at the nearest airport. Those strike me as sensible suggestions, but they are not in the Bill. I hope the Minister will tell us how much thought his Department gave to incorporating further measures such as that in legislation—although, of course, that cannot happen in the case of a private Member's Bill.

Mr. Leigh: Airlines have power to take such action now but choose not to, presumably because they want to go on enjoying the profit from carrying a passenger even if he appears somewhat inebriated. That illustrates the limitations of statute: it is possible to legislate for anything, as we are doing yet again today, but it makes very little difference.

Mr. Forth: Indeed. Let us consider some other suggestions produced by the consultation—my briefing uses the words "thrown up", rather infelicitously. They include banning alcohol from aircraft, which I should have thought was a matter for the airlines; introducing a tracking system to ban disruptive passengers from future flights, to which the same applies; making duty free available only on arrival—it is possible to purchase duty free on arrival at many airports, including, I believe, Heathrow; and better liaison with police at airports. There are a whole series of things that can surely be done already, and if they cannot, one asks why the airlines themselves are not doing them. Do they require legislation? I should have thought not. Another suggestion arising from the consultation is

"relaxing the ban on smoking".

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West, who made that point earlier, will like that one. Other suggestions include

"increasing the seat pitch, and improving air quality."

So here are a series of perfectly sensible-sounding measures that one would have thought were completely consonant with the Bill's aims, but which do not require legislation.

Mr. Swayne: They do, however, require some thought. Although I accept that the requirement to revisit smoking would be helpful, I am not sure that it is entirely compatible with improving air quality.

Mr. Forth: Indeed. That simply illustrates the inherent contradictions that tend to emanate from an exercise in which well-meaning people come up with different suggestions that perhaps make a degree of sense when taken in isolation, but which begin to show flaws when one puts them together.

Mr. Swire: It is difficult to see where all this might end. As my right hon. Friend made clear earlier, there is another factor: those who, in addition to having taken some kind of medication—perhaps to calm themselves down before flying—are served drinks by cabin staff who have no knowledge of their use of such medication. Such a combination can make people highly excitable. How does one attempt to legislate against that? If we are to carry this legislation to its logical conclusion, perhaps people should be asked to sign a form before embarking on the aeroplane, stating whether they are taking any medication which, if combined with alcohol, might give rise to extraordinary behaviour inside the cabin.

Mr. Forth: Yes, and the clever person might say that they should have a blood test before they get on the plane, or a big sign around their neck stating what medication they have taken recently. What my hon. Friend says illustrates the question of how far one should try to go in this direction to deal with a perceived problem. I think we all agree that there is a problem. Those of us who fly know of the dread of sitting beside or near someone who has had too much to drink, or who

is misbehaving. It is a horrible experience, and none of us would deny that, but what we are trying to get at is whether the Bill will do what it is supposed to do.

That, rather felicitously, brings me to the Bill itself. Although it is commendably short and commendably focused, I wonder, looking at the wording, whether it is as helpful as its promoter would like to think. Before I embark on my brief analysis, let me say that I am well aware of the pitfalls of a layman such as me seeking effectively to analyse a Bill that is drawn up by a parliamentary draftsman, who comes from another planet. However, that is what we must try to do, because we are here to try to bring a lay interpretation to the language of statute, and it is always a challenge.

Let us consider the first substantive provision in this modest Bill. Subsection (2) of clause 1, which deals with arrest without warrant, refers to

"an offence of contravening a provision of an Order in Council under section 60 of that Act (air navigation order) where the offence relates to—

this is the meat—

"a provision which prohibits specified behaviour by a person in an aircraft towards or in relation to a member of the crew".

The provision is targeted at behaviour towards members of the crew only, and not, presumably, at behaviour towards other passengers. This gives rise to the question of whether the person concerned might also be a member of the crew, a point that was touched on in an earlier intervention. I am wondering whether "specified behaviour" is intended to be an all-encompassing, completely flexible phrase that will be interpreted on the spot, or whether the intention is to give some detailed underpinning to that phrase. In other words, would there be a list of things that might be covered?

I am open-minded on the point; I do not know which provision would be more sensible. It depends who discretion is being given to. Here, we return to our old friend the citizen's arrest. Although I should be pretty comfortable about the captain of the aircraft having that power, it is quite another matter to rely on its exercise by anyone at all.

I do not want to nitpick, but some important considerations arise from the words

"a provision which prohibits a person from being drunk in an aircraft".

How will that be interpreted? Will a subjective judgment be made of the person's behaviour by someone in uniform—perhaps a member of the crew? The provision continues with the words,

"in so far as it applies to passengers".

That suggests that if a member of the crew was drunk they would not be covered by the provision. I suppose the assumption is that the crew member would be identified before they boarded the aircraft and took charge of it, as happened in a recent case.

I am not very happy about the wording of the Bill. It is not as helpful as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw suggested. I hope that when the Under-Secretary makes his contribution, he will, in his usual way, exemplify and elucidate what is in the Bill and convince us that it will be more effective than I am currently persuaded to believe. I should like to hear his comments on "specified behaviour" and on whether the drunken person might be a member of the crew. I should also like some clarification about the definition of "drunk". Will aircraft carry breathalysers or will it simply be a subjective judgment: "Oi, mate! You're drunk. You're nicked. I am exercising my renowned powers of citizen's arrest under the Aviation Offences Act."

Mr. Tom Harris: In Scottish law, there is an offence of being drunk and incapable in a public place and police officers make exactly the subjective judgments to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. I do not know whether the same would apply in English law.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am sure that he can see the problem as well as I do: a police officer may not be available at the appropriate moment. Under the Bill, someone else on the aircraft will make that judgment and make the arrest. Sufficient doubts have been raised about those provisions to make us all somewhat anxious about their meaning.

I am aware that if we are to give the Bill a fair wind, there is not much more time for this debate, so although there is much more that I could say, I shall exercise uncharacteristic self-restraint and resume my seat. I hope that we shall receive full explanations from the Minister, perhaps after he has heard other hon. Members' contributions. How will the Bill work? Why is it a significant step forward? Why should we allow it to go into Committee?

1.30 pm

Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. I hope that we are able to persuade the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) that the Government must include it in the legislative programme. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) will respond to the points that the right hon. Gentleman raised.

The Bill has been long awaited and deals with a problem that has affected many of us. Some people believe that drunkenness on aircraft is a recent phenomenon. It is not; I had personal experience of such a disturbance in the early 1990s. It was most unpleasant.

I do not imagine that many Members have experienced such situations, so I want to try to give the House a sense of just how terrifying it is to be on an aircraft when an incident takes place. I was returning from Florida with my family, after a wonderful holiday. We were only one hour into a seven-hour flight when a disturbance broke out. The incident was entirely drink-related. Two men, who had clearly been drinking before they went on to the aircraft, began an altercation. Imagine the noise. Their wives tried to calm them down and their terrified children were screaming. Many of the 300-plus people on the aircraft were aware only of the noise, not of what was causing it, but those of us who were nearby were afraid that someone would be injured.

People sitting near that kind of event have nowhere to move. They cannot remove themselves or stop their children experiencing it, and they are upset. There is no safety zone. My hon. Friend the Member for

[Rosemary McKenna]

Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) talked about safety zones. Normally, the minute an altercation starts, parents remove their children from the area, but they absolutely cannot do that in an aircraft.

The staff were eventually able to calm down those two individuals, with the assistance of a female passenger, who spoke in the most severe terms to those two chaps. They were absolutely terrified. [HON. MEMBERS: "Was it you?"] No, it was not—I was in great awe of the person who did it, and she clearly had my admiration. Even after things had calmed down, the anxiety remained for the rest of that six-hour flight. We were all absolutely terrified to move and the children were upset. We were unable to relax and enjoy the flight. It really was the most horrendous experience.

In fact, I am absolutely certain that such incidents can have long-term effects on young children. They do not want to go back on to an aircraft if they have had that experience. They are put off flying when they are very young, and young children can be very easily affected by nightmares. It is damaging for them to encounter that kind of incident, particularly when they have had a wonderful experience at Disneyland in Florida.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): I have seen one or two altercations on flights, and they are terrifying for people who are already scared of flying. It is important that people in England, Scotland and Wales all work together, just as the British Transport police work in the rail system. With the massive increase in air transport, that might be a very good way forward. We should all do a bit of joined-up thinking and work together to eradicate such behaviour.

Rosemary McKenna: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We can address the issue in many ways. The Bill will be a definite deterrent, and it will give the police powers to deal with individuals who cause that kind of distress. Of course there are many reasons why people behave in that way. I have sat beside someone who was very drunk on an aircraft; there was no disturbance, but it was a most unpleasant experience.

I shall conclude now because we want to ensure that the House agrees to the Bill today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw on being successful in the ballot for private Members' Bills and on choosing this subject. He is absolutely right to choose this issue. This is an important Bill, and I commend it to the House.

1.39 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): It is pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Rosemary McKenna) who, regrettably, has had personal experience of this relatively recent phenomenon. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) on securing this Bill and on introducing it so eloquently.

May I remind the House of my personal interests in aviation? My husband is an airline executive. He is currently with Delta airlines, having spent 34 years in the airline industry. On a personal note, that is a remarkable achievement—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am delighted that my right hon. and hon. Friends recognise it. As for other personal interests, I have a small, modest interest in BA, BAA and BAE Systems, which is not registrable, but, for the purposes of this debate, it is important to declare.

Air rage has been identified as a phenomenon for some years, and it appears to be growing. It has caught the attention of the Department for Transport, which, for some time, has been monitoring annually the incidence of air rage. That monitoring is performed by the Civil Aviation Authority. I am most grateful to the House of Commons Library for finding me the Department's most recent report on disruptive behaviour on board UK aircraft, and the analysis of incident reports between April 2001 and March 2002. I confirm the view of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who took some issue with the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy), the promoter of the Bill, about whether this phenomenon is growing or declining. The Department's figures show that, overall, in the last reporting period, which is April 2001 to March 2002, the number of reported incidents of disruptive passenger behaviour fell by 15 per cent. compared with the previous year. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw rightly said, however, some of that may be accounted for by the decrease in passenger numbers following 11 September 2001, most notably in transatlantic air traffic—regrettably, as my husband's business is in that sector.

Mr. Swayne: Is my hon. Friend aware of the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions consultation document, "The Future of Aviation", of December 2000, which says that air rage

"is not as widespread a problem as media reports would sometimes suggest."

She says that, subsequently, it has declined. Is she telling me that it is even less of a problem that it was in 2000?

Miss McIntosh: The figures speak for themselves, but, clearly, it is a matter for debate. Right hon. and hon. Members may draw different conclusions, but my hon. Friend is right to refer to the most recent consultation document. Although, in part, the 15 per cent. decline in the last reporting period follows a decrease in passenger numbers post 11 September, the decrease in reported incidents since September was much greater than the fall in passenger numbers. The pattern of incidents reported was very similar to the corresponding data in the previous year. Such significant differences are not identified in the notes of the Department. According to the Department, the figures confirm that air rage

"is not a widespread phenomenon, and the probability of any individual passenger being affected by an incident of disruptive behaviour is extremely low."

That shows that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth was extremely unfortunate in her experience in the early 1990s. I sympathise with her, as all of us would admit to some fear of flying. I admit to being an anxious flyer. As she said, if one is in a confined space, there is no safe zone to which to go.

The Department says, however, that

"there remains a low level of anti-social behaviour, which on occasion escalates into serious incidents which could pose a threat to the safety of the aircraft and/or its occupants."

The Department is conscious that airline employees working on board aircraft are more at risk of harm than the average passenger by virtue of the fact that they are flying more frequently and, because of the nature of their responsibilities, more exposed to disruptive passengers.

I think that it is important to share the figures with the House, particularly in view of the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) provided figures for smoking and for alcohol-related disruption. In the last reporting year, of the 1,055 incidents reported, the CAA categorised 50 per cent.—528—as significant. A further 52 cases—only 5 per cent.—were judged to be serious.

Mr. Forth: I am familiar with the figures, but it is helpful for the House to hear them. However, do we have any idea what the categories of "significant" and "serious" mean? The definitions can be arbitrary. As we have learned from the example of smoking, I do not think that anyone would argue that finding someone smoking in the lavatory on an aircraft—however serious an offence it may be—is the sort of thing that should be subject to an arrest. Can my hon. Friend help us and tell us whether there is any description of what the terms mean?

Miss McIntosh: My right hon. Friend touches on a personal point that I hope to cover when I discuss the Bill's wording. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Transport in his place, and we shall seek his assistance. As my right hon. Friend suggested, clause 1(2) refers to "specified behaviour", and it would be helpful if it clarified whether an incident was "serious" or "significant".

The Under-Secretary, the Minister for Transport and I have the pleasure of each other's company in the Committee stage of the Railways and Transport Safety Bill. Like me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst appears to have noticed that part 5 of that Bill relates to "Aviation: Alcohol and Drugs". Clause 89 is about the crew "Being unfit for duty", and prescribed limits are set in clause 90. Clause 91 defines "Aviation functions", and it will come as no surprise to the Under-Secretary that I am seeking to write new provisions into that Bill.

Mr. Swayne: Will my hon. Friend consider whether that is necessary? She has said that the incidence of air rage has declined since the DETR document was published in December 2002. Paragraph 101 of that publication says:

"There is already a considerable body of legislation, both criminal and aviation-specific, to deal with offenders."

Miss McIntosh: That is, indeed, the case.

To satisfy the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst about the fact that the Bill does not deal with a potentially disruptive passenger boarding an aircraft in a drunken state, I thought that it would be helpful to refer to the Air Navigation Order 2000. It was made under the Civil Aviation Act 1982, which was passed under the Conservative Administration. The order covers aviation safety and article 65 makes it an offence—I do not believe that it has been amended, but the Under-Secretary might confirm this—to enter an aircraft when drunk, to be drunk on an aircraft and to endanger the safety of an aircraft or any person therein. I hope that that satisfies my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend might know that I am not that easily satisfied. I am not sure whether the provisions that she has described would meet the problem that the Bill's promoter and I have described. How does that solve the problem of people presenting themselves at the door of an aircraft in a foreign port having gone through all the formalities? Can we deal adequately with such people by not allowing them admittance to the aircraft?

Miss McIntosh: Nothing in existing law or the Bill would deal adequately with that problem. Indeed, the Government do not believe that the Bill would rectify it. That is why a noble Friend of the Under-Secretary is on the record as saying in another place that the Government will look to the International Civil Aviation Organisation to deal with the gap in the law.

It would be more appropriate for the Government to take the opportunity to include such provisions in the Railways and Transport Safety Bill, although that would, of course, deprive the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw of successfully promoting his Bill. I regret that that has not happened and expect the Under-Secretary to explain why. The House and Parliament in general are accused of over-legislating. Why do we need two Bills when one would do?

The House will be interested to know that 77 per cent. of all incidents involve male passengers, which is perhaps not unsurprising. The figure has remained almost constant over the past three years. I also learn from the Department for Transport's note that the majority of offenders were in their 20s, 30s and 40s, so happily my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is exonerated.

Mr. Swayne: On the gender of the offenders, how does that marry up with the overall proportion of air travellers? Are they preponderantly male, or is it half and half?

Miss McIntosh: I am not sure that the Department's note covers that, and I look to the Under-Secretary for assistance having been accused in Committee earlier this week of answering the Government's questions for them. Hopefully, he will have the answer.

A third of incidents involved people who travelled alone. Worthy of specific mention is that 21 incidents involved groups of 10 or more. Some 5 per cent. of incidents occurred in business or first class. In the last reported period, alcohol and tobacco were the two main contributory factors to disruptive behaviour. As a non-smoker, I have more sympathy with those who turn to alcohol in times of anxiety either before boarding or while on board an aircraft than I do with those who turn to smoking, which is a separate offence.

Alcohol was identified as, or suspected of being, a contributory cause in 45 per cent.—almost half—of all incidents. That was an increase from 43 per cent. in the previous reporting period. Around 40 per cent. of alcohol-related incidents involved passengers drinking

[Miss McIntosh]

their own alcohol, which was also the case in the previous reporting period. So why is the Bill silent on prohibiting passengers from boarding a flight with their own alcohol? Regrettably, we have lost duty free travel throughout the European Union because the Danish Government blocked its continuation. I understand that people who purchase alcohol are not allowed to drink it during the flight. I was therefore surprised to find that 40 per cent. of alcohol-related incidents involve passengers drinking their own alcohol, and that there is no provision in the Bill to prevent passengers carrying their own alcohol on to the plane. We expect the Under-Secretary to explain why, when his Department has identified that as a rising problem, the Bill does not deal with it. The figures up to March 2002 show that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst so eloquently spelled out, drinking prior to boarding has a knock-on effect on behaviour on the aircraft.

Smoking, or the desire to smoke, featured in 385 incidents, or 36 per cent. of the total, compared with 33 per cent. in the previous reporting period up to March 2001, so there has been a rise. A staggering 79 per cent. of those incidents involved smoking in the toilet. That offence, I am told by the Department, implies a degree of premeditated deception which poses greater safety risks to the aircraft. That invites the question why the Bill, albeit only five clauses long, does not extend to imposing higher penalties on those who commit such a serious, premeditated offence as smoking in the toilet, which, I have to say, is the most disgusting thing that I can think of.

Mr. Swayne: Will my hon. Friend admit that while that may be disgusting, it is a lot less disgusting than an air rage incident?

Miss McIntosh: If time permits, I would like to share some rather horrendous air rage offences with right hon. and hon. Members.

The number of recorded incidents must be seen in the context of the number of flights operated by UK carriers and the number of passengers carried. It may help the House if I record that during the 12 months to the end of March 2002 UK airlines operated about 1.1 million passenger flights and carried 104 million passengers. The figures are similar to those for the previous year. As I said, in the year up to March 2002, only 52 serious incidents were reported, why have the Government seen fit to draft a separate Bill rather than including these clauses in the Railways and Transport Safety Bill. I do not make light of air rage. It is, I accept, a terrifying experience being cooped up with drunk or disruptive passengers or with someone who is going berserk because they would appear to need a cigarette in the middle of a flight.

I turn briefly to the International Civil Aviation Organisation's role in the matter. ICAO's member states are required to have regulations for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse by aviation personnel. In its document A33-12, which is short but worthy of note, ICAO is currently considering harmonising member states' alcohol and drug-testing programmes. It directs

"the Council to review existing guidance for improvements aimed at helping States to develop consistent prevention and testing programmes."

I hope that the Under-Secretary will have the opportunity to tell us what stage ICAO has reached.

In document A33-4, ICAO calls for the adoption of

"national legislation on certain offences committed on board civil aircraft".

The appendix to that document reveals that ICAO is considering offences such as assault and other acts of interference against a crew member, other acts endangering safety or jeopardising good order and discipline, and questions of jurisdiction.

Mr. Forth: I had hoped that my hon. Friend would touch on that. We are in that part of her analysis that deals with the international aspects and the ICAO, but has it become seized of the problem of misbehaviour before boarding the aircraft—the Bill's promoter described that so eloquently—which usually involves drunkenness, but may involve other things? I would have thought that we must look to the international body to begin to take effective action on such people who seek to board an aircraft. A UK-registered aircraft is subject to UK law, so we could deal with it when it landed in the UK, but we are considering what happens in a foreign airport before the aircraft takes off. Does the ICAO have proposals on the stocks? Is it considering that problem?

Miss McIntosh: I am delighted to say that Lord Whitty pressed for international action to ensure that crimes committed on board aircraft are prosecuted appropriately in all states. I hope that we hear that that provision is to be extended to preventing offenders from boarding aircraft in an unfit state. We learned this from Lord Whitty in the January 1999 debate:

"The . . . problem relates to offences committed abroad which are pursued abroad and prosecuted in foreign courts."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 January 1999; Vol. 596, c. 155.]

That point is slightly different from the one that my right hon. Friend raises. I hope that the Minister takes note of his question and replies to the point. While the ICAO is aware of the question of jurisdiction, the point is slightly different in that regard.

I note for my right hon. Friend's benefit that in the early years of civil aviation the main international concern was the problem of gaps in jurisdiction over offences committed aboard aircraft. There is a distinction in that common law countries, on the whole, claimed territorial jurisdiction only and did not always consider their aircraft to be part of their territory. Civil law countries, on the other hand, claimed jurisdiction over offences committed by their own nationals abroad, to a greater or lesser extent.

Some states might grant extradition only if their national law allowed, but they were under no international obligation to do so. Many states refused to extradite their own nationals, and most refused that for political offences. My right hon. Friend referred to the 1963 Tokyo convention on offences and certain other acts committed on board aircraft, which is concerned with establishing jurisdiction over offences committed on board aircraft and the extradition of offenders. It is important to draw it to the Minister's attention that

there is a gap in law, which, I note with some disappointment, the Bill fails to address. However, there is still time to amend the Bill being considered in Committee, and I shall seek to do that.

On a point of information, the Tokyo convention was enacted in UK law by the Tokyo Convention Act 1967, which was replaced by parts of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, section 92(1) of which applies criminal law to aircraft. Section 94(1), (2) and (3) implement article 6 of the convention, which provides the commander of an aircraft with the power to impose reasonable measures on a passenger to protect the safety of the aircraft. That is the scenario that my hon. and right hon. Friends referred to during this excellent debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will be interested to know that the European Commission published a communication on the protection of air passengers in the European Union. It was considered by the European Parliament, where he served with great distinction for a number of years, early in 2001. The European Parliament considered whether there was a need for more and broader legislation to combat air rage.

What is air rage and how is it described? We are probably hampered by the fact that we do not have an adequate definition of air rage. One might have looked to this Bill to define air rage, but I am disappointed to find that it provides no assistance in that regard. I thought that it would be helpful therefore to look at how air rage has been dealt with by other jurisdictions.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is touching on the phrase "specified behaviour" which is the only term that appears in the Bill. Perhaps she is about to suggest—it might be a good idea—that when the Bill is considered in Committee some of the wording that she has found might be suitable for inclusion, perhaps in a schedule, to help those who, in difficult circumstances, seek to interpret that term, the better to exercise the powers that they have been given under the Bill. Will she consider that when she gives us these helpful examples?

Miss McIntosh: That is a helpful suggestion. Unfortunately, the Library has given me the German law in the original language, so I shall have to look further into that. I have only a conversational knowledge of German, so I shall refer to other jurisdictions.

I know that my right hon. Friend is a great admirer of all things American, particularly the American legal system, so I shall start with the Federal Aviation Administration which is the responsible authority in the United States and issues operations bulletins to air carriers. Its most recent air carrier operations bulletin, No. 1-94-1 on service of alcoholic beverages, states:

"The boarding of a passenger who appears to be intoxicated is a violation of . . . the Federal Aviation Regulations."

Having drawn that provision to the Government's attention, one has to ask why it has not been included in the Bill. As my right hon. Friend has suggested, it would fit neatly into clause 1, which amends paragraph 11 of schedule 1A to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, inserting paragraph 11A which would prohibit "specified behaviour".

US federal aviation regulations also require operators to report passenger disturbances associated with alcohol within five days. That highlights another gap in the Bill. Should an offending passenger fail to be arrested because a police officer has not arrived in time or because other passengers on the flight are too nervous and frightened of a particularly aggressive or disruptive passenger, is there a time frame within which the offence cannot be prosecuted because the offending person has not been arrested?

The Federal Aviation Administration bulletin states:

"interference with a crew member"—

which is an offence under its regulations

"may also be a criminal violation under... the Federal Aviation Act of 1958, as amended."

I commend this document to the attention of the Under-Secretary of State and will be happy to pass it to him after the debate.

Mr. Swayne: What is wrong with the formulation that was used in the amendment to the Air Navigation (No. 2) Order 1995,

"acting in a disruptive manner",

which covers the use of threatening or abusive language to a crew member, behaving in a threatening or abusive manner to a crew member and interfering with a crew member in the performance of his or her duties? I thought that the Bill sought simply to bump up the penalty for that to five years so that it would become an arrestable offence. *[Interruption.]* I see from the Minister's body language that I have misunderstood.

Miss McIntosh: That seemed like the start of a helpful suggestion. Perhaps the Minister will put us right.

Under the German law on air rage offences, there are two main provisions pertinent to what is called the unruly behaviour of passengers on a German aircraft. Most of the offences committed as a consequence of drunkenness, such as insult or assault, are covered by the respective articles of the German criminal code. According to article 315, it is an offence seriously to endanger an aircraft, for example by destroying equipment. One hesitates to think what equipment might be destroyed. Alcohol is not specifically mentioned and where passengers are concerned the consumption of alcohol is not an offence in itself.

Article 29, paragraph 3, of the German air traffic law holds the captain responsible for security on board and authorises him to take any necessary measures. Under the ICAO and US and German law, and, I believe, our own law, which applies across the kingdom, the captain is responsible and authorised to take any necessary measures. Although not explicitly stated, it is understood that that might include preventing a passenger from drinking alcohol. If there is a German law in that regard, it is right that we in Britain should seek to introduce one, particularly in regard to a passenger who is already a little the worse for alcohol. Certainly, such passengers should be prevented from taking their own alcohol on the plane.

However, both provisions applying in Germany are restricted to cases where danger is concrete. A specific law concerning unruly passengers is being drafted. As I

[Miss McIntosh]

mentioned, regrettably, the German law is available only in German, but before Committee stage I shall endeavour to obtain clarification.

As I am half Danish and have family in Denmark I am particularly interested in the Danish situation, and the Danish Air Navigation Act is available on the internet. While there is nothing in the Act about passengers being drunk, chapter 5 contains provisions for the breath testing of crew suspected of drinking, which may be of interest in the context of the Railways and Transport Safety Bill. Why, if we are introducing prescribed limits for aviation crew—flight crew and attendants—can the Minister not extend the provisions of that Bill to passengers? There should be some mechanism for preventing passengers already a little worse for wear from boarding a plane.

Chapter 5 of the Danish Act repeats that the pilot in command has supreme authority on board, and goes on to state in article 44(2) that when necessary in the interest of aircraft safety or protection of passengers or goods on board, crew members and passengers may, without being asked by the pilot in command, implement preventive measures, including the use of force, to the extent that it can be justified in the circumstances.

Article 45 goes on to say that if a serious offence is committed on board an aircraft, the pilot in command shall, to clear up the matter, take all necessary measures that cannot be postponed without being detrimental—presumably to the flight.

I should like to refer to three recent court cases illustrating the legal implications of air rage. The judgment pronounced in the case of Regina *v.* Julian Ayodeji on 31 August 2000 held that a sentence of eight months' imprisonment was appropriate. The defendant was a 32-year-old male—another male, Madam Deputy Speaker—who pleaded guilty to a charge of being drunk on an aircraft, contrary to article 57(1) of the Air Navigation (No. 2) Order 1995. The judge was entitled to consider the fact that fellow passengers must have been utterly terrified. The verdict did not mean that he had been sentenced on the basis of the more serious offence of endangering an aircraft.

Mr. Swayne: Will my hon. Friend comment on the case that will not now come to court—that of Courtney Love? The offence to which I have already referred is on the statute book. If cases are not prosecuted and no action is taken, an incentive is created. The proper remedy is to take the action, rather than put new offences on to the statute book.

Miss McIntosh: If time permits, I hope to turn to a number of cases reported in the press. My hon. Friend raises a crucial point. I am sure that the House will agree—I certainly hope that the Under-Secretary will do so—that there should be one rule for all passengers, regardless of whether they are celebrities. Hon. Members fall into the category of celebrities and I believe that we should be exemplary in our behaviour on aircraft, regardless of whether we are nervous flyers. The law should not recognise whether the passenger in question happens to be well known and should be applied irrespective of such considerations—a point to which I shall return in a moment.

Secondly, in the case of Regina *v.* David James McCallum, which was judged on 5 October 2001, a sentence of 12 months' imprisonment for affray was deemed not manifestly excessive where the appellant had sustained abusive conduct on an airplane for a considerable period. Thirdly, in the case of Regina *v.* Heather Susan Tagg, it was judged on 30 April 2001 that there were clearly vires in section 60(3)(h) of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 to prohibit drunkenness in an aircraft—as in article 57 of the Air Navigation (No. 2) Order 1995, Statutory Instrument No. 1995/1970—because drunkenness on an aircraft was one sort of conduct capable of bearing on the safety of the aircraft and the people therein. In my view, those sentences could have been tougher in view of the gravity of the offence.

I promised briefly to mention for the satisfaction of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West some rather disgusting examples of air rage. Mr. Finneran, a banker, was recently fined $50,000 by United Airlines after he assaulted an attendant and then, regrettably, defecated on a first-class food cart on a flight from Buenos Aires to New York. I hope that that is not something that the House would condone. I shall not refer to the next case in my notes, as it is rather vulgar. On another occasion, a passenger named Mr. Misiak put his hands around the throat of a flight attendant and threatened her because she had spilt a drink on him.

Another passenger, a Miss Pennix, grabbed a flight attendant's finger and bent it backwards. Miss Pennix explained to the authorities that she had not liked the way in which the flight attendant had told her to put her tray and seat in an upright position before landing. As a result of cases such as those, airline crews have begun to take drastic measures, which sometimes have disastrous consequences.

Mr. Swayne: A $50,000 fine seems to be in proportion for a first offence such as the one that my hon. Friend cited. However, she has not told us what the penalties were for the other offences. Were the penalties appropriate? In this Bill, we are considering a five-year sentence.

Miss McIntosh: I am handicapped by the fact that the newspaper report did not give that information, but a maximum five-year sentence would have resolved the situations in the court cases that I referred to. The maximum penalty that was handed down in those cases was two years. I believe that five years is much more appropriate.

Courtney Love, the widow of Kurt Cobain, is not the only celebrity to have displayed air rage. She was said to have become verbally abusive towards cabin staff and to have gone berserk. In a case that we have already heard about, a Boeing 737, which was flying 148 fans back from Santiago in Spain to Glasgow after a football tie, was diverted to Cardiff after the pilot sent out a mayday. I could use up my remaining time by going through endless reports in the press. However, the case has been made for a more severe penalty.

Alcohol has been shown to be a contributory cause in 45 per cent. of all incidents of air rage. In 40 per cent. of those cases, the passengers were drinking their own alcohol; and in 42 per cent. of cases, the passengers had

been drinking alcohol before boarding. Regrettably, there are omissions from the Bill. I believe that it will have to be either amended or, more appropriately, considered as part of the Railways and Transport Safety Bill.

Mr. Swayne: Although I would a support a ban on passengers consuming their own alcohol, I hope that my hon. Friend is not tempting the Minister to prevent law-abiding people from consuming alcohol on aeroplanes.

Miss McIntosh: Citizens may be law-abiding before the consumption of alcohol.

I hope to demonstrate why the Bill is lacking. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, the promoter of the Bill, said, on football day excursions people may end up waiting hours before returning home. Many of them—perhaps because they are of a nervous disposition—drink excessive amounts of alcohol. The Bill does not deal with that.

The Bill is flawed in that it does not deal with the 42 per cent. of passengers involved in such offences who have been drinking alcohol before boarding, or with the 40 per cent. who drink their own alcohol on board the plane. The Bill is also deficient in that it does not explain who would be the authority with the power of arrest. Could the authority be a fellow passenger? Will the Under-Secretary put my mind at rest by assuring me that it does not mean that a passenger will be able to arrest a member of the crew? We wish to give the Bill a fair wind, but we hope that the Under-Secretary will answer our questions.

2.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): The hon. Lady has certainly left me a lot of time in which to respond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) on winning a place in the ballot and on the exemplary way in which he opened the debate. I commend him for his long-standing campaign on air rage.

The Government take seriously the problem of disruptive passenger behaviour on aircraft. It rightly became a matter of increased public concern after a serious incident in 1998 when a stewardess was attacked and injured on board a United Kingdom aircraft. The Government took action in two ways. First, we set up a working group on disruptive passengers, which the Department chaired. It included representatives from the Civil Aviation Authority, the Home Office, the police, airlines and unions. Its remit was to advise Ministers on measures to minimise the frequency and potential impact of disruptive behaviour on board aircraft.

Secondly, on the group's advice, we introduced a standardised reporting scheme for disruptive behaviour on board United Kingdom aircraft. At the time, little hard evidence was available and it was agreed that statistics were necessary to establish the nature and scale of the problem.

I am pleased that the statistics that have been gathered to date confirm that air rage is not as widespread as media reports sometimes suggest. However, some antisocial behaviour escalates into serious incidents and thus poses a safety threat to the aircraft and its occupants. In the past reporting year, more than 1,000 incidents were reported on United Kingdom aircraft, of which 52 were classed as serious. Several hon. Members said that the number of incidents was small, but 52 incidents multiplied by the number of people on an aircraft suggest that a large number of people had been put at risk. However, the figure equates to one serious incident for every 2 million passengers. Any incident of antisocial behaviour on board an aircraft, however serious, can be an unpleasant and frightening experience for those affected, as several hon. Members made clear in the debate.

United Kingdom legislation to deal with offences on board aircraft is among the most comprehensive in the world. Several specific offences relate to behaviour on aircraft: endangering the safety of an aircraft; being drunk in an aircraft; smoking when that is prohibited; disobeying a lawful command by the commander of an aircraft; and acting in a disruptive manner.

Normal criminal law applies on board United Kingdom aircraft and powers also exist for acting against offenders on board non-UK airlines whose next destination is the UK, provided that the act is an offence under both UK law and the law of the state where the aircraft is registered.

However, it is essential that offences can be properly enforced and that penalties are appropriate. In the case of the offence of endangering the safety of an aircraft, there is consensus that the maximum two-year sentence is not proportionate to the gravity of the offence. In at least one case, a judge commented that if he had been able to pass a longer sentence, he would have done so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, the police have been worried that their powers are not always sufficient with regard to some of the offences. I confirm that that sometimes prevents them from taking effective action. Clause 1 deals with that. The police have asked for their powers to be strengthened to allow other offences to become arrestable by statute but without increasing the penalty.

As my hon. Friend made clear, all those who work in the airline industry support the changes and our working group on disruptive passengers also welcomed them. The Government want the offences to be prosecuted effectively and to ensure that offenders are punished appropriately, thereby sending a strong message that such behaviour is unacceptable. The Bill will help to achieve those aims. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for promoting the Bill and happy to record the Government's support for it.

2.29 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I came here to oppose the Bill but the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) has persuaded me of the need for it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not clear what the

[Mr. David Wilshire]

situation now is. We have less than a minute in which to try to dispose of further business and I wonder whether there are any provisions in Standing Orders which say that, when we are this close, it would be unwise to start a new debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will adhere to Standing Orders and continue with the business that is before the House.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

DEALING IN CULTURAL OBJECTS (OFFENCES) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 4 April.

HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK (OFFENCES) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January], That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 7 March.

CROWN EMPLOYMENT (NATIONALITY) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 28 February.

Public Highways

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

2.31 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester): Dick Turpin was an infamous villain of the 18th century, a ruthless highwayman and a nasty piece of work. For a time, he operated in Essex—at the London end of the county, I hasten to add. Today, I am going to tell the House a modern story of highway robbery, the value of which is considerably greater to the perpetrator, if he is allowed to get away with it, than the combined proceeds that Dick Turpin accumulated in a lifetime of crime. If this 21st century highway robbery is allowed to happen, the national precedent that it will set should sound alarm bells for all Members who represent urban constituencies that contain backland sites similar to those in my Colchester constituency. I am sure that the Minister can think of such an example in Plymouth. Nobody—including planning lawyers, highway experts and others with a wealth of experience in development matters—to whom I have related this story has ever come across anything like it. They are unanimous in not believing it. Worryingly, the public relations man for a national builder has already asked me to let him know what happens, because his client is interested. I bet he is!

The highway robbery in this case relates to private property developers appropriating the public highway to develop land, which they would otherwise not be able to do because they cannot satisfy the minimum highway standards where their land joins an established road. They do not have enough land in their ownership to comply with the highway requirements of the site in question, so with the connivance of the local council—which, it has to be said, has woefully failed the local community—they have decided simply to grab a piece of the road outside about a dozen privately owned houses to overcome their problem. Double yellow lines, to make parking illegal, are not an alternative, in either highway or road safety terms, because this is not a method that complies with current highway regulations for new junctions where vision sight lines for drivers have to be secured permanently, and certainly not in the case of an access road serving an estate of between 60 and 110 dwellings. Even if double yellow lines were a solution, the Minister will confirm that the granting of road traffic orders is not in the gift of developers or planners. Therefore such a solution—in this case, one that is totally inadequate and inappropriate—should not even be considered when contemplating granting a planning approval.

Let me set the scene; it is one that is to be found in many similar locations around the country. The St. George's area of New Town, Colchester, was developed in the early years of the 20th century. High density housing was built alongside roads laid out on a grid system. For about 100 years, the backland behind rows of terraced and semi-detached houses was used for private allotments and later also for lock-up garages. These were accessed by a single track running between the houses in Barrington road. Over the past 20 to 30 years, one developer, Mr. Gordon Parker, has by various means acquired a large amount of the backland plots, many of which had fallen into an unkempt condition. Over time, they had become a wilderness and

a dumping ground. Mr. Parker is not your usual property developer. He specialises in assembling parcels of land by reaching the parts to which others choose not to go. The methods by which he achieves this by stealth are something of a mystery. He has even included land owned by the local church. He is not the most popular man in Colchester. Indeed, over the years, his performance in relation to property dealings and developments has made him very unpopular. His past goes before him. Anyway, he managed to assemble enough of the backland to think that he could secure planning consent. But he could not. He was thwarted for years because he simply could not satisfy either the planning regulations or the highway requirements.

Then a few months ago, for reasons that I need not mention today, all the planning objections were amazingly resolved. Only weeks before, there had been total rejection of the scheme as an appeal loomed. However, there remained the seemingly insurmountable problem of hopelessly inadequate access to serve a new housing estate that could eventually contain 110 residences.

A cunning plan was then hatched by the developer. It would, of course, be outrageous to suggest that the idea was put forward by someone in either Colchester borough council or Essex County Highways. An easy solution was found, which would not cost the developer a penny in land purchase: grab a chunk of the public road, narrow a section of Barrington road to a single width, widen the pavement in front of half a dozen houses either side of the track so that the vision line for drivers entering and leaving the new estate access road is permanently secured across it, and hey presto, at a stroke, the previously impregnable highway objections are overcome—to which I, and the entire local community, say, "Oh no they aren't!"

Solving the developers' problem will result in a lasting, extremely serious road safety hazard that cannot possibly comply with the minimum highway standards that the Ministry of Transport must demand. That is why it is so important for what may appear to be a local issue to be drawn to the personal attention of the Minister, in the hope that he and his officials can prevent it from happening here, and to ensure that measures exist to prevent others from using the same procedure elsewhere.

The House of Commons Library has given me some background information to the Highways Act 1980. Section 75, which deals with the variation of widths of carriageways and footpaths, was never intended to be used in the manner proposed here. The purpose of the Act was to enable highway authorities to approve works that would benefit the community. In this case the benefit is not to the community, but to a private property developer.

The Act makes it clear that a highway is there to enable vehicles to pass and re-pass. Specifically, section 130 places the highway authority under a duty—I repeat, a duty—to assert the rights of the public to pass and re-pass. That right, in terms of commonsense daily use, will be removed if the road is narrowed to a single carriageway. Two-way traffic will have to compete for use of the same single-track stretch of road, over a distance that I estimate to be perhaps twice the length of the Chamber, into which the new junction—serving 59 dwellings to start with, and perhaps another 50 if the rest of the site is developed in due course—will emerge.

This is a recipe for disaster. Far from this cunning highway arrangement being a boost to road safety, the consequence will be the creation of serious road safety issues in the immediate vicinity. I emphasise that there are two schools respectively 100 yd and 50 yd on each side of the new junction that the developer wants to create. They are St George's infant school and St George's junior school; the latter celebrates its centenary in two months.

We all know of the serious congestion and road safety problems that already exist outside schools. To make them dangerously worse, as this scheme will, is an outrage. Traffic calming measures had to be introduced because of the number of accidents causing injury that were occurring. Once the area has been made safer, why introduce new dangers?

Two-way traffic will have to manoeuvre through a single-width carriageway in Barrington road, with a new junction generating traffic entering and leaving the new estate. To add to the safety dangers, the single-width section of Barrington road at its northern end will meet an existing T-junction with two-way traffic entering and leaving it. Traffic turning right out of the T-junction to go south along Barrington road, towards St George's infant school, will be able to do so only by being on the wrong side of the road.

Alongside the T-junction is the corner of the junior school playground, with gates for pupils only yards away. It is already a dangerous corner; the new single-width carriageway carrying two-way traffic will make it even more dangerous.

If the Minister or his officials will accept my invitation to visit the setting for this crazy proposal—it is worse than crazy: a coroner could construe it as corporately or criminally negligent, in terms of those who designed and approved it—I have every confidence that there is no way it will receive Department for Transport approval. Nor would the Government be prepared to see it repeated throughout the country. It is because of my concern about the national precedent that this scheme would unleash that I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to prevent it.

I am grateful that the Minister responding to this debate has responsibility for road safety issues. There is still time to prevent what the local council has sanctioned, because the highway conditions of the planning approval have yet to be finalised. In truth, the proposed junction layout must be rejected, and the developer will have to find more traditional methods to secure an access into his land: by exclusively using land to which he has legal ownership, not by grabbing part of the public highway.

The local community—strongly represented by the St George's residents association, the congregation of the nearby St Stephen's church, borough councillors for New Town ward, Colchester civic society, and the parents, staff, governors and pupils of St George's infant and junior schools—would be delighted if the Minister promised to veto the proposed junction arrangements, which are in breach of highways legislation, and of his Department's regulations and requirements for minimum standards. If he cannot go

[Bob Russell]

that far today, we would welcome a full public inquiry into whether the appropriation of the public highway by a private developer should be allowed. The national precedent involved means that we cannot allow this scheme to proceed unchallenged.

Another consequence of this scheme will be the loss of about 25 on-street parking places—on either side of Barrington road, where the plan is to narrow it to a single carriageway—in a neighbourhood where parking is already at a premium. This will add to the traffic, parking and road safety problems. One of those who will be seriously affected is a disabled man, who will no longer be able to get a car to his front door. Every vehicle delivering to the street, be it the refuse freighter or the milk float, will also experience problems. They will be unable to stop at houses along the single-carriageway stretch, which will be about 75 yd long.

I recognise that the root cause of the problem does not come within the remit of the Minister's Department; local government planning decisions are for another arm of government. The manner in which this application was handled leaves a lot to be desired, to put it mildly. Such misgivings may well be pursued elsewhere. There is much that I would like to say about how the planning process was contaminated in determining this application. In more than 30 years of elected public office in Colchester, I have never before seen such arm-twisting by officers, which has led to a majority of councillors on the planning committee performing an undignified somersault. That issue falls outside the terms of my debate and of the Minister's remit, but roads are totally within the Department for Transport's jurisdiction. That is why the Minister who is replying is from the Department for Transport, and not from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Even with the support of officers who should know better, and of councillors coerced into changing their minds, no developer has the power to appropriate a public highway to the detriment of those whose freeholds front it, in order to enable the building of a new housing estate. The Minister will be aware that when a developer wishes to develop a site—for housing or whatever—for which he does not have the necessary land to create a safe junction that complies with highway regulations, he has to acquire the land that he needs. In such instances, the land is referred to as a ransom strip. Its size is not important—what is important is how its acquisition will enable a development to proceed that otherwise could not. The value of a ransom strip can range from a third of the value of the land to be developed, up to even half in some circumstances.

The value of the area of public highway in Barrington road that Mr. Parker and his fellow developers have their sights on appropriating in reality, though not through legal ownership—and without paying a penny for it—ranges from a minimum of £600,000 to more than £1 million. The figures, the second of which is probably the more accurate, are arrived at by using the ransom strip formula. For easy maths, let us assume that the value of a building plot in this part of Colchester is £30,000, and that one third is thus valued at £10,000. If we multiply that by the approximate 60 residential units on the site, the value of the appropriated public highway is a minimum of £600,000. This valuation is at the lower level. If we now add in the potential near doubling of the estate in due course, the value of the highway land to the developers is in excess of £1 million. Yet the developers have got it all for nothing!

Essex county council's web page on the general subject of the ownership of highway land states:

"Although the area of land forms part of the publicly maintainable highway it is very often not actually owned by the County Council. In the case of an established property (ie prewar) there is a common law presumption that the land will revert back to the abutting land owners should highway rights be removed."

The area of public highway that the developers intend taking away from the public—a road over which vehicular traffic has travelled for the past 100 years—is outside 12 privately owned homes. It is not outside land or property owned by the developers; thus they have no legal right to either the surface or the soil of the highway. In law, the soil beneath the highway is owned by the frontagers, not those who own land round the back.

I am advised by a leading authority on planning law that Mr. Parker, and those who have joined him in his quest for development, cannot remove the rights of Her Majesty's subjects to drive their vehicles along the Queen's highway, and the planning authority has no power to withdraw the public highway rights enjoyed both by frontagers and road users in order to facilitate the proposed development. To do so would be against section 130 of the Highways Act 1980, and perhaps other sections of the same Act and other Acts of Parliament. I am not a lawyer, but lawyers tell me that that is the case.

I hope that the Minister can confirm that. Failing that, will he give an undertaking that he will have the legal position investigated? If not, what is there to stop any developer taking it upon himself to decide to appropriate any part of the highway in situations such as I have described? An easily swayed local authority will not stop them.

It is claimed by the council that the section of Barrington road in question will still be a highway, albeit one that cannot carry vehicular traffic, so there is no need to apply for a road closure order or stopping-up order, as set out in section 247 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. The legal advice that I have been given says that is somewhat disingenuous of the local authority. I hope that the Minister agrees with that legal opinion, and that he will confirm that local residents must be given the legal right to object to the loss of the public highway in front of their homes.

Section 247 states that notice of the making of an order must be published in a local paper, and that notices must be displayed at the ends of the highway that is intended to be stopped up. None of that happened. The council will, in effect, be ignoring the spirit of the Act, because it is claimed that the highway will not be stopped up, even though it will be physically impossible to drive vehicles along the area of blocked-up highway.

I understand that a stopping-up order has to be confirmed by the Department of Transport. If an order was sought, legal objections could of course be made and a public inquiry might result. Anybody with an ounce of common sense who viewed this disgraceful state of affairs would have no hesitation in finding in favour of the residents—hence the twists and turns of the local authority to prevent its handiwork being put to public examination.

The council, in league with a property developer, is denying residents natural justice, if not their legal rights. It not only aims to deprive residents of the road in front of their homes, but it is misusing the law—at any rate, in spirit—so that its dastardly deed cannot be challenged. Or can it? After today's debate, I hope that it can.

If there is a loophole, it needs to be blocked. It is clear that we cannot rely on the planning and local highway authorities. The interests of the local community, especially those whose homes front that Alice in Wonderland road arrangement, have been ignored. Worse than that, of course, is the stark realisation that, every day, hundreds of children attending the two nearby schools will be put in danger.

People whose homes front the area of public highway that a private developer intends taking from them are flabbergasted that such a proposal could even have been considered by the local council, let alone approved. The wider local community looks to the Minister with responsibilities for road safety to prevent a serious road safety threat from becoming a reality. Nationally, I hope that the Government will prevent this case from becoming a precedent for other private developers' appropriate sections of the public highway.

The proposed configuration of the overall road layout does not appear to comply with national guidelines relating to road junctions. That being so, how can a local highway authority ride roughshod over them? In such circumstances, surely it is the role of central Government to insist that national standards are upheld.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate and on raising a matter that is of great importance to his constituents in Barrington road. As he rightly points out, road safety is among my responsibilities. If he was in the Chamber earlier, he will have noticed that I have other responsibilities, too.

The hon. Gentleman said that the case that he described was highway robbery. Had that been so, I can assure him that a legal remedy would already have been taken.

In the brief time that remains, it may be helpful if I highlight the law on these matters to show where the responsibility of the various bodies lies. An essential characteristic of a highway is that it is open to all members of the public, although it may not be open to all classes of traffic. An urban highway will usually comprise both the vehicular carriageway used by traffic and the footway. The carriageway and footway together form the highway. Part V of the Highways Act 1980 confers on highway authorities general and specific powers for improving highways, so a highway authority can undertake improvements in the highway boundary without the need for further authorisation. Changes in a highway's layout do not change its legal status as a public highway.

Of course people like to park their cars in front of their houses, but, sadly, there is no absolute right to do so. In older urban areas with terraced housing and little or no front garden, there is no scope for parking vehicles off the road. Of course such areas were never designed with the car in mind. Although I have not seen the site to which the hon. Gentleman refers, I have seen the maps and it looks as though it is one of those areas. Parking problems in such areas have to be dealt with on a day-to-day basis by the local authorities responsible for traffic management and parking.

Parliament has given local authorities powers to deal with those problems. As democratically accountable bodies, it is up to local authorities to decide how to use those powers to best advantage in their areas. The Government cannot and should not get involved in those detailed local issues. If we did so, the hon. Gentleman and his party might have something to say about that, as the Liberal Democrats say that they believe very much in devolving power to local government.

One driver of the need for changing existing highways is, of course, new development. New developments will inevitably generate additional traffic. It is essential that local planning authorities consider the impact of additional traffic on the existing highway network and identify possible needs for improvement. Where such a need is identified, the normal recourse is to seek a contribution from the developer to the costs of any improvements.

Developing a site may require formation or alteration of junctions to provide access. Visibility is, of course, an important safety consideration at junctions. All road users must have adequate visibility in each direction at junctions to see conflicting traffic movements in sufficient time, enabling them to make their manoeuvres safely.

The issue raised by the hon. Gentleman involves the formation of a new access to a housing development in his constituency. Subject to the final approval of the planning authority, it will result in the development of about one hectare of land that, as he said, has long been derelict. In principle, the proposed development sits four square with the Government's housing policy, as set out in planning policy guidance note 3. The hon. Gentleman is nodding in approval.

We want priority to be given to re-using brownfield sites in urban areas, bringing empty homes back into use and converting existing buildings, in preference to developing greenfield sites. We expect land for new housing to be used more efficiently through higher densities, and development to be focused where it is supported by good transport networks and services.

In this case, the proposal is to build 59 dwellings on about one hectare of land, which forms about half of a larger area of land to the rear of Bourne, Canterbury and Barrington roads in Colchester. The development would comprise two, three and four-bedroomed flats and maisonettes. The site is designated for residential development in both the adopted Colchester borough local plan and second deposit draft of the emerging replacement plan. The streets adjacent to the site comprise mainly Victorian and Edwardian terraced and semi-terraced houses, with the majority having no garaging or provision for off-road parking.

I understand that the only practicable access to the site that has been identified is off the eastern side of Barrington road. The developer has acquired the necessary strip of land between 26 and 28 Barrington

[Mr. David Jamieson]

road to enable the access to Barrington road to be formed. As I have said, visibility at junctions is an important safety consideration. Ensuring that visibility is adequate is the responsibility of Essex county council—the local highway authority. It and the planning authority, Colchester borough council, have been in liaison on this issue. It has been concluded that the visibility splays required by the highway authority would be secured and protected either by an extension of the adjacent footway or other physical obstruction. A possible alternative may simply be to impose parking restrictions either side of the junction.

I am aware that the hon. Gentleman has written a number of letters to Ministers urging intervention in this local planning matter. I know that his particular concern is about what he terms the appropriation of the highway in front of houses in Barrington road to create the visibility splays at the site access. He is also aggrieved at Colchester borough council's handling of the planning application. He has articulated those points strongly. In response to his representations, Colchester borough council was directed not to grant planning consent until the Deputy Prime Minister had decided whether the application was one that he should call in for his own determination, after a public inquiry. However, it was concluded that the application did not raise any land use planning issues that justified its being called in, and on 11 December last year the Government office for the east of England advised the borough council that it was free to determine the application as it saw fit.

The council is minded to approve the application, but I am told planning permission has not yet been granted because a legal agreement or planning obligation under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, between the council and the applicant, has not yet been finalised. The agreement will secure, among other things, rights of vehicular access to rear gardens for properties in Barrington road. The planning permission will also be subject to a number of conditions. One of the proposed planning conditions deals specifically with the issue of provision of adequate visibility splays between the new access road and Barrington road. It requires a detailed scheme to be submitted to the local planning authority for approval showing how the 33 x 2.4 m visibility splays at the Barrington road access will be kept clear at all times. The scheme must be completed prior to occupation of any house built on the site.

In earlier contacts with the hon. Gentleman, it was thought by the Government office for the east of England that the works required to enable the development of the site to go ahead might necessitate a stopping-up order under section 247 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Such orders are made by the Secretary of State for Transport. What is meant by a stopping-up order is an order authorising the removal of all highway rights. The hon. Gentleman was advised that if such an order were required, there would first be an opportunity for local residents to object, and if objections could not be resolved, a public inquiry might be necessary. I explained the procedure to the hon. Gentleman in a written answer on 28 November last year.

On 24 January, however, Colchester borough council, having taken the advice of its own highway staff and Essex county council, wrote to the hon. Gentleman informing him that as the part of Barrington road affected by the visibility splays will stay as highway, albeit footway instead of carriageway, no road closure or stopping-up order would be necessary. I see no reason to dissent from that view but ultimately it is for local authorities to make sure that they are properly exercising the powers given to them by Parliament. The fact is that the developer will not be appropriating the public highway for his own ends. Barrington road will remain a public highway albeit with possibly some alterations to its overall layout. The requirement to prevent the parking of vehicles in the vicinity of the junction in order to meet visibility requirements has been laid down by the highway authority, Essex county council.

The detail of how the requirement is to be met is still to be resolved. I would expect the two councils to consider the effect of the scheme on the ease of movement of traffic and the access to the school and residential properties south of the junction. Under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, a traffic authority is under a duty to secure the expeditious, convenient and safe movement of vehicular and other traffic.

I acknowledge that parking restrictions or a build-out of the footway may create parking problems for nearby residents of Barrington road, but this is a matter of the detailed design of a scheme. It is for Colchester borough council and Essex county council, together with the developer, to sort out rather than the Government. One hopes that, as democratically accountable bodies, the councils will have regard to the views of local residents. The residents' local councillors will have been able to make representations on their behalf when the council's planning committee considered the planning application.

Use of a physical build-out to prevent parking on either side of a junction is a tested technique of traffic management. There is nothing new in the issues raised by this case that suggests that there is a gap in the existing law that requires remedy. Legislation, as it stands, provides an adequate framework for resolving what are essentially detailed local planning and highway issues. Sorting them out is exactly why we elect local councils.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 10 February 2003

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Retirement (Savings)

1. **Mr. John Redwood** (Wokingham): If he will make a statement on his policy towards saving for retirement. [96319]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Andrew Smith): The Green Paper sets out our proposals for helping people to choose how they plan for retirement, how much they save and for how long they keep working. Effective partnership—with Government, employees, employers and pension providers all playing their part—is clearly crucial.

Mr. Redwood: Now that we know that it costs £2 million to provide a pension fit for a Lord Chancellor, what have the Government to say to constituents of mine who struggle to save one tenth of that amount, only to discover that large sums have been stolen by the Chancellor's taxes and further big sums removed through the collapse in the stock market, in part brought on by the Chancellor's boom and bust policies? Will my constituents have to work for longer?

Mr. Smith: As the right hon. Gentleman well knows, the pension arrangements for the Lord Chancellor are set down in statute. The right hon. Gentleman might do well to reflect that the relevant legislation—the Lord Chancellor's Pension Act 1832 and the Parliamentary and Other Pensions Act 1972, as amended by the Ministerial and Other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991—were all passed by Liberal or Tory Administrations. As for the abolition of the tax dividend credit, we would pay more attention to the crocodile tears from the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues if they proposed to reinstate the credit and to confirm whether they would at the same time put up corporation tax, because when we abolished the credit it was as part of a package that cut corporate taxes to incentivise investment.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): I ask my right hon. Friend not to take any notice of the gurus of casino economics among the Opposition. If he wishes to restore the level of saving for retirement, will he consider the following options? First, will he consider forcing employers to contribute to pension schemes and also make it more difficult—if not impossible—to close down final salary schemes? Secondly, will he consider relinking the state pension to earnings—a link that was abolished by the Tories in 1981? I recognise the above-inflation increases of the past two years, but to institutionalise those increases we need the link reinstated. Finally, will he consider increasing the over-80s allowance, which has been left at the level at which it was set when it was introduced in 1981?

Mr. Smith: On the closure of schemes, my hon. Friend will know that our Green Paper sets out options to increase protection for those facing scheme closure, including investigating whether a central discontinuance fund—long campaigned for by the TUC—could be set up. The link to earnings would do nothing for the poorest pensioners, who have been the principal beneficiaries of the huge increases in the minimum income guarantee that we have introduced. That will be amplified by the pension credit, which will benefit half of pensioner households by an average of £400. As for compulsion, it falls within the terms of reference for the Pension Commission that the Government have established.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): At least, unlike the Secretary of State, the Lord Chancellor has a clear policy on saving for retirement and appreciates the importance of having a large pension. I hope that the Secretary of State will confirm two points about his decision. Does the Lord Chancellor's decision not to take his full salary increase mean that he will also not take the higher pension, worth more than £250,000, that would accompany that higher salary? Will the Secretary of State also confirm that the total value of the Lord Chancellor's fund has already exceeded £1.4 million? That question relates directly to the Secretary of State's statement in December when he set an Inland Revenue limit of £1.4 million as the maximum value for any pension fund. If £1.4 million is enough for even the most senior manager in British industry, why is it not enough for the Lord Chancellor?

Mr. Smith: I dare say that the hon. Gentleman has a big pension, compared with most of our constituents. He would do well not to adopt the simple, cheap, populist gibing of having a go at the Lord Chancellor, whose pension—as I have explained—is set down by statute, in laws passed by the Tories. I take it that the hon. Gentleman would be in no more of a position to abrogate those laws than I am.

Mr. Willetts: I asked the Secretary of State specific questions about the value of the extra pension that goes with the Lord Chancellor's salary and the £1.4 million limit announced in the House in December. The right hon. Gentleman has refused to answer those questions. The enormous gap is between what the Lord Chancellor will get and the evidence published today in the report by PricewaterhouseCoopers that the average value of people's state and funded pensions is set to fall by 25 per cent. over the next decades. We see millions of people facing the fear of pensions that are losing value and a

member of the Government with a pension that is shooting up in value. Does the Secretary of State understand the outrage that the contrast causes?

Mr. Smith: I understand the public reaction and so, indeed, does the Lord Chancellor, which is why he had already put in hand a review of his salary arrangements and why he is taking only the same 2.5 per cent. that applies to members of the Government and Members of the House. As for the hon. Gentleman's other points, we shall take no lectures on pensioner security from those who were responsible for pension mis-selling, who plunged millions of pensioners into poverty and who, even now, would privatise the state pension.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): As we have recently learned that in a growing number of major companies the pension deficit is more than half the capital value of the firm, does my right hon. Friend expect that, over the next few years, there will be a significant increase in the number of companies that are winding up their pension schemes completely—not just for new members? If he thinks that is likely to happen, should not we legislate this year on the winding-up procedures?

Mr. Smith: As I have already said, improved protection for members facing the possible winding up of their schemes is an important part of the Green Paper. We shall complete consultation by next month and where it is a matter of secondary legislation it would be possible to move quickly to take further action. I hope that we shall have the support of both sides of the House in so doing.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): The Secretary of State's predecessor acknowledged that he had inherited from the Conservatives the strongest system of occupational and private pensions in Europe. How is it that the Secretary of State has reduced the system to its biggest ever crisis? Is it because he has imposed a £5 billion a year tax on pensioners? There is now a 40 per cent. penalty for the majority of pensioners who save extra for their pension and the reward for encouraging people to save more has disappeared because of the 1 per cent. cap on stakeholders.

Mr. Smith: This country has a strong position on occupational and private provision; it had that historically and it still does, with the largest private pension savings in Europe. The right hon. Gentleman knows very well why pension funds are under pressure: greater longevity and the fall in the stock market. He can see that the measures set out in the Green Paper will build confidence by renewing partnership through the right Government framework and commitment by employers and employees; by greatly simplifying the tax treatment of pensions—something that I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman would welcome; and by making it easier for people to move more flexibly, and at their choice, towards retirement. I have yet to hear any alternatives from the Opposition Front Bench. Indeed, although the Conservatives bleat about the tax dividend credit, they never give a commitment to reinstate it. We shall take them seriously when they make some serious proposals.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Does the Secretary of State accept that people in my constituency, in the M25 ring and in other conurbations who are saving for retirement are frustrated about the disparity in the services that they receive? That is especially the case for my constituents in comparison with the London boroughs, where there is a concessionary fare pass scheme. It is unfair that in England we tolerate the fact that some people have generous—*[Interruption.]* I deliberately said England because I am politically correct. There is disparity because people in inner-conurbation areas enjoy much more generous concessions than those in neighbouring areas, which means that they have more disposable income in real terms because they are not spending it on transport—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The question was about saving for retirement.

Refugee Doctors

2. **Dr. Evan Harris** (Oxford, West and Abingdon): What his policy is on the need for refugee doctors in receipt of jobseeker's allowance or income support and undergoing training courses provided by the national health service to be available for work. [96320]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): The purpose of the jobseeker's allowance is to support clients who are available for and actively seeking work. Any change in those requirements would seriously dilute the work focus of the JSA. However, the Department of Health has established a steering group on refugee health professionals. The steering group has allocated £1 million for training and support to help refugee health professionals.

Dr. Harris: Does the Minister believe that that money is all that is required to solve the problem? At the moment, up to 2,000 refugee doctors are faced with the choice of giving up either the opportunity to use their skills in this country's health service, where they are desperately needed, or the livelihood that they require to support themselves and their families as they seek retraining in the NHS to give of their skills to this country. Should that be the only choice that they face?

Mr. Brown: I accept that the hon. Gentleman is on to a good point. That is why discussions between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health continue. We are seeking a way forward, but I cannot offer the prospect of an easy way forward at the expense of the benefits system.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): While welcoming what the Government have done with regard to the steering group, there are not only difficulties for doctors who would wish to be part of delivering health services in this country but, certainly in my constituency, single women who wish to return to

nursing are experiencing the same difficulties, which are exacerbated by the difficulties of obtaining child care. Will the steering group also examine that?

Mr. Brown: The child care issues are under discussion in a number of Departments, and we have made progress in that area. On the point about the route for health care professionals—whether nurses or those with other specialisms—discussions continue between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health. We are trying to find a way forward but, as I said to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), that cannot be at the expense of the benefits system.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Mindful of the enormous gaps in recruiting doctors in this country, largely because the policy of the Secretary of State for Health has driven so many home-grown doctors to frustration and to leave the profession, we need to use those refugees who are here. But will the Minister also be mindful that many countries—Ethiopia, for example—have more doctors based overseas in America than in Ethiopia itself? Will he make sure that when doctors are able to return to countries where they are desperately needed, they are assisted in doing so?

Mr. Brown: The whole focus of the Department for Work and Pension's working-age services is to help people into work in the United Kingdom. I respectfully suggest that the other issues that the hon. Gentleman raises are more appropriate for the Secretary of State for Health.

Incapacity Benefit

4. **Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth): How many incapacity benefit recipients lose part of the benefit because they receive armed forces pensions. [96322]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): People with armed forces pensions who are in receipt of incapacity benefit are not counted separately. The latest figures show that 11,800 people who are receiving incapacity benefit have had their benefit reduced to take account of their income from an occupational pension. Incapacity benefit is intended to provide a source of income for sick and disabled people of working age. We believe that it is therefore right to take account of their occupational pensions.

Jon Trickett: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Many people may be surprised to learn that it is possible that one's incapacity benefit can be reduced as a result of serving in the armed forces. At a time of increased tension in the world, may I urge the Minister to consider the possibility that either part or all of an armed forces pension might be exempted for incapacity benefit purposes? In any event, will he please look at the case of my constituent, Mr. Allsopp from South Kirkby, who tells me that he has lost a very large amount of his incapacity benefit in that way?

Malcolm Wicks: Obviously, I am happy to look at any situation regarding the hon. Gentleman's constituent. War pensions paid because of disablement in service are fully disregarded when calculating incapacity benefit, but it might help to clarify the fact that the first £85 of pension income from the normal military retirement pension is totally disregarded, with only 50 per cent. of the excess taken into account. Most people would say that it is right to have regard to a significant occupational pension.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): On reflection, does the Minister think that it is not really moral to cut the incapacity benefit of a person who was in the service of the Government and whose disability has come about by serving the Government and, indeed, the country?

Malcolm Wicks: As I have said, where the disability occurs because of service in the armed forces, no account is taken of the pension in relation to incapacity benefit. What is at stake is whether, when people retire in the normal way from the military, as they might do from public service, when they take an early retirement pension and they are of working age, we should have regard to some of that money, given that incapacity benefit is intended for people of working age. Our judgment is that to disregard the first £85 and thereafter to take account of 50 per cent. of the pension is a reasonable compromise.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): It is worth the Minister bearing in mind that armed forces pensions are among the very few pensions in this country that do not kick in until servicemen and women have done between 12 and 22 years' service, which is very unusual. Perhaps it might be worth considering the situation in that light.

Malcolm Wicks: Obviously, we keep all those matters under review. I repeat again, however, that to take no account of the first £85, and then to have regard to only 50 per cent. of the excess, seems to us a reasonable compromise at a time when significant numbers of people are on incapacity benefit and a growing proportion of them—although I do not want to exaggerate the numbers—probably have quite substantial occupational pensions.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): On a point of fact, the Government's judgment was to have an exemption of £50; the other place set it at £85. Is that not just one more example of the Government betraying our service personnel by allowing their interests to slip between the cracks of the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Work and Pensions? As our servicemen and women form up to go to the Gulf, they have the worst level of medical cover with which they have gone to war for more than 100 years, and private insurance companies have backed off from providing insurance. Is not that pettifogging measure introduced two years ago just one more kick in the teeth for those who serve us bravely?

Malcolm Wicks: No. I have made the point that when people are disabled serving their country, no regard is taken of that pension if they receive an incapacity benefit. We are not arguing about military personnel as such, but whether all people of working age who receive an early occupational pension should be able to keep

100 per cent. of it, or whether some of it—above the level of £85 in this case—should be taken into account when they are awarded an incapacity benefit. That is the judgment that we have made.

European Year of Disabled Persons

5. **Mr. Colin Challen** (Morley and Rothwell): What plans his Department has for the European Year of Disabled Persons. [96323]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): This year is the European Year of Disabled Persons. I want it to be a celebration of the achievements and potential of disabled people and an opportunity to raise awareness generally of the rights of disabled people, as well as taking the chance to improve civil rights in Britain for disabled people. My Department has almost doubled to £2 million the amount of money that we are putting into celebrating the year. It is funding 171 local, regional and national projects run by groups of and for disabled people to promote rights and participation.

Mr. Challen: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply, which demonstrates how deeply committed the Government are to disabled people. In Leeds, three groups will benefit from the funding: the disability modernisation scheme, People in Action and Nterplay theatre. My only fear is that, once the European year is over, we might begin to forget the achievements of it, as has been the case with many previous European years. I urge my hon. Friend to review the plans for what happens afterwards, because that is important.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is right that sustainability of achievements is an important part of the European Year of Disabled Persons. We hope that the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 22 January of a draft disability Bill, to be published later this year, will provide long-lasting benefit to disabled people in this country. My view is that the local projects run by disabled people in areas such as Leeds, which my hon. Friend mentioned, will continue following the end of the year to make a real impact on the lives of disabled people.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): While we welcome the recent launch in this country of the European Year of Disabled Persons, the Minister will know that we remain concerned about apparent failures to make inroads in relation to the number of people of working age who still claim disability benefits. Even if there is no target as such, what progress does she hope to make, in this year of all years, so that slogans such as "Pathways to work" reflect less of the sound bite and more of solid achievement?

Maria Eagle: I would listen to the hon. Gentleman more if his party in office had not doubled the number of people on disability benefits. The number of people of working age claiming disability benefit who are able to go into work has narrowed. The number of disabled people of working age who are now in work has increased by 4.5 per cent. That achievement needs to be built on by "Pathways to work", which is the incapacity benefit Green Paper. As the hon. Gentleman knows, because we have discussed it many times, the Government will trial later this year and next year new interventions that aim to assist disabled people by providing proper rehabilitation and help so that they can get into work and benefit from it. We do not want them to be excluded from the labour market as they have been all too often in the past.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I am sure that the Minister will agree that one of the biggest barriers to disabled people getting into work is the discriminatory attitudes of many employers, who still believe that employing a disabled person is more effort than it is worth. On the back of the promise that the European Year of Disabled Persons will promote the positive aspects of disability, will she take the opportunity to ensure that employers are informed that disabled people are worthwhile members of society and would be good people to have working for them because they add a great deal to a company?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is right. For example, disabled people are less likely to take time off work sick than those who are not disabled. That is, perhaps, a little known fact. My Department will use resources this year to raise awareness among employers of the value of employing disabled people if they want to retain a good and skilled work force. Employers should also realise that by October next year, when the small firms exemption from the employment provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is abolished, it will be unlawful for any employer, irrespective of the size of the company, to discriminate against a disabled person in employment.

Pension Service

6. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on progress on the setting up of the Pension Service. [96324]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Andrew Smith): We are committed to providing the best possible service for pensioners and the creation of the Pension Service enables us to do that. Twenty four of 26 modern pension centres have now opened, backed up by local services operating in the community throughout England, Scotland and Wales, including local advice surgeries.

Mr. Dismore: Will my right hon. Friend consider the situation at the Glasgow centre? Minimum income guarantee claimants in my constituency have been referred there since November and often have to wait a long time for an answer when they phone. Sometimes they get no answer at all or are put through to the wrong call centre. Worst of all, sometimes they are left on hold, which runs up their phone bills. That is a real concern to MIG claimants. Old age pension claimants in my constituency will use the Glasgow centre from April. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that it works properly as

soon as possible, and certainly by April? In connection with that, I tried to phone the local complaints service today and it was permanently engaged.

Mr. Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing those issues to my attention. I know that he has also written to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions. I have checked on what is happening at Glasgow and on the complaints that he has received. I am assured by the chief operating officer that its performance has been improving and in a short while will be at the fully satisfactory standard that we all want to see.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): Does the Secretary of State know that as a result of the grotesque extension of means-testing policies by his Government, the work load of the Pension Service in Birmingham is set to increase by something like 100 per cent.? Why does he not stand at the Dispatch Box and apologise to the House for not following the wise advice of his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), on means-testing and for breaking the Chancellor of the Exchequer's solemn pledge in 1993 that the Government would work to reduce, not increase, means-testing?

Mr. Smith: Far from apologising, I am proud of what the Government and the Labour party in office have done to help the poorest pensioners. Let us remember that the minimum income guarantee will increase to £102 for a single pensioner and £155 for a pensioner couple this April. The Government have been responsible for helping the poorest pensioners' incomes increase by 30 per cent. in real terms. The hon. Gentleman and his party should be ashamed for allowing so many pensioners to languish in poverty for so long.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): What help is the Pension Service to my constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Howard of Ashbourne, who this month will have their pensions halved as a result of the Maxwell Communications fund pension fiasco? Why did it take the right hon. Gentleman's Department three years to reply to their inquiries?

Mr. Smith: If our Department has taken three years to reply to those inquiries, I shall certainly look into it and write to the hon. Gentleman, as his constituents are entitled to a better service. As for the substance of his question on the Maxwell pension fund, that is a matter between the pension fund trustees, law debenture and the members of the scheme. We greatly regret and sympathise with the position in which the pensioners have been put. The Government, for their part, have honoured in full the terms of the agreement that was brokered by Lord Cuckney and introduced under the previous Government.

Pensions

7. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): What estimate he has made of the number of people who will receive the (a) minimum income guarantee and (b) pension credit in the next financial year; and if he will make a statement. [96342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): We estimate that by October 2003 about 1.8 million minimum income guarantee claims will be automatically transferred to pension credit. Between October 2003 and October 2004, we expect to take on a further million additional successful applications for pension credit. We want all pensioners to have a decent and secure income in retirement, and are committed to ensuring that all pensioners receive their entitlement. As a result of our policies, from April no pensioner need live on less than £102.10 a week or £155.80 for couples.

Mr. Waterson: Does the Minister agree that if all pensioners claimed what they were entitled to, that would have a massive effect on pensioner poverty? Does she agree with the estimate that nearly 3 million pensioners are not claiming their entitlement? Is not her Government only making the problem worse by overcomplicating the system?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman should realise that the pension credit vastly simplifies the way in which pensioners make claims. Pensioners will be able simply to telephone us and make a claim on the telephone once every five years, which is much simpler than the current system under which there is effectively a weekly means test. The Opposition need to get their policy straight—we are not sure whether they are against the pension credit, which gives half of all pensioner households an average of £400 extra a year, or whether they would keep it, which their spokesman, when pushed, keeps saying they will do. We are not sure what their policy is—perhaps they can enlighten us.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the expected beneficiaries of the pension credit are the great many women who retire on low incomes? Will she give an assurance that she will not listen to the Opposition and tinker with that process, whether those voices belong to people who say that they want to review it, or to the Liberal Democrats who say that they want to abolish it altogether?

Maria Eagle: I agree with my hon. Friend. Fifty-four per cent. of pensioners who will gain under the pension credit will be single women, and a quarter of pensioners who will gain will be over 80. The credit will target help on those who most need it to try to eradicate pensioner poverty. If it had not been for the Opposition's time in office, we would have a lot less to do.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Does the Minister accept that at the moment people are suffering because they are squeezed by works pension schemes that are losing their value and a state system that is so complicated that people simply do not receive the help to which they are entitled? Is she aware that three-quarters of a million people are not taking up the minimum income guarantee and that her target for 2006 will mean that 1 million pensioner households will not

claim the pension credit? Do not both those factors have the same common cause—action by the Chancellor of the Exchequer? He took £5 billion a year out of pension funds, causing the current crisis, and was so wedded to targeting overcomplication that he lost sight of the fact that people have to understand the system to claim. Should not those blunders be laid fairly and squarely at his door, and known as Brown's blunders? What will the Minister do to pick up the pieces?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman seems to think that he is at Treasury questions, not Work and Pensions questions. In fact, the Government have already made sure through take-up campaigns that an extra 144,000 pensioners are at least £20 a week better off. Once the pension credit starts, we will be able to ensure that that help, which is targeted on those who most need it and who were left in penury under the Tories, can go where it is needed. That is what is important about the pension credit, but the Opposition do not want to admit it.

Long-term Unemployed

8. **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield): What initiatives he plans to ensure that the long-term unemployed get assistance to acquire basic skills. [96325]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): Jobcentre Plus has comprehensive arrangements in place for identifying clients who need help with their basic skills and for referring them to appropriate learning opportunities. We are looking at ways of increasing the number of people we help. Last year we piloted a range of approaches aimed at encouraging more people to take up basic skills training. We are currently evaluating those pilots.

Mr. Sheerman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it may be one of "Brown's blunders" that we now have the lowest unemployment that any of us can remember? That gives us a unique opportunity to tackle hard-core unemployment—people who need basic skills if they are ever to work again. Is it not odd that at a time when we have that opportunity as a result of the £1 billion-plus budget, throughout the country we are cutting the smaller education and training providers and going for the big ones—the ones with less local knowledge, less local contact, and in many people's view, less ability to deliver basic skills? Will my right hon. Friend look at what is happening in his Department and see whether he can make changes to favour some of the small providers?

Mr. Brown: The fact that the labour market is as tight as it is right across the United Kingdom gives us an opportunity to help the hardest to help. There can be no doubt that those who lack basic skills—the ability to read, write and count—are among the hardest to help. We should set out to do as much as we can to help those, the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens, into work. I will do as my hon. Friend asks and look at the way in which the Department chooses its providers. They are, of course, chosen in competitive tender operations and there is an audit function that checks the quality of the provision; but as my hon. Friend asks me to do, I will have a look and see whether more can be done to help smaller providers.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): As the Minister is aware, in many areas, including north Yorkshire, there is a growing shortage of skills, which poses a problem for the employment market. Would he see fit to do more, particularly for the over-50s who have been employed for less than six months—for example, by giving them IT skills, which are now essential for many jobs?

Mr. Brown: I am willing to look at what can be done, but of course there are dead-weight costs associated with some of the schemes, which the taxpayer must pay. In all provision, there is a balance between the interests of the individual whom we are trying to help, and the interests of the taxpayer.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Jobcentre Plus facilities which he has just described for the long-term unemployed will be available in Eckington in my constituency, instead of the jobcentre there being closed down? It is important that facilities be provided directly, rather than people having to move to other areas to obtain them.

Mr. Brown: I want to make sure that a full range of Jobcentre Plus services are available to all my hon. Friend's constituents. We met recently to discuss how that can be done. I am looking at proposals, but I cannot promise him today that it will be possible to keep the local facility open.

Child Support Agency

9. **Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell): If he will make a statement on the treatment by the Child Support Agency and the benefits system of parents who voluntarily choose to share the cost of child maintenance. [96326]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Andrew Smith): In the existing scheme for child support, the non-resident parent's maintenance liability reduces if care is shared for 104 or more nights in a year. In the new scheme, which starts for new cases from 3 March, reductions will apply if care is shared for 52 nights or more. For equal care, there are special rules. The new scheme gives more recognition and encouragement to non-resident parents who are trying to meet their responsibilities towards their children.

Chris Grayling: Will the Secretary of State look at the example of a constituent of mine who came to see me a couple of weeks ago? He and his former wife share equally the custody of their children, and the costs, but as a result of the changes to the children's tax credit—under which, up to now, they both received 50 per cent. of the benefit—after 1 April he will receive none of it and his former wife will receive all of it. What message should I give my constituent about the justice of that?

Will the Secretary of State agree to look again at such anomalies in the changes that the Government are making to the system?

Mr. Smith: I am of course happy to look into the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman describes. On child support reform, in the new scheme, where people are sharing care—in other words, where a non-resident parent has care for 175 nights or more—child support will reduce by half, plus £7 a week for each child.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): My right hon. Friend is correct in trying to advise that where parents can come to some agreement on maintenance for a family, that will be in the best interests of everyone concerned. I congratulate him on trying to take us out of the minefield that the Child Support Agency has entered into, but will he comment on the situation that will develop after April, when the working families tax credit comes into being? The parent with care could receive a substantial increase in their income, which could be more than that of the absent parent. We are therefore creating an imbalance and an unfair system, and entering a further minefield. Will he take on board that point and ensure that that unfairness does not apply?

Mr. Smith: It was essential to get away from the complexity and the more than 100 assessments that had to be made in each case in the present system. There was general support in the House and among the general public for introducing a much simpler scheme. The basis of that simpler scheme is that the factors taken into account in assessing non-resident parents' liabilities are their net income—the amount that they receive after tax, national insurance and pension contributions—the child care responsibilities that they have in respect of the family in which they now are, and, as I said, how many nights' care are shared. Account is not taken of the income of the parent with care, but that is a feature of the simpler system that we are introducing, which has the great merits of ensuring that people know where they stand and of being more efficient to operate, thereby allowing child support resources to be diverted away from assessment, which currently takes such a large share, and on to enforcement, so that we can ensure that children benefit from the child support that they should have.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The Secretary of State will be aware that the move from the old child support rules to the new ones will create lots of gainers and lots of losers. He will also know that people who are on the existing system may know what their assessment will be under the new system, but will realise that that assessment will not apply until they are switched to that new system. Has he received the reports that I have received from around Britain describing what is happening now that a date for the introduction of the new system has been given? For example, working lone parents who can see that they will gain some money under the new rules are contacting the Child Support Agency and saying, "We do not want anything more to do with you for the next three months", with a view to coming back in three months' time to register new cases on an enhanced maintenance assessment, so that they will get more child maintenance. Had he anticipated that loophole, is he aware of it, and is he doing anything about it?

Mr. Smith: Yes indeed: there are rules covering the period between the cessation of an existing claim and the start of a new one that are precisely calculated to attempt to close that loophole. A 13-week period is involved. One can well understand why those who have calculated that they stand to gain from the new system want to get on to it as soon as possible. It has been clear from the beginning that we would have to take the process in stages. First, we should deal with the new cases, including the other cases that are linked to them, and we should then move to conversion of existing cases once we know that the new system is working properly. That is the sensible way to proceed. We needed to deal with that loophole without again erecting a battery of rules and bureaucracy that is so complex that it starts to divert more resources away from the main job in hand—getting money to the children who need it.

Vera Baird (Redcar): When the new system starts on 3 March, by and large, it will pay out less cash to single parents than before, according to the National Council for One Parent Families. The quid pro quo is that there should be better enforcement, which is the Government's stated aim. At the moment, about half the people who are ordered to pay maintenance do not pay all that they should and about a quarter do not pay anything at all. Can we be reassured that increasing compliance is at the top of the Government's agenda for the new scheme?

Mr. Smith: Absolutely. That is why I have mentioned this already in virtually every answer that I have given. This will enable us to put more resources into compliance. In making these estimates of gainers, it is also important to take account of the fact that, at the moment, those on income support who do not see the benefit of any maintenance paid will benefit from the child support premium of up to £10 a week.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): I am sympathetic with the Minister in terms of the changes that he is making, but does he understand that my constituents would like occasionally to be able to get through to talk to somebody about this? The problems with the CSA remain its very slow response and the great difficulty in getting through to it—not only for one's constituents but for Members of Parliament. After all these years, we have still not managed to establish a system that is user-friendly in the sense that the people who really need to talk to someone can feel that there is someone there to help them and explain to them what to do. All hon. Members on both sides of the House would be much impressed if the Minister could give us some assurance that this really will be put right at long last.

Mr. Smith: I can give the right hon. Gentleman and the whole House the assurance that, yes, it will be better under the new system, for the reasons that I have already given. Of course, we have already improved—quite dramatically in some areas—the performance of the Child Support Agency. We have got case compliance up to 71 per cent. and cash compliance up to 68 per cent. and,

while the time taken to settle cases is still much too long, at 18 to 20 weeks, it will be six weeks under the new system. That is much less time than it took during the sheer chaos that we all remember when the CSA was introduced. I would therefore like to put on record my appreciation of the chief executive of the CSA, Doug Smith, and all his staff, who have been working so hard with good effect to improve the performance of what is a very important agency to so many children in this country.

Jobcentre Plus

10. **Mr. Peter Pike** (Burnley): When he expects a new Jobcentre Plus office to be opened in Burnley. [96327]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): More than 70 integrated Jobcentre Plus offices are now operating across the country and, by the end of this financial year, we aim to have increased that number to well over 200. My hon. Friend will be aware that we are planning to open an integrated Jobcentre Plus office in Burnley, and I would like to thank him for the support that he has given to local managers in trying to find a suitable site. We are still hoping that we will soon secure an agreement with the local council on a site that is suitable for our customers and compatible with local planning priorities. We have agreed to evaluate the sites currently on offer from the council, while also exploring opportunities for joint development. All options are being reviewed as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Pike: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I am sure that he will want the people of Burnley to benefit from a Jobcentre Plus as soon as possible. I am also sure, however, that he will recognise my concern over the deadlock that exists at the moment. Is it not important that the Northwest Development Agency, as well as the Department and the council, should look positively at the development that the Department would like to have on the site, as it could surely include retail premises as well as the new Jobcentre Plus, thus benefiting all the people of Burnley?

Mr. Brown: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for the constructive interest that he has taken in this matter. There is a real opportunity here to do something that will benefit the people of Burnley. Discussions are continuing, and if my hon. Friend would like to come and see me, and to meet officials and make his representations to them, I would of course be very happy to see him.

Means-tested Benefits

12. **Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South): What percentage of pensioners are claiming means-tested benefits. [96329]

The Minister for Pensions (Mr. Ian McCartney) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McCartney: Supersub! Ole Gunnar Solskjaer! Mr. MacIntyre of *The Times* probably thinks I speak Norwegian better than English.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Say that again.

Mr. McCartney: Touché. Speak up a bit!

About 30 per cent. of pensioner families have been in receipt of income-related benefits over the past five years. From April 2003, a single pensioner will be at least £17 a week—and a couple nearly £28 a week—better off in real terms from the rises in the minimum income guarantee. Those pensioners eligible for pension credit will gain about £400 a year. From April 2002, we are spending an extra £6 billion a year in real terms on pensioners as a result of our policies introduced since 1997. This includes £2.5 billion more on the poorest third of pensioners. In the hon. Gentleman's constituency, about 1,700 people are in receipt of the minimum income guarantee, and some 18,300 people received a winter fuel payment for last winter.

Richard Ottaway: The Minister will be aware that the Prime Minister, no less, highlighted the problems of having too much means-testing when he spoke recently about the number of pensioners who do not take up income support. Why, therefore, is the Minister introducing a means-tested pension credit, which increases dependency and acts as a disincentive to save? Would it not be better if the Minister followed the lead of the Prime Minister?

Mr. McCartney: I never deviate from any line that the Prime Minister takes and hon. Members should know that.

What belies the hon. Gentleman's question is the fact that the Tory party does not want to continue with special investments to tackle pensioner poverty. His party would abolish the minimum income guarantee. The Tories do not like pension credit either, but they cannot bring themselves publicly to tell pensioners that they would rather cut the additional £400 a year, which pensioners are receiving from this Government, than accept the responsibility of supporting the scheme. The Government are slashing away the weekly means test and replacing it with one telephone call, four months before people retire, thus ensuring not only a basic state pension but a minimum income guarantee as well. Furthermore, unlike the Conservative Government, we will pay additional money to take account of people's small savings. When the hon. Gentleman had a clawback, for every pound of small savings people lost £1 in benefit. We have removed the anomaly that was created by the Tory Government.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the alternatives to the Government's plans—namely, targeting additional help in ways that are not based on income but on age? Does he agree that such a policy would do nothing to help younger, poorer pensioners—who would have to wait until they were 75 or more to receive any significant extra help—and that the policy

would condemn 65 to 75-year-olds to weekly means-testing—which all the parties opposite pretend to dislike?

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend is right. The Government are targeting poverty—whether someone is a pensioner of 60 or a pensioner of 85. Some of the proposals that my hon. Friend mentions would lead to a reduction of £17 a week for the poorest pensioners. Hon. Members on the opposite side of the House always try to do one thing—con pensioners. On this side, we do not con pensioners; we are on their side.

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): The Minister will be aware of significant problems in the take-up of means-tested pensioner benefit in Scotland—a country in which, after nearly six years of Labour Government, one in four pensioners is languishing in poverty, to use the Secretary of State's words. The Minister must be concerned that the Government's planned massive extension of means-testing will exacerbate the problem of take-up.

Mr. McCartney: I have good news for the hon. Lady. Under that Labour Government, nearly 1 million pensioners in Scotland benefit from winter fuel payments, and hundreds of thousands of them are now benefiting from the minimum income guarantee. In addition, the creation of the new Pension Service has meant new jobs in Dundee, Motherwell and Glasgow. In other words, not only have new jobs been created in areas of high unemployment, but there are better services for the pensioners of Scotland.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): Does the Minister accept that there is any disincentive-to-save effect inherent in the pension credit?

Mr. McCartney: No.

Unemployment

13. **Mr. Gary Streeter** (South-West Devon): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the rate of unemployment in the north of England. [96330]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): Over the past year, claimant unemployment has fallen by 12 per cent. in the north-east and by 6 per cent. in the north-west and Yorkshire and Humberside regions. In the hon. Gentleman's constituency, claimant unemployment has fallen by 13 per cent. These figures are evidence of the strength of our labour market policies, which have contributed to national employment rising to record levels and unemployment falling in every region since 1997.

Mr. Streeter: How does the Minister feel about being part of the first Labour Government in history to have turned its back so blatantly on trying to tackle the north/south divide? Rather than building hundreds of thousands of new homes in the south to cope with the migration of people who cannot find jobs in the north, why do the Minister and his Department not focus on stimulating economic growth? His party is simply throwing in the towel and turning its back on its natural constituents.

Mr. Brown: The fact is that unemployment is falling the furthest and the fastest in the region where it was previously the highest. That is a good thing and should be welcomed on both sides of the House.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I, too, have undertaken an analysis of unemployment trends in my constituency in the north-west of England. One factor stands out in my constituency, and that is the effect of the working families tax credit. It has had a direct result in reducing unemployment now that there has been new investment in the retail and leisure sector. Is that trend seen elsewhere in the north of England; and is my right hon. Friend intent on publishing the research that he has carried out?

Mr. Brown: The information that the Department has available has been put in the Library of the House. The broad trends in employment are similar right across the United Kingdom. The move from manufacturing and agricultural employment towards employment in the service sector is a universal trend that is not just true of the United Kingdom. It is true also of the European Union and the United States of America. In other words, it is a worldwide trend.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the underpinning policy of making work pay. The fact that the jobs are there and that it pays people to take them has enabled us to achieve record levels of employment.

Carers Allowance

15. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): What plans he has further to assist people on carers' allowance to take part-time work. [96332]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): We have increased the earnings limits for invalid care allowance so that carers who combine work with their caring responsibilities can earn £75 a week plus allowable expenses before it affects their benefit. Carers are also benefiting from the introduction of our new Jobcentre Plus service in which personal advisers can help carers to find training or employment that is suitable and tailored to their circumstances.

Dr. Palmer: I declare an interest: one of my staff is a full-time carer, but she is able to help me with internet inquiries by working from home. It is becoming increasingly possible for full-time carers to contribute usefully to society, so does my hon. Friend foresee further improvements that will enable carers working from home to supplement the income of the home through earning a decent wage?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend will be aware that, to qualify for the invalid care allowance, carers have to do at least 35 hours a week of caring. That is quite a lot. We have already increased the earnings limit, which means that, in addition to the £75 and allowable expenses, carers can keep in touch with the labour market.

However, of the 450,000 carers, only 30,000 or so manage to combine part-time work with caring. We want to encourage them to do that when possible, but as I have said, they qualify for the benefit only if they work in a caring role for at least 35 hours a week. That leaves them with only a certain amount of spare time in which to work.

Youth Unemployment

16. **Mr. Ian Davidson** (Glasgow, Pollok): What assessment his Department has made of the effect which the new deal has had on youth unemployment. [96333]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): Since 1997, youth unemployment has fallen by a third and long-term youth unemployment has been cut by three quarters. The new deal has played an important part in this success, helping almost 400,000 young people into jobs and improving the work prospects of many more. Independent research found that the number of young people unemployed for six months or more would be twice as high without the new deal.

In Scotland, the new deal has helped nearly 47,000 young people into work, and in my hon. Friend's constituency, nearly 800 young people have moved into work as a result of the new deal.

Mr. Davidson: Will my right hon. Friend agree that he is a fine man and that this is a fine policy? The impact on my constituency has been entirely beneficial, but does he accept that some youngsters still disappear off the registers and some are extremely difficult to help because of their educational or emotional difficulties? Extra effort should be put into helping such youngsters in constituencies such as mine. Does he not agree that it is about time we had a Jobcentre Plus centre in Glasgow, Pollok?

Mr. Brown: My universal experience in this place shows that a compliment is usually followed by a request. Although it is often polite, it is nevertheless a request. My hon. Friend makes a persuasive case for locating a new Jobcentre Plus outlet in the heart of his constituency, which has above average unemployment. The issue is being examined, and although I cannot make an announcement today, I should be happy to see my hon. Friend if he would like to discuss the matter as we approach making a decision.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that, his panoply of statistics notwithstanding, the Minister would acknowledge that long-term unemployment among young people remains a significant problem, what proportion of the 1,623 long-term unemployed people who were diagnosed as requiring special assistance for a basic skills deficiency between September 2001 and April 2002 were youngsters? How many have been helped? To what extent has that assistance enabled them to secure continuing, durable employment?

Mr. Brown: Four or five thousand young people in this country could be deemed long-term unemployed. One of the successes of the Government's employment policy is in almost eradicating long-term youth unemployment.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Statistically impossible.

Mr. Brown: We have programmes to help those who are hardest to assist. When people have repeated short-term episodes of employment, other factors are usually at work. They include offending, problems with drugs or educational attainment and basic skills. The Government have programmes to help people with all those problems. The Government believe that those who can should work, and the jobs are there for them to be helped into.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Many traditions and conventions pertain in the House. Although many are written down in Standing Orders, many are not. I have noticed that, in the past few years, some of the customs have degraded and hon. Members have lost sight of them. For example, I have seen people move in the line of sight between you, the Minister, and an hon. Member who is asking a question. I have seen some hon. Members reading speeches and others leaving the Chamber without nodding to you. I do not believe that that is meant as a discourtesy to you. However, the large intake of new Members on both sides of the House after the past two general elections means that there has been no opportunity to explain to hon. Members what ought and what ought not to be done in the House. Do you believe that it is now time to produce a guidebook for Members of Parliament, old and new, on how to behave with courtesy in the Chamber?

Mr. Speaker: I would not blame new Members. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. At the beginning of the Parliament, I issued to all hon. Members, old and new, guidance on the conventions and courtesies of the House. Perhaps some hon. Members have forgotten the contents of my letter. I therefore intend to issue a revised, expanded version to all hon. Members in the next few weeks. I hope that they will all read its contents with care.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. My point of order could hardly be on a graver matter. It concerns the misleading of Parliament and the people. Misleading the House of Commons could not be more serious. I refer to the document, "Iraq: Its Infrastructure of Concealment, Deception and Intimidation." It claims that part two gives up to date details of Iraq's network of intelligence and security organisations whose job is to keep Saddam and his regime in power and to prevent the international community from disarming Iraq.

Surely plagiarising an out of date PhD thesis and presenting it as an official report of the latest British intelligence information reveals a lack of awareness of the disastrous consequences of such deception.

This is not a trivial leak. It is a document that is the basis of whether or not this country goes to war, and whether or not young servicemen and women are to put their own lives at risk and, indeed, put at risk the lives of thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of innocent civilians.

I put it to you, Mr. Speaker that there really ought to have been, at the very least, a clarification of what has happened from a senior Minister.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman applied for a debate on this very subject under Standing Order No. 24. I had a feeling that, because I had refused his application, he would raise a point of order on the subject. I do not really appreciate it when, after an application has been refused, the subject is then raised on a point of order. The Father of the House knows as well as I do that these are matters that he can put to the Prime Minister whenever he catches my eye at Prime Minister's Question Time.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Has the Prime Minister said whether he intends to make a statement to the House about what he told the House last Monday? He said then

> "As the report we published at the weekend makes clear, and which I placed in the Library of the House, there is a huge infrastructure of deception and concealment designed to prevent the inspectors from doing their job."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 22.]

Given subsequent revelations about this document, it is surely a matter of grave concern that the Prime Minister should give it his personal authority. It is imperative that Parliament and people are able to trust the Prime Minister absolutely, particularly over intelligence matters, at a time when we appear to be rushing into the dangerous precedent of a pre-emptive war.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman asks whether the Prime Minister has approached me. The answer is no, he has not.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Is it a point of order on the same matter?

Andrew Mackinlay: No, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: In that case, I call Mr. Öpik.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): My point of order relates to the forthcoming business. As you know, Mr. Speaker, in their wisdom the Government have once again chosen to schedule a Northern Ireland debate on the Floor of the House at the same time as a debate on a statutory instrument on Northern Ireland matters in the Committee Corridor. I realise that the Government are under some pressure to pass legislation in Parliament during the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it strikes me as inappropriate that they repeatedly organise business that requires Members to be in two places at once. Although fortunately my hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) can cover one debate while I cover the other, I—along with others, I think, especially members of Northern Ireland parties—find that we are hindered from scrutinising Government legislation and proposals.

May I ask you to raise the matter through the appropriate channels, Mr. Speaker, and impress on the Government the difficulties they are causing with regard to scrutiny of Government legislation on Northern Ireland? I do not question the amount of legislation that is coming to us, but I do question the timetabling.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. It is the second time in a week that this has happened. Last week we had the coincidence of consideration of a statutory instrument on Northern Ireland and a meeting of the

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

Northern Ireland Grand Committee. I entered a protest last week at the beginning of proceedings in the Statutory Instrument Committee.

It is always possible to suppose that one unfortunate coincidence of that kind is a mistake, but for it to happen twice in a week looks remarkably like a systematic pattern. It looks as though the Government are actually delighted that those who take a professional interest in Northern Ireland will not be able to do their job of giving proper scrutiny to two different legislative proposals, because one will be dealt with in Committee while the other is being dealt with on the Floor of the House.

This is a very serious matter, Mr. Speaker, from the point of view of the people of Northern Ireland and also generally, in the context of the way in which Parliament conducts its business under the rule of the Government's business managers.

Mr. Speaker: I say to both hon. Gentlemen that I am not responsible for business management. It is up to both hon. Members, who are members of different parties, to take this matter up with their business managers, who have access to the usual channels.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Let me take Mr. Mackinlay.

Andrew Mackinlay: I did not mean to mislead you a few moments ago, Mr. Speaker. The point of order of my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), to which I listened very carefully, related to part two of the great document in question. I wanted to raise a new matter in relation to part one. At our party conference, in the House and in my constituency I have urged people to trust my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* Well, I still do. But part two, which my hon. Friend did not raise, said, for instance, that UNMOVIC had been intimidated by the Iraqis. That is brand new. We have not heard it either here or in the Foreign Affairs Committee. That claim needs to be amplified and probed. There is no parliamentary oversight of our intelligence and security services. There are appointments as head of the intelligence and security services—namely, the Prime Minister—who happen to be parliamentarians. But there is no parliamentary oversight. There is a parlous state of affairs—a void. On this matter there should be a statement to clarify part one so that we can probe. Clearly, we would not be able to do all of this at Prime Minister's Question Time. It is a very serious matter. I put my head on the line in terms of trust, and I should like a good explanation of how and why the assertions have been made.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Further to that point of order. I listened with care last week, Mr. Speaker, when you explained with great courtesy and care that an announcement should be made in this House and not elsewhere. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) has a point. There is real concern on both sides of the House about how we are to explain to our constituents what may be a situation in which Britain enters into a war about which many of us on both sides of the House are very concerned. We need to have in the House the opportunity of explaining and asking the questions that we want to ask. I know, Mr. Speaker, that you have no control over the order of the House in that sense, but I am sure that there are connections which you might use to explain that this is not a party political matter. It is a serious matter for those of us who have deep moral concerns about the issue, who want to ask the questions and in a sense want to be reassured, but who are not at present. It is in the House, here, that we should have that opportunity.

Glenda Jackson *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Is it on the same matter?

Glenda Jackson: Further to that point of order, with reference in particular to the concerns that my constituents expressed to me only this weekend on the dossier that the Government issued, and particularly part two. My constituents well understand that to mislead is a heinous crime in the House, but they would require clarification of what constitutes plagiarism. Is "plagiarism" a parliamentary euphemism for what they perceive as theft? Some Minister should have come to the Dispatch Box, admittedly to attempt to explain the inexplicable, or are we, as one of my constituents put to me so robustly at the weekend, being governed by a group of petty thieves?

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Further to that point of order, may I raise the extraordinary position that we are in, Mr. Speaker, and your constitutional role in it? We are in the position, possibly unique in our history, that we might be going to war without the wholehearted support of the British people. In the past we have relied on the Prime Minister and the Head of State to take these decisions, knowing that the country was behind them, but we are all aware that now there is no wholehearted support. The country is divided about the decision to go to war. Is it not right, Mr. Speaker, that you should review your role as a defender of the reputation of Parliament? We were all validly elected, in the same way as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) was, and all our elections have equal validity. Is it wrong that the Government should go ahead and declare war without the consent of Parliament and of our constituents? If we say that it is, that means that we are telling the people that the only way in which they can seek redress is to go on the streets, because Parliament is impotent.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. There are so many hon. Members making points of order that if I accept any more now, I will forget where it all started.

Mr. Lilley: Mine will be memorable.

Mr. Speaker: I realise that the right hon. Gentleman's contribution will be memorable, but let me try to respond to the lesser mortals in this House. I should tell the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) and other hon. Members that I am not

responsible for the utterances of the Prime Minister or any other Minister, and nor am I responsible for documents that are placed in the Library or given out anywhere else. I can understand the deep concerns that every Member has about these matters, particularly given that our young servicemen are involved. Obviously, their parents and loved ones are deeply concerned about what we do. However, my powers are limited. Any urgent question that is put before me is studied very carefully, and sometimes it is rejected and sometimes it is agreed to, but what I am suggesting is a way in which some hon. Members can make their case known. I should also say that the Leader of the House did promise a debate on this matter; in fact, I and others in this Chamber were present at business questions at the time.

Both Labour and Conservative Members have raised this very worrying issue with me—some of them belong to the 1922 committee, and others to the parliamentary Labour party—and it is up to Members to put the case at these forums to try to pursue a debate. The House knows that I only have the authority that the House gives me, and I think that hon. Members will agree that they are asking me to do things that I do not have the powers to do. That is the best that I can say on this matter. Does the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) now have anything to say, or is he quite happy with what I have said?

Mr. Lilley: My point would have concluded simply by asking you, Mr. Speaker, whether there is any precedent of this magnitude and gravity for the House having been misled, our allies having been misled, and of individual Members in turn having misled our constituents, and no one resigning.

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman uses the term "misled", but that is bringing me into the argument and I should not be brought into it. We have the business of the House to attend to—

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will know of the high regard that I have for you personally and for your office, but one matter that very definitely is in your power is the allowing of a debate under Standing Order No. 24. Some of us argue that this is a matter that dwarfs etiquette: it is matter of trust and deceit. Parliament has been deceived and the British people have been deceived not on a trivial matter, but on a matter that is the basis of peace and war. Therefore, if I may say so, I think that you ought to have allowed a Standing Order No. 24 debate, so that the question of whether we should have an urgent debate could have been decided by the number of Members standing, or otherwise. We are on a motorway without exit to war, and the basis that has been produced—by a PhD student in California, who now says that he is against conflict—is apparently the heart of what purports to be the intelligence briefing of the British Government.

Mr. Speaker: Once again, the hon. Gentleman is putting his case for a Standing Order No. 24 when it has been refused. He knows that he has no say in whether it has been refused, and there can be no question about my decision. What I can say, however, is that it is up to him to apply again for a Standing Order No. 24 if he feels so strongly: tomorrow is another day. I must move on—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall) *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: I feel that we are going to enter into a debate on this matter.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful, Mr. Speaker, and I seek your guidance. I am not making an argument or seeking to engage in a debate; what I am anxious to have on my constituents' behalf is an assurance on a point of fact. You have just advised us that the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the House has already said at business questions that there will, in due course, be a debate on whether military action should or should not take place. That is not in question. What I would like to ask you is whether you have received any assurance, either from the Prime Minister or from the Secretary of State for Defence, that there will be a vote on a substantive motion, prior to or concurrent with the commencement of military action? Yes or no?

Mr. Speaker: The answer to that is no.

Mr. Tyler: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker—

Glenda Jackson: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. It is a genuine request for information.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will hear a point of order from Mr. Tyler.

Mr. Tyler: You referred earlier to the statement made by the Leader of the House, but you will also be aware that within a matter of minutes of him making that statement about the necessity for a debate and a substantive vote in this House, the Secretary of State for Defence, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), said in terms that such a debate might take place after hostilities had begun. In those circumstances, will you consider very carefully any further request for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 if it is likely that hostilities will commence before a substantive debate can be arranged?

Mr. Speaker: I always consider such matters very carefully. I must tell the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) that we have the business of the day—

Glenda Jackson: I have a genuine request for information.

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps we can let the business continue and the hon. Lady can have a discussion with me about that issue.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Unless it is a new matter, I say to the Father of the House—

Mr. Dalyell: You mentioned the business of the day, Mr. Speaker. The business of the day is trivial compared

[Mr. Dalyell]

to the question of peace and war. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] All right, the business of the day may be important in Northern Ireland for a time, but—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Please be seated while I am standing. That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I tell the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat.

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am instructing the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat. I have been very—

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Please be seated. I am instructing the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat.

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has tested the patience of the Chair. He must be seated.

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I tell the Father of the House to resume his seat. I do not want—

Mr. Gummer: Sit down, Tam.

Mr. Dalyell: No.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is treading on very dangerous ground.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.

Mr. Dalyell: I insist on the parliamentary right to put a point of order—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I insist on my rights as the Speaker, and I tell the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat. He must—

Mr. Dalyell: I insist on putting my point of order. In matters of peace and war, the House of Commons—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I am in the situation, very reluctantly, that I shall have to tell the hon. Gentleman to withdraw.

Mr. Dalyell: I do not wish to cause you embarrassment, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order. We now come to the main business—

Mr. Dalyell: If that is what you wish—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.

Mr. Dalyell: The House of Commons is—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Orders of the Day

Police (Northern Ireland) Bill *[Lords]*

[Relevant document: the Third Report from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords], HC 233.]

Order for Second Reading read.

3.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill provides for further provisions for policing in Northern Ireland and it is by no means an unimportant matter. It will implement the Patten commission and last year's review of policing. It has already gone through the other place, where their lordships considered it in great detail and made some useful amendments for us to consider. I am grateful, too, to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for its work on the Bill's consequences and matters.

The House is aware that the Belfast agreement laid the foundations for a better future and for lasting peace in Northern Ireland; it is also aware that the institutions of government in Northern Ireland now lie suspended. The Assembly is suspended, as are the north-south bodies and, of course, the Executive who govern Northern Ireland. As a result, the four Northern Ireland Ministers and I must, reluctantly, rule directly in Northern Ireland for the people of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Members for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) and for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) made points of order about clashes of parliamentary business. I shall look into the matters that they raised; it was certainly not the Government's intention that there should be a clash or that there should be problems with Commons business. However, they know that the Assembly would have passed 22 Bills during the remaining months of its Session and that, as I have reported to the House on several occasions, those Bills will take the form of orders. There is a time problem with Privy Council approval of the orders, so, although I shall look into the points that were made, the hon. Gentlemen will be aware that the imperative is to ensure that those matters are resolved.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I am grateful for the Secretary of State's reassurance. I do not want to prolong something that is slightly peripheral to the main debate, but does he accept our frustration at the fact that we repeatedly raised those points? The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats can probably cover both items of business effectively, but it will be difficult for the minority parties, especially those from Northern Ireland, to do so. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that although a large amount of legislation has to be passed, not so much of it is to be dealt with on the Floor of the House that it will be impossible to stagger measures and allow Members to attend?

Mr. Murphy: I shall, of course, look into the matter, but the hon. Gentleman will realise that the House is doing the work of two Parliaments at present. Our undertakings on the legislation that the Assembly would

have passed were time constrained. However, I shall look into the points that the hon. Gentleman made and try to ensure that a clash is avoided.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Of course, I [illegible] good faith in which he made it the Secretary of State's assurance both that there was no intention on the part of the Government that debates on two aspects of Northern Ireland legislation should coincide and that he will look into the matter. I appreciate the full force of the words "look into" when they are spoken by a Minister on the Treasury Bench. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that although discharging the role of two Parliaments—as he rightly puts it—is a considerable burden, it really cannot be beyond human ingenuity, let alone the ingenuity of his Whips Office, to find a way of staggering the business so that we can all take part in all the deliberations on Northern Ireland legislation?

Mr. Murphy: Indeed. I share the hon. Gentleman's view of the ingenuity of Whips so we shall see what happens over the next few days. I take the points that both he and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire made.

Of course, if it were not for the fact that the Assembly is suspended, we would not have that problem. Our greatest and most important aim is to ensure that the Assembly returns and that there is an Executive in Northern Ireland, with government for the people of Northern Ireland by people from Northern Ireland. That is the Government's aim, and I believe that it is shared by the Taoiseach and the Irish Government. Most significantly, all political parties in Northern Ireland want the restoration of devolution.

Hon. Members will know that the Assembly lies suspended due to the breakdown of trust and confidence between political parties in Northern Ireland. That resulted in several events, which led to the suspension of the institutions. We need to ensure that we tackle the central issue that confronts us: paramilitary activity.

Other issues, too, must be addressed to implement the Belfast agreement in full. The House is aware that, in two days' time, the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach will meet at Hillsborough, where they will discuss, individually, with pro-agreement parties how we can overcome the problems and, we hope, ensure that we move forward.

The House also, I believe, needs to be made aware of the events that occurred particularly but not exclusively in Belfast over the past week or so as a result of the loyalist feud, which resulted, unhappily, in the death of members of one side of the feud; they also resulted in members of the other side of the feud fleeing, as they would put it, to Scotland.

The House should be aware that the police have played a uniquely important role in ensuring that those problems are minimised. More than 70 members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland have been exclusively engaged in working on that loyalist feud. There have been 40 arrests, and 20 people have been charged with various offences—attempted murder, conspiracy to murder or possession of firearms with intent.

I have had a meeting today with the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland. Obviously, we discussed those matters to try to ensure that the weight of the law and the police force fall directly on what is essentially criminality—gangsterism and mobsterism—masquerading as political loyalism.

David Burnside (South Antrim): I am sure that all hon. Members on this side of the House would agree that that disgusting loyalist violence should be condemned and that it shames the face of loyalism in Northern Ireland, but, in informing the House about events in the past week, would the Secretary of State like to add the disgraceful bomb explosion at a nightclub in Colombia and the great loss of life there? It seems that the bomb was exploded using a method that resulted from the technical training of members of Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA who are standing trial in Colombia. Will he include that in his condemnation?

Mr. Murphy: Obviously, I cannot comment on legal proceedings in another jurisdiction. I can, however, deplore what occurred in Colombia and any activity of that nature, whether in south America or on our own continent, and irrespective of whether it is started by terrorists of one side or the other. The question of paramilitary activity goes across the board—it is not just loyalist, and it is not just republican. The reason why the Assembly lies suspended and why politicians of all persuasions in Northern Ireland and the two Governments must address paramilitarism has been brought to the fore dramatically in the past few days.

It is also important to put on record the fact that there is a difference between the criminality that we have seen and the political loyalism that we have also seen over the past few years, which has helped in many ways to develop the peace process. There are loyalist politicians who, like us in this House, abhor such activity; nevertheless, it is important that all of us in government and, indeed, in the House of Commons are conscious of the effect of such activity on the political process.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I share the Secretary of State's views about gangsterism, but does he share the concern of decent folk on the Shankhill road who believe that the police did not act properly when they allowed others to come down the Shankill road, with guns firing, to clear people out of the area? They are glad that the others have gone, but they think that it would be better if the police did their job and protected them, instead of leaving it to mobsters.

Mr. Murphy: I do not share the hon. Gentleman's view about the police; I entirely share his view about the peaceful, law-abiding citizens who live along the Shankill and other roads in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. There are certainly loyalists in the Shankill area who want nothing to do with that sort of gangsterism and mob rule. I believe that those people need to be led by politicians who understand where they are coming from, but it is understood by all politicians in Northern Ireland that it is only through the political process that we can achieve peace, prosperity and stable institutions. As I have said, I have spoken to the Chief Constable, who assures me that the police were very rapidly on the scene and that they did all that they could

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to deal with the situation. I know, too, that the Policing Board has met the Chief Constable to discuss those issues.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Is not it time that the gangsters among the loyalists in Northern Ireland ceased to be able to hide under what to them is a respectable umbrella term—paramilitary—and were instead described by the Government, and by everyone, as the criminals that they are?

Mr. Murphy: I agree. The time has come for any kind of paramilitary activity—it does not matter from what part of the political spectrum it comes—to end. That will be the purpose of the discussions and negotiations over the next couple of days and weeks.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): The Secretary of State will have read the same press reports that I read at the end of last week about people fleeing the Shankhill road to houses bought in central Scotland and in south-east England; some of them were not people whom one would normally expect to be in a position to buy a second home. Last year, the House gave very significant powers to the police under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Will he assure us that there will be the fullest co-operation between his office, the Home Secretary and Scottish Ministers to ensure that those powers are fully exercised in respect of those individuals?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman refers directly to the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and the Assets Recovery Agency, which has now started its operation in Northern Ireland. That will be a great boost in taking ill-gotten gains from criminals and mobsters. As for his point about Scotland, I spoke at the weekend to the First Minister and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland.

I emphasise that this is not a one-sided matter. Perhaps some of the reason that we do not hear so much about the activities of those who are termed dissident republicans is that they have been thwarted, intercepted and nullified by the very effective security forces that we have working in Northern Ireland. That does not mean that they do not exist: we need only cast our minds back to Omagh to reflect on how awful the activities of so-called dissident republicans can be. I know that the House agrees that all this paramilitary activity must be consigned to history. It is not part of the politics of any modern, democratic, peaceful society.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): I fully agree with the Secretary of State that all such activity should be consigned to history. One way of bringing completion is to bring some clarity to the belief and the fact that members of the very same organisations on both sides were used by the security services for security reasons. One of the factors that led to the Ulster Defence Association in all its guises having such power in Belfast was its relationship with the security services and its imperviousness to arrest by them in a certain period.

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is right to bring to the House's attention the fact that, during the 30-odd years of troubles, awful things happened right across the political board, under different Governments. Obviously, the purpose at the moment is to try to ensure that we move forward out of the problems and the mess of the past, which— until the signing of the Belfast agreement—brought us to nowhere.

Having said all that, Northern Ireland is a much better place now than it was when I first became involved in Northern Ireland politics in 1994. It is a safer, better and more prosperous place to live. Economically, Northern Ireland is now developing faster than any other region of the United Kingdom. The other weekend, I went into Belfast city centre to do some shopping. When I first did that, in 1994, I saw police everywhere, it was difficult to shop, it was difficult to go into a restaurant, and it was difficult to lead the kind of ordinary lives that the rest of us can lead in our constituencies. I am not saying that it is now perfect—far from it—but I am saying that there have been improvements. Those improvements have come about because of the changes that we have seen as a result of the Belfast agreement and because of the determination of leaders of political parties in Northern Ireland to want to move to a better society and a better place in which to live. Of particular note is the way in which the police force has developed in the past few years. That has been the most significant change in the three years since I left the Northern Ireland Office as Minister of State.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I have greatly enjoyed visiting Northern Ireland and I explain to folk that it is the safest place in western Europe. On the state of life there, will my right hon. Friend's Department publish details on or carry out an audit of crime outside terrorism? The police in Northern Ireland tell me that there is less "normal" crime there than there is in Surrey. It is a very law-abiding society. We need to proclaim that and, if need be, to document it.

Mr. Murphy: In some ways, that is true, but in other ways, the situation is deteriorating. I mentioned the loyalist feud over the past week or two. Some years ago, that might have been described as semi-political activity, but no one could describe it as such now. The drug activity, the extortion and other activities by paramilitary organisations need to be taken into account.

Rev. Martin Smyth: One accepts the pressure that the police have been under. Did the Minister hear the interview this morning in which the Sinn Fein Assembly representative from Omagh castigated the Police Service of Northern Ireland despite all the changes that it has implemented? Despite all its tremendous good work, it has not yet won the approval of Sinn Fein, which it again sees as a target.

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I understand that 18 police officers were injured in Omagh. That is to be deplored. As I said, in the three years that have elapsed between my leaving the Northern Ireland Office as Minister of State and returning to it as Secretary of State there have been huge developments in the police service. The police force is

just and fair. It is accountable, professional, effective, impartial and free from partisan control. All those things were set out in the Good Friday agreement as what a police force should be, and I believe that the PSNI operates under those terms. The new Policing Board, which was set up in November 2001, has been powerful and credible. It agreed a new badge and uniform in 2002, and appointed a highly effective new Chief Constable. It issued its first annual policing plan and this week will publish the PSNI code of ethics. It is, I believe, genuinely cross-community, and I pay tribute to all its members.

There have been developments in the district policing partnerships. Nearly 1,500 people have applied to join them, so there is enthusiasm for that scheme. The police ombudsman has increased transparency in the police service and has worked with dedication. I pay tribute in particular to the Northern Ireland Police Fund and the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation. Both those organisations do good work for past and present officers, widows and families, and for others connected with the police service in Northern Ireland. More and more Catholics have joined the police force. In the first year alone, there were more than 530 new recruits. The Government have also recognised that the illegal financial activities of criminals should be tackled through the Organised Crime Task Force, chaired by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, and the new Assets Recovery Agency.

The police have led efforts to combat extortion, illegal drugs and money laundering. This weekend, drugs worth more than £3 million were seized in Craigavon. In the run-up to Christmas, the police seized counterfeit goods valued at £500,000. In January, police and customs officers seized 6 million illicit cigarettes in Coalisland. Those are a few examples of what the police force has been doing in recent months. I pay tribute to the professionalism, dedication and effectiveness of the police force in Northern Ireland and to the fact that it is by no means afraid of change—far from it: in many ways it has led change most effectively in the past three years.

David Burnside: The Secretary of State has given us some interesting figures on organised crime. Could he inform the House how many members of the Provisional IRA and how many members of mainstream loyalist terrorist organisations—the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force—have been arrested and convicted for involvement in racketeering, especially drug dealing, in the past 12 months?

Mr. Murphy: No figures are yet available, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman, as I take his point.

Lembit Öpik: Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the interesting changes in Northern Ireland society in some areas where there was great scepticism about policing is a greater willingness to accept the rule of law rather than vigilantism? One example lies in the concerted efforts of families bereaved through car crime, particularly joyriding, to effect changes in the law with the apparent support of the local community. I do not think that that would have happened 10 or 15 years ago.

Mr. Murphy: I am sure that it would not. Those changes demonstrate that the community at all levels and in all its variety supports policing to deal with so-called joyriding.

Having set out its context, I shall now turn to the Bill, which focuses on strengthening the role of the Policing Board and clarifying its relationship with the Chief Constable and me in my role as Secretary of State. That is consistent with Patten's vision of a more accountable police service. Clause 1 requires the Secretary of State to consult the board with a view to reaching agreement when drawing up both long-term policing objectives and codes of practice. The board in turn must take account of the Secretary of State's objectives in framing its policing plan, as laid out in clause 2. The final piece of the jigsaw is the obligation on the Chief Constable to take account of the Secretary of State's long-term objectives, only insofar as that is consistent with the board's policing plan. At the specific request of the Policing Board, and in light of its experience over the past year, the Bill gives it greater flexibility on the frequency and spacing of its public meetings, as well as flexibility in the timing of the publication of the best-value performance summary.

As for reports and inquiries, the Bill introduces two changes to bring the law more fully into line with Patten, followed by provisions allowing for the handling of sensitive information by the board and measures against any misuse of it. Clause 21 would require the board to set up a small but representative committee to deal with sensitive information. Wherever the Chief Constable was sharing with the board or the committee sensitive information as defined by the Bill, he would be obliged to flag it up as sensitive. That is particularly important as, under clause 20, it would be a criminal offence for a member of the board or of the committee to disclose any information shared with them by the Chief Constable that had been specifically identified as sensitive.

Clause 18 places a general obligation on the Chief Constable to supply the board with such information as it requires to carry out its functions. Finally, on the approval of proposals relating to inquiries by the board, clause 11 amends the threshold of board members required to vote for an inquiry, reducing it from 10 to eight, provided that that is the majority of those present and voting.

Mr. Quentin Davies: When the right hon. Gentleman described the proposed powers or conditions in clause 20 to impose confidentiality on members of the Policing Board, he said that members both of the committee and the board would face criminal sanctions if there was a breach of confidence. Could he confirm that he meant "and", and that it is not simply members of the committee.

Mr. Murphy: I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman, in case I say the wrong thing. As far as I can see from the information before me, it would be the committee and the board, but I will clarify that before the night is out.

[Mr. Murphy]

Clause 12 gives the police ombudsman the power to investigate current police practices and policies, rather than, as at present, simply research them. Under the clause, the ombudsman will have access to all the information that she requires although, as already noted, the existing safeguards on disclosure of information are retained. The Bill also clarifies the extent of the ombudsman's remit in this regard relative to the separate supervisory arrangements set up under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. There has been extensive and fruitful consultation with the ombudsman on all the changes that I have just described.

Lady Hermon (North Down): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the increased powers of the police ombudsman do not include power to investigate restrospectively—that "current" means current and on-going into the future, not trawling back through the past?

Mr. Murphy: I can confirm that.

At the request of the board, the Bill places an obligation on the Policing Board to secure representativeness in appointing independent members to district policing partnerships, and clarifies the position for appointing individuals who have previously been removed from a DPP. Clause 16 makes it clear that policing with the community is to be one of the core policing principles, along with the human rights-based approach to policing that is enshrined in the new code of ethics. For policing to be effective, it must have at its heart the fundamental principle of human rights for all and it must command the support and co-operation of all sections of the community. The Bill reinforces those principles.

The Bill will enable the Chief Constable to make fixed-term appointments at ranks from sergeant to chief superintendent in order to facilitate secondments with policing powers from non-UK police forces. Part 2 contains important measures brought forward at the request of the Chief Constable with the support of the Policing Board. They build on provisions introduced for England and Wales by the Police Reform Act 2002. Clauses 23 and 24 give the Chief Constable greater flexibility in the deployment of civilian staff, including contracted-out staff, under his control. The duties that those individuals may take on are set out in schedule 1. They are mainly the roles of investigation officers, detention officers and escort officers.

Clauses 29 and 30 make it clear that designated civilians are subject to the same requirements in relation to notifiable memberships as apply to police officers, and they are to be guided by the police code of ethics. In addition, where there are complaints about the exercise of police powers by these civilians, those complaints will be handled by the ombudsman. These measures will allow the Chief Constable to use civilian staff, including contracted-out staff, on some of the more routine policing duties, such as escorting detainees and operating custody suites, thus freeing up officers for front-line duties.

I should not close without saying something about the "text for consideration" that the Government published last November. During the passage of the 2000 Act through Parliament, the Government made it clear that it was our hope that in the future the sensitivities surrounding the issue of ex-prisoners joining DPPs would subside. I give the House an assurance today that the changes proposed in the "text for consideration" will be brought forward only in the context of acts of completion on the part of the paramilitaries, and I emphasise that by "acts of completion" I mean, in the words of the Prime Minister,

"commitment to exclusively peaceful means, real, total and permanent . . . an end to tolerance of paramilitary activity in any form".

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way a second time. He will be well aware of the recommendation in the Patten report that the independent members who serve on DPPs should bring with them

"expertise in matters pertaining to community safety".

How can anyone with a criminal conviction or a terrorist conviction bring with them expertise in community safety? How does that implement Patten?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Lady has her interpretation of Patten. Similar individuals can serve on boards as a result of political appointments. However, the proposed appointments are independent ones. The hon. Lady saw the "text for consideration" and knows that it contained considerable safeguards, first by way of a five-year gap between having served a sentence and serving on one of the new bodies, and secondly, by giving the House order-making powers so that the House would be conscious of the time necessary for that to happen. I also say to her that, if we indeed see a major change in the way in which Northern Ireland develops over the next few months and years, there may well be circumstances in which members of parties that have been linked to paramilitary activities in the past would play their role. I re-emphasise, however, that that has to be done in the context of major changes that have been defined by the Prime Minister, the Taoiseach and me.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. In respect of the last question asked by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), surely it is perfectly possible for a reformed terrorist to consider local community matters, policing interests and community safety as issues of importance. Is that not further defined in the code of practice relating to the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, so that there are clear criteria about the obligations that an individual must fulfil?

Mr. Murphy: That is entirely right. The Select Committee considered that issue in relation to the Bill. As I said, the context of such events is one in which Northern Ireland is free from the grip of paramilitarism that has been there in the past. There is justification for suggesting that all parties in Northern Ireland may eventually serve on policing boards, but all that must happen in the context to which I referred.

Before I conclude my speech, I shall put the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford out of his misery regarding his earlier question. The criminal sanction applies to both the board and the committee, so my guess was right.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way one last time. I shall interrupt him

again only on this occasion. Since membership of DPPs will be finalised in the next few days—all the membership will be known in the 26 district councils—will he confirm that there will be no changes until the next district council elections two or three years hence?

Mr. Murphy: I understand that that is the position. The time when DPPs change will be 2005. That is when those changes will occur.

Northern Ireland has undergone considerable change in the three short years since I was last there. In many regards, it has altered beyond all recognition. People shop, work and walk the streets as they could not have done only a few years ago. The fear that accompanied everyday life for people in Belfast and elsewhere is receding every day, but nowhere has that change been more dramatic or difficult than in policing. The change from the RUC to the Police Service of Northern Ireland marked a new beginning for policing in the Province. The PSNI has been in the vanguard of the changes in Northern Ireland, just as it has been in the vanguard of its fight against terrorism.

This Government and this Bill will continue to support and strengthen policing in Northern Ireland—policing which I am confident will be welcomed and sustained across all communities and by all traditions. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.28 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I should like to begin by endorsing what the Secretary of State said about the apparently very active policing undertaken in the difficult area of north-west Belfast over the past week or so. As he knows well, speaking from the Opposition Benches, I have also done everything that I can to encourage the Police Service of Northern Ireland increasingly to take an attitude of zero tolerance to violence or at least to maintain the standards and attitude regarding outbreaks of violence that we would expect elsewhere in the country.

Our attitude to the Bill will be determined by two considerations. First, will it improve the effectiveness of policing in Northern Ireland? In other words, is it useful in itself? Secondly, will it assist the peace process? In other words, is it expedient to introduce the Bill at the present time in terms of our other objectives? I do not think that the Government have made even the slightest serious attempt to argue that the Bill is necessary for the cause of good policing in Northern Ireland or, indeed, that it has anything to do with strengthening policing in Northern Ireland. In fact, some of the Bill's provisions will serve only to weaken effective policing and the administration of justice there.

Let us take as an example the extraordinary proposal in clause 19 to remove one of the protections that formed part of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000: the inhibition on the Policing Board's ability to ask for information from the Chief Constable or to launch an inquiry, when, according to section 59 of the 2000 Act, doing so

> "would, or would be likely to, prejudice the prevention or detection of crime or the apprehension or prosecution of offenders".

The Secretary of State must surely agree that the prevention or detection of crime, and the apprehension and prosecution of offenders, go to the heart of the criminal justice system and of good policing, yet that protection—which the Government themselves decided was required in the 2000 Act—is now being removed. That seems extraordinary to anyone who cares about the effectiveness of our criminal justice system. Neither the Secretary of State this afternoon, nor the Government, when this Bill was debated in another place, has attempted any justification for its removal, in terms of the needs of policing.

Most strikingly of all, the Bill says nothing about what is undoubtedly the major policing problem in Northern Ireland at present: the great deficit in police numbers. According to the Patten report, the regular force should number 7,500. That figure was based on the assumption of the completion of the peace process and the end of political and paramilitary violence, but we all know how far away we are from that. The current strength of the regular police force is about 6,900. The Bill does not address that problem; it contains no proposals for dealing with it. Nor does it address the failure of recruitment under the 50:50 procedure. We support that procedure in principle, but it has led to a situation, in the last round of recruitment, in which the Chief Constable had only 26 Catholics who met the required standards and was therefore able to recruit only 52 new officers.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why, in the final stages of the passage of the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill in 2000 in another place, his colleagues in the Conservative party objected to and voted against 50:50 recruitment? What has changed in the two years since then to convince the hon. Gentleman to support the principle?

Andrew Mackinlay: I think we should be told.

Mr. Davies: I am very happy to answer the hon. Lady and, as I hope is my wont, to give her a frank and honest answer. I am also happy to answer the hon. Gentleman, and to take the credit—or the blame; the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman can choose—for this. Naturally, when anyone is appointed to a job on the Front Bench, on the Government side or the Opposition side, it is their responsibility to look through the existing party or Government policy on the matter that has become his or her responsibility and to decide whether it is sensible to build on that and to take it forward, or to revise it.

I am happy to tell the hon. Lady—I hope that she will note this down and not ask me the same question again—that I came to the conclusion that the 50:50 principle was right, and that we should support it. Despite the fact that the principle is dubious in itself and contrary to human rights, it nevertheless seemed to me that, in the context of Northern Ireland, it should be upheld and that other considerations should be overridden, because of the overriding need to produce a police service that the people felt to be owned by both communities, and to get away radically, decisively and clearly from the difficulties that we have had in getting acceptance of the legitimacy of the police force from the people of Northern Ireland. I am, therefore, very happy to tell the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman that this

[Mr. Davies]

is an area in which our policy has evolved. I am also very happy to defend our present policy. We strongly support the present Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon *rose—*

Mr. Davies: The hon. Lady wants to intervene again. I must make some progress, but if she wishes to insist on intervening, I will try to come back to her on another occasion.

Mr. McCabe *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I will give way to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, who is an assiduous participant in these debates. However, I will not be giving way to him quite as frequently as I sometimes do.

Mr. McCabe: The hon. Gentleman is far too kind. To let the House understand his strength of feeling on this matter, will he tell us how far he is prepared to depart from the point of principle on 50:50 recruitment? Would a ratio of 2:1, 3:1, 4:1 or 5:1 be acceptable? How strong are his principles on this issue, and how far and for how long would he depart from them?

Mr. Davies: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood me or whether I have misunderstood him, but 50:50 means just that—it does not mean 250:50 or 150:50, it means 50:50. I accept the principle that, for the immediate future, normal, mainstream recruitment at constable level to the PSNI should be based on the assumption that the number of recruits who are deemed to be from the Protestant community should equal the number who are deemed to be from the Catholic community. We should accept that system for the time being. However, that is clearly a derogation from the normal principles to which we adhere in the Opposition and it must, by its very nature, be temporary—like other forms of so-called affirmative action, which make no sense at all unless they are temporary. That should be the case on this issue. How quickly we manage to achieve something like 50:50—not arithmetically exact but something like 50:50—will depend on progress in recruitment. In recent recruitment rounds, that progress has not been satisfactory, as I have said.

Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I will give way in a moment. If this Bill is given a Second Reading—and we will not try to stop it being given a Second Reading—we intend to introduce amendments that will directly address this issue. I may be able to give the Secretary of State a flavour of those amendments. For example, candidates or would-be recruits who are deemed to be Protestants, who make the grade but who are held back from taking up a position in the PSNI because there is an insufficient countervailing number of Catholics, should not have to go through the process over and over again. Once they have qualified, they should be able to move into the ranks of the PSNI when the 50:50 process permits them to do so. We will introduce a number of ideas of that kind. However, I notice that the Government have been completely barren of practical suggestions to address this serious problem. My strictures, to which the Secretary of State appeared to object because he wanted to spring to his feet, have been more than justified.

Mr. Donaldson: As he now supports the 50:50 recruitment policy, the hon. Gentleman ought to be aware of what it is based on. It is not based on 50 per cent. Protestant and 50 per cent. Roman Catholic; it is based on 50 per cent. "others" and 50 per cent. Roman Catholic. In the recent census, almost 10 per cent. of the population came under the category of "others"—that is, non-Protestant. The hon. Gentleman can therefore see that we are not talking about a 50:50 ratio for Protestants and Roman Catholics; we are talking about a rather lower level of Protestants.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman suggests that I have changed my policy. I have not. I have always said the same thing on this subject. It is important to be clear about that.

However, the hon. Gentleman makes a good and interesting point. I have heard it before and I accept it. In Northern Ireland politics and history, there is a sort of convention that people from a Jewish background, for example, were counted as being Unionists or Protestants rather than Catholics. That is the kind of absurdity of life that one gets into when one starts to categorise people. I must emphasise again that I do not like categorising people. I do not like such distinctions. I think that they are anomalous, unpleasant and undesirable. The trouble is that the consequences of getting rid of the mechanism are worse. Sometimes in life, there is a conflict between two principles to which one is attached. One has to decide which principle will carry the day, and I have made my decision.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I am astonished at the suggestion that the consequences of getting rid of this mechanism would be worse. As everyone knows and as the recent census shows, the target population from which the police would recruit—namely young men in their late teens and early 20s—is fairly evenly balanced. Indeed, in some age cohorts, there are Catholic majorities. If we have equal participation, we will have equal recruitment. Therefore, we should not focus on this artificial device but on equal participation. Crucial to that is the attitude adopted by the civic and political representatives of the nationalist community who have yet to implement Patten's recommendation on that point. We should focus on that rather than on something that is a denial of the human and civil rights of the people concerned.

Mr. Davies: I am grateful for that intervention, but there is no trade-off. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman is right. An extremely serious problem is continuing intimidation and implied intimidation by republican paramilitaries of would-be Catholic recruits to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I hope that he has not forgotten the fuss that I made at the Dispatch Box when an attempt was made on the life of a young Catholic recruit in Ballymena and what I said at that time about the refusal of the president of Sinn Fein to condemn that.

However, to try to solve the problem in as short a time scale as we can, we self-evidently need not only the end of intimidation—the right hon. Gentleman knows that I feel every bit as strongly about that as he does—but this mechanism as well. I understand that it is a rather unpalatable concept to the political tradition that he represents so ably, and I have great respect for the opposition of principle that he has to it. As I have said, it is a matter of conflict between principles.

The only thing that I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman about is the suggestion that recruits should principally be young men. I do not think that that there should, in principle, be more men than women. Perhaps it was a slip of the tongue on his part. Furthermore, I do not want to exclude the idea that we should recruit people into the PSNI from older age categories. Perhaps we do not share the same strong views on those matters as we do on intimidation of any kind.

In such a debate, it is reasonable to take a number of interventions, but I have been successfully sidelined from my main theme. I know that the Government would like me to be sidetracked from that theme, because the Bill does not deal with it or with any of the real problems of policing.

Something else is very curious about the Bill. It follows just over two years after the introduction of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. I see the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who was responsible for that Act, in his place, and it is known in many quarters in Northern Ireland as the "Mandelson Act". However, in none of the documents that I have read, in none of the explanations that the Government have given this afternoon or over the past few weeks in the other place, in none of the explanatory notes, which I have read, and in none of the myriad reports on the PSNI that have been carried out over the past few years—the latest is the Constantine report—has it ever been argued that the provisions of the 2000 Act have been proven to be defective and need to be revised. If I am wrong and have missed something, I hope that the Secretary of State will intervene to put me right.

There is therefore more than the suspicion—in fact, it is quite clear—that there is no pragmatic justification for the Bill. Parliament is being asked to legislate on policing in Northern Ireland, but it is not being asked to do so for the sake of policing in Northern Ireland. The motive lies elsewhere. When the Government are pressed, as they have been by my noble Friends in another place, they always say that the changes proposed in the Bill are required by the Patten report and that the Bill is designed to implement Patten. However, the 2000 Act was designed to implement Patten. So did the 2000 Act implement Patten, or not?

Mr. Mallon: No.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman helpfully says that it did not. Well, now we know.

If the 2000 Act did implement Patten, clearly Patten cannot be used again as a justification for this new and different Bill. If it did not implement Patten, the Government clearly misled—I use that term advisedly—the House and the public in saying at the time that it did. Indeed, that was the whole announced purpose of the 2000 Act. The Secretary of State remains remarkably and uncharacteristically quiet while I say all this. It clearly must be one thing or the other, and I hope that he will tell us which.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: Perhaps the hon. Lady is going to reply as the Government's proxy.

Lady Hermon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for having permitted me with such courtesy to intervene.

If I heard the Secretary of State correctly, he intimated that a number of provisions towards the end of the Bill were requested by the Chief Constable in order to facilitate the civilianisation and the release of policing resources in relation to detention and investigation officers. Again, if I heard the Secretary of State correctly, the Bill's earlier provisions were included at the request of, and initiated by, the Policing Board. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, however, to ask who initiated the increased powers for the ombudsman and the change in the composition of the DPPs.

Mr. Davies: My expectation was justified—the hon. Lady did act as a proxy for the Government. She came up with the answer to my question that I was expecting the Government to come up with, but they did not—perhaps they did not think of it quickly enough. It will not wash, of course. I am well aware that the Bill contains the provisions that the hon. Lady mentions regarding the use of contractors and protection for contractors who come in to work for the police, but that is no reason to include in the Queen's Speech a major Bill that requires Second Reading, days in Committee, and so forth. It is certainly no reason for the revisions to the Mandelson Act—the 2000 Act—which is being substantially changed, indeed, in many respects emasculated, by the Bill.

Mr. Mallon: I have no intention of acting as proxy for anyone, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to the explanatory notes on this part of the Bill, which state:

"The purpose of the Bill is to implement more fully the recommendations of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland"—

that is, the Patten report. That is the Government's position in this respect, and, for a change, I accept it.

Mr. Davies: Of course the hon. Gentleman accepts the position of the Government—these are the changes that the SDLP has been pushing for, and the Bill is part of the bargain that has been done between the Government and the SDLP, so it is hardly news that the SDLP is happy with the situation. It would have been an extraordinary state of affairs, which would have opened up questions about the rationality of all concerned, if the SDLP, having pressed the Government to introduce the Bill, were to stand up and criticise the changes that it proposes. It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman has revealed that the Bill was not designed to address objective problems of policing and to strengthen policing and the administration of justice. We have been through all that and we have seen that it is not the case at all.

Mr. Paul Murphy *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I shall of course give way to the right hon. Gentleman in a moment to see whether he denies this.

[Mr. Davies]

The Bill was designed explicitly to fulfil the promises that the Government gave to the SDLP at the Weston Park meeting. It is a political Bill with a political origin that emerges directly from a political negotiation and agreement between the Government and the SDLP.

Mr. Murphy: Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House whether he will support the Bill? He told us that he would not go into the Division Lobbies to vote against it, but is he in favour of it? As far as proxies are concerned, my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) gave a very good proxy on behalf of the Government and the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) did not do a bad job either. The hon. Gentleman himself gave a marvellous proxy on behalf of the Government in relation to the 50:50.

Mr. Davies: I am sorry that, to score a point, the Secretary of State suggests that 50:50 is a party political issue. The right hon. Gentleman should welcome bipartisanship on that. We support it because we believe in it; it is the right approach. When we believe that the Government are doing the right thing, we support them. When we believe that they are doing the wrong or dangerous thing, we disagree with them and try to head them off. As he knows, I do not agree with the Government's tactics or substantive proposals on many matters. However, when I agree with them, I am happy to support them.

Mr. Murphy: We want to find out exactly what the hon. Gentleman believes. Does he oppose or support the Bill? Is he simply indifferent to it? Hon. Members do not know.

Mr. Davies: They will know when I finish my speech. However, if the right hon. Gentleman is becoming impatient, he can have a preview.

We would not have introduced such a Bill now. It is unnecessary and undesirable when a police Bill was enacted so recently. As the Secretary of State admitted, further police legislation will be necessary. Clauses of a measure that make concessions not to the SDLP but to Sinn Fein have already been published. Will a third, fourth or fifth Bill be introduced? Will he present measures to assuage the anxieties of the Democratic Unionist party, to bring the loyalists on board or to help the nationalists or republicans with some problem? Will the Police Service of Northern Ireland simply become a ball that the Government toss endlessly between the different Northern Ireland parties? I sincerely hope not. That is the wrong approach. I shall argue shortly for a different approach to the peace process.

However, the Bill exists. The Government did a deal with the SDLP whereby the SDLP supported the Policing Board and the new police service and got the concessions. If we voted against the Bill and thus killed it—I like to believe that we would be so eloquent that we could persuade a majority of hon. Members to vote against it—we would deliver a humiliating blow to the SDLP on the eve of important elections on 1 May. We do not wish to do that. We shall therefore not take a view tonight.

We shall allow the measure to progress to its next stages, and table substantive amendments to try to make it more justifiable and more directly able to deal with the problems of policing in Northern Ireland. If we achieve substantial success, we will support the Bill on Third Reading. If not, we may vote against it. We shall see what happens. I hope that that satisfies the Secretary of State.

The Government increasingly gave the game away this afternoon by conceding that the Bill contains no substantial provisions that policing in Northern Ireland requires. The Secretary of State spoke about the Patten report and the 2001 implementation plan. When the Government were taxed with similar criticisms in another place, they continually referred to the report and the plan. However, the implementation plan does not answer the question or get us any further. It is simply a statement by the Government. It amounts to the Government justifying what they say today on the grounds that they said the same thing yesterday. It is tautologous. It adds nothing to the argument for the measure's legitimacy or credibility. However, it betrays the Government's true purposes, which I have already revealed. The Bill is a political measure that reflects the commitments that the Government made at Weston Park. I do not know why they could not say that instead of leaving me to make the analysis. They know that what I said is true. The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) implicitly acknowledged that. Why therefore do not the Government have the courage and frankness to tell hon. Members the truth and the genuine reason for the measure? They would have gained in dignity and hon. Members would have gained in understanding if that had happened at the outset.

The 2000 Act—the "Mandelson Act"—was intended to implement Patten in a way that would minimise the affront to Unionists. It did, of course, affront them greatly by abolishing the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and in other ways. Now the Government are presenting another Bill to deliver on the promises that they made to the SDLP. There is, I think, a fear that this method of legislating for policing in Northern Ireland has no natural end, and that we shall see an endless series of police Bills occurring every year or so, each addressing a different group and trying to provide some of its desiderata.

That, as I have told the Government many times, is a hopeless way of proceeding. We have a better idea, which we have suggested to the Government. I suggested it to them long before the present Secretary of State took his post. We have always proposed a single, global, comprehensive negotiation with all the parties on the implementation of the Belfast agreement and on all points outstanding, followed by the implementation of a single, final package. That package would have to include policing—and, no doubt, a police Bill, but one alone, one that would stand the test of time, and one to which all could sign up without feeling that it had been designed merely to deliver a specific set of concessions to a particular party.

The Bill clearly cannot meet the first test that I identified at the beginning of my speech, namely whether it contributes usefully to policing in Northern Ireland. It was not even designed to undergo that test. It can be judged only on the second criterion—whether it is relevant and helpful to the peace process. I intend to devote the rest of my speech to that second issue.

As the House knows, we are at one with the Government on the objective in Northern Ireland—the objective of peace and normalisation. We are at one with them in believing that the Belfast agreement provides the best, perhaps the only, basis for that peace and normalisation. Our differences with the Government, which have at times been radical, have related to tactics, important as tactics are.

I say "have". I use the past tense optimistically, because I retain the hope that the Government may finally come round to our point of view, not so much because of our eloquence in advocating it—although I hope that we are eloquent—but because of the even greater eloquence of the facts: the even greater eloquence, sadly, of the serious reverses that the Government's tactical errors have brought to the peace process over the past five years.

Let me be clear about what the Government's essential error has been. It has been to neglect the intrinsic interlinkage of all the issues involved in the process. Those issues are IRA decommissioning and disbandment—I do not accept the euphemism "acts of completion"; let us be candid and clear—loyalist decommissioning and disbandment, demilitarisation, the end of expulsions and beatings, the future of law and order, policing, justice for victims, arrangements for ex-prisoners, amnesties, human rights Bills and all the rest. All those are inextricably linked.

When I used the word "interlinkage" in the days of the right hon. Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid)—I do not blame the right hon. Gentleman for this—he would jump to his feet and explicitly reject the use and appropriateness of the term. He was, in my view, entirely wrong to reject the concept of interlinkage, and I believe that it was because the Government rejected that concept and did not perceive the essential interdependability of all the elements in Northern Ireland that they made many of the mistakes that they made.

David Burnside: Would the hon. Gentleman include in this inextricable linking of all the circumstances and facts from violence to non-violence what is now known as Stormontgate—the activities of a spy ring at the very heart of the institutions of Government of the United Kingdom? Should not any political party involved in that, and convicted of any offence, be excluded from the executive of the process?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman knows that I think such parties should have been excluded from the institutions, because I argued that very strongly at the time. Not only that, but last July, well before we knew about Stormontgate, I had said that because the Government had completely failed to react to the various abuses and breaches of the ceasefire and agreement that had already occurred, there would inevitably be more. I said that they should take powers to deal with that by being able to exclude from the power-sharing Executive—on the decision of the Secretary of State, not by putting forward a motion in the Assembly—a party in breach of, or in concert with parties in breach of, the ceasefire and agreement. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who took a major part in our debates, will recall my saying that in July.

Had the Government accepted my advice in July, they would have had that power to exclude a party in breach when Stormontgate was revealed last autumn. That would have enabled them to target the guilty rather than dismantling the whole structure of devolution, targeting everybody—innocent and guilty—and bringing about the present crisis.

Lady Hermon *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that I have given way very generously. I may give way later, but I should like to make progress now.

The Government made a series of great errors, including four colossal ones that I shall enumerate in a moment. They were all a result of a misconceived, false analysis of how progress can and cannot be made in Northern Ireland. It is all a result of the failure to grasp the importance of interlinkage and consequently the attempt to proceed by partial agreements, by side deals, by what the Prime Minister called inch by inch negotiations, by trying to buy off one faction, then finding that they have alienated somebody else and trying to find something to appease them with. The history of the police Bills, which I have just outlined, is part and parcel of that sorry process.

In the course of, and as a result of, that mistaken and misconceived policy, the Government made four cardinal errors. The Secretary of State may have heard me list them before, and he will hear me list them again as long as I think there is still a danger that the Government might repeat them. It is very important to draw lessons from the past, and where there have been major disappointments and reverses—as there have been—in the peace process, we must not fear to face up to the errors that have been committed.

The first error was that the Government released all the prisoners without any decommissioning whatever. That was an extraordinary and naïve error, which probably cost the best opportunity of fulfilling the Belfast agreement within the two years provided for in the agreement.

Secondly, the Government compounded that error by offering new concessions, not required by the Belfast agreement, to those who had not implemented their undertakings under it. It makes no sense when people have not delivered their part of the bargain to give them a bonus for non-delivery, which is what the Government did. That was the story of the special status for Sinn Fein MPs here—incidentally, another humiliation for the SDLP at the time, perhaps deserving of some compensation for the SDLP subsequently.

That was also the story, the disgraceful story, of the amnesty for on-the-run terrorists, which was promised by the Government at Weston Park. According to that promise, which was in writing, it was to be delivered by the end of 2001. Thanks to our opposition, that commitment was never delivered—and thank heaven it was not, because, thanks to us, that card still remains in the Government's hand, and a very important card it is.

Thirdly, we have the policy of not responding to breaches of the ceasefire and the agreement, the policy of turning a blind eye. As I said at the time, not responding to such abuses makes it inevitable that there will be more, and so it has proved: Florida, Colombia,

[Mr. Davies]

Castlereagh and then Stormontgate. Finally, there was the error of suspending Stormont as a whole and not just those who had caused the crisis.

All those errors had in common not only that they involved throwing away leverage on Sinn Fein, but that they also guaranteed the disillusionment, sense of betrayal and sometimes—I regret it, but one understands it—alienation and rejection of the whole Belfast process, which we have seen across the board among other parties in Northern Ireland.

I fervently hope that the Government have learned the error of their ways. The Secretary of State has mentioned this week's discussions, and I welcome the fact that they are taking place. During those discussions and the further intensive discussions that will certainly be required and which hopefully will take place in the coming critical weeks before the May elections, and, if necessary, during the six-week period provided thereafter for an Executive to emerge—that is a very tight timetable indeed—there must be a new approach. There should be no more attempts at side-deals and partial implementation, because they simply will not work. There should be no more mealy-mouthed phrases and no more euphemisms. It should be quite clear what the Government mean when they speak of "acts of completion": let them say "decommissioning and disbandment". If they want to use another word that has the same finality as "disbandment", that is fine, but let them not try to deceive themselves—or, worse, anybody else—as to the seriousness and completeness of what is required by way of those acts of implementation.

A settlement, if it is to be viable, must be four things. First, it must be comprehensive, for the reasons that I have explained. Secondly, it must be transparent—I know that this, too, is a new one for the Government—otherwise, there can be no trust, and no one will make the difficult moves if he or she suspects that others are getting a private deal. This is the mistake that the Government have been making all along: creating everywhere the suspicion that somehow, someone else was getting private assurances. Obviously, that made it very unlikely that the party with those suspicions would feel able to put all its cards on the table. Thirdly, a settlement must be balanced. Never again must there be an appearance—I fear that, often, there was much more than an appearance—that all the concessions are going one way. Sadly, as I have explained, that has been the case with, among other things, police Bills such as the one before us today.

Finally, a settlement must be definitive, and for two compelling reasons. First, no one in Northern Ireland will make a significant move unless they know what portion of the total price to be paid such a move represents, what they will get in return and by when, and what will happen if the other party, or parties, do not deliver. In other words, everyone must see, and be signed up to, the end game. That is why there is no such thing as a partial settlement—it must be a definitive settlement. It is no good people holding something back for the next round, and it is no good if people think that there is going to be a next round; this must be it: it must be definitive.

The second reason why the settlement must be definitive is simply that there is very little time. I very much hope that it will be possible to reinstate the Executive during the next few weeks before the elections. However, if it is not, and if there are elections, under the rules there will have to be agreement on an Executive within six weeks. There will be no agreement on an Executive unless there is decommissioning and disbandment by the IRA, because the Unionists have rightly made it clear that without it, they will not rejoin a power-sharing Executive. So unless there is a global settlement—because all these things are interlinked—there ain't gonna be an Executive formed within six weeks of the May elections. If an Executive are not formed within that time, the Secretary of State knows perfectly well what must happen. We must have either new elections, or another suspension of devolution and the restoration—sine die, this time: in other words, indefinitely—of direct rule.

I do not believe that the credibility of the peace process could survive the extraordinary state of affairs whereby we ask the electorate to go to the polls on 1 May to elect an Assembly that has been under suspension for the previous nine months, only for it to be suspended again six weeks later. Equally, if the electorate are told that they must go back to the polls again, six weeks after having voted, the credibility of the Belfast peace process as we know it will be destroyed. Of course, human beings must always have hope, particularly when the situation is desperate, and various theoretical scenarios can doubtless be devised as to how we might move forward in such circumstances. However, the enormous progress that was produced in the first place by the tremendous work that went into negotiating the Belfast agreement would, I am afraid, be set at nought, and we should have to start again. So no one should have any doubt that it is absolutely vital that this matter be dealt with in a very short time scale.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I have almost completed my remarks so I will not give way. I am sure that the hon. Lady will catch your eye later, Mr. Speaker.

We fervently hope that the attempts over the next few weeks will be successful, but I repeat that they will be successful only if there is a comprehensive, global, full, definitive and balanced settlement. If the Government pursue those discussions and conversations on a realistic basis, they will have our full support. If not, not.

5.10 pm

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): Before I address the Bill specifically, I think that we should remind ourselves of the problem of policing a divided society such as Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State is right to say that the problem is about much more than policing. It is a problem of allegiance and identification with the state. It is a problem with the recognition of the legitimacy of the state within which people live and the Administration who govern them, and the police service that serves them.

It is right to say that policing is much more than what the Policing Board will decide, in its wisdom or otherwise, to do. For that reason, it is worth repeating

that the attempt to solve the policing problem in Northern Ireland goes way beyond the operations of the police service. It goes to the heart of the problems that people such as me have had to face, politically and in many other ways. Therefore, we should consider carefully everything to do with policing. That is what I have tried to do these past 30 years. I have tried to examine the problem, even when it was not popular to do so.

It will never be popular to talk about policing in relation to Northern Ireland, but it is crucial that we do so, because if we do not get policing right other things will follow. It will not be possible to keep an Administration or other political institutions going if we do not have a solution to the policing problem. The issues are so closely linked that we must examine—honestly, as I have tried to do—how one is dependent on the other.

What did the Good Friday agreement say about policing? It offered a new beginning for policing. I am convinced that that is possible and that it will happen. What has happened so far has already begun to unlock, in a limited sense—although it will be much less limited before this month is out—the constitutional logjam that policing faced in relation to the nationalist community in the north of Ireland. It has not fully achieved that, but it is on the way. That is why the Bill is crucial.

I am probably regarded as a fairly conservative, reasonable nationalist, although some people might not choose to use the word "reasonable" in relation to me. However, I am not an extreme nationalist and, as such, there are two ways in which I can achieve the changes in policing that are necessary for me to give my allegiance not only to policing in Northern Ireland but to the institutions of the state. The first is through legislation and the second is through implementation.

The business of the political process is to deal with legislation. However, this measure deals with a failure of legislation because the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 did not adequately deal with how Patten, in his wisdom, suggested that I and the community that I represent could make changes. The very fact that we are holding this debate is recognition of legislative failure on policing. I do not like having to say that. As someone who has supported Labour from the day and hour when I knew what politics was about, I do not like saying that legislative failure put us in this position.

Implementation—the second aspect—will be achieved in several ways, including through the Policing Board. Our party had the courage to join that board. It also had the courage to ask young nationalists and Catholics to join the police service. There were no ambiguities—no ifs or buts: we simply asked people to do it. We asked the community to take part, too. Young people can implement change by joining the police service. Political parties can do so by sitting on the Policing Board. People throughout the community can do so by making it clear to everybody—not least those involved in paramilitarism—that they want a police service that they can be proud of, and that they will defend and sustain it. That is the crux.

As the Secretary of State rightly said, we are a substantial way down the road to change, but we must consider the failure of the 2000 Act. That measure was passed by the House on the basis of a number of side deals—to which reference has constantly been made this evening—even at one minute to 12, to which Members who were present on that occasion and are in the Chamber today can bear testament. I look forward to hearing their confirmation of that fact.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) made great play of the fact that my party—the Social Democratic and Labour party—had committed some heinous crime by taking part in negotiations organised by the Government: at the invitation of the Government, we went to Weston Park and committed the awful crime of negotiating a good position based on what Patten had said. We told the Government for the umpteen hundredth time that, if they did not get to the heart of the problem, we could not be involved in the Policing Board; we would not be able to deliver because they were not giving us the legislative basis on which to do so.

Mr. Quentin Davies *rose—*

Mr. Mallon: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment; I know that he has much more to say.

What is the difference between negotiating at Weston Park at the invitation of the Government, at Hillsborough castle at the invitation of the Government, in Downing street at the invitation of the Prime Minister or in Castle buildings at the invitation of the two Governments? I am proud that our party went to Weston Park and told the Government: "You have made a legislative hash of this: now start to change it, because if you don't you will not solve the policing problem".

Mr. Davies: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He had a smile on his face when he was making the remarks that he directed at me, but as the readers of *Hansard* will not know that I want to set the record straight. In no way did I intend to imply—nor did I imply—that there was something wrong with the SDLP going to Weston Park and negotiating with the Government. Indeed, far from committing a heinous crime, the hon. Gentleman did a very good day's work. As I said earlier, the Opposition do not want to be party to depriving the hon. Gentleman of the fruits of that occasion. There are many much less deserving parties in Northern Ireland and he can be pleased with the good negotiations that he conducted.

I was in fact criticising the Government for having conducted a series of partial deals and concessions. One or two of those concessions were thrown at the hon. Gentleman, but bigger ones were made elsewhere. Given the hon. Gentleman's analysis, I think that he would agree that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is starting to make another speech.

Mr. Mallon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for intervening—I know the point that he tries to make—but the reality is that there were no side deals. What happened at Weston Park was put in the public domain—not by us, but by others—within a month of the Weston Park agreement. There was no sideshow; there were negotiations between ourselves, as a political

[Mr. Mallon]

party, the British Government and the Irish Government, whom we demanded should be the guarantor of what was agreed at Weston Park. That was what we sought to negotiate, and it has resulted in the Bill.

Of course hon. Members will recognise some of the flannel that has been thrown in to cover up the legislation—for example, the financial provisions, which cover a number of pages. We all recognise flannel when we see it—we are long enough about the political process—but, in the context of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, I did not apologise for anything that we did at Weston Park. I have a great sense of sadness that it took the Government a year—they wasted a year—to get to Weston Park and that it took a very considerable period to redress the administrative damage that was done.

I am sad that we all lost a year in terms of the Policing Board and in developments in policing. We lost that time because some found it difficult to face up to the facts. There were those who knew better than Patten or than others, such as myself, who live in the north of Ireland, and they thought that they would be able to pull a fast stroke that would solve the problem. However, when it comes to fundamentals such as this, no fast stroke or sleight of hand will work, and this is the classic example of a stroke going wrong. That is why we are debating it today.

Lady Hermon: When the hon. Gentleman's party took the very courageous decision, for which I warmly commend it, to join the Policing Board in the autumn of 2001, the Irish, British and American Governments and the Catholic Church all said that what had been agreed was in the spirit and letter of Patten. I think that my memory serves me well. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that his party has been undermined by further Government concessions to Sinn Fein, which did not take its seats and have the courage of his party?

Mr. Mallon: I thank the hon. Lady for asking that very valid question. That is the humiliation referred to by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford. Let me deal with it. Before hon. Members cast their vote on the Bill, I would like all of them to go through it to find the changes that were not negotiated by the SDLP and that were not publicly stated before we went to Weston Park. The public were told, "Here's what we are going for. If we get it, we'll go on the board. If we don't get it, we can't." I ask the hon. Lady whether she can identify those things in the Bill that result from negotiations that were not done by the SDLP. She can let me know if she finds them and perhaps then I can answer her question more accurately. I leave that as an offer to the hon. Lady and, no doubt, she will reply to it later.

Mr. Donaldson: The hon. Gentleman knows that the concessions that are to be made to Sinn Fein are not contained in the Bill, but were set out in what the Government described as texts for consideration. The reality is that we will be dealt yet another blow if the Government must persuade Sinn Fein to join the Policing Board by offering further amendments and concessions that go beyond the Patten recommendations and what is in the Bill. Is not that the reality to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) refers?

Mr. Mallon: I hope that I do not detect a scepticism bordering on cynicism in what the hon. Gentleman says. If he is asking me to put my hand on my heart and say that I know that this matter has been dealt with properly, fully and adequately, I will do so when it gets Royal Assent. I have every confidence that, in this instance, the Secretary of State will deal honourably with our party in negotiations as the Bill passes through the House. I have every confidence that, as a man of integrity, he will stick by the word of the Government. I have every confidence that the legislative process in this House will solve the problem of policing, not little deals done wherever they were done in the past at one minute to midnight. I am confident of that, but, for my answer to be definitive, I shall give it when the Bill receives Royal Assent. I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) for the point that he makes.

I want to make several other crucial points. I have heard the debates about what will be given to this, that and the other party. I am no longer at the heart of negotiations, so I do not know what has gone on under the counter with Sinn Fein. I do not know what has gone on under the counter with the Ulster Unionist party. I do not know what has gone on under the counter with the Democratic Unionist party. What I do know is that we have negotiated with integrity and honour and that the decisions in respect of the Policing Board were taken with integrity and that our members are applying them. We will continue to do that in relation to policing. I trust that everyone will take that approach to this matter.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I regret that I was late in arriving for this debate, but the mother of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell), who is my party's spokesman on this issue, has been taken seriously ill, and I only came here today on a call from the hospital. I hope that the House will give me that indulgence.

It is very unlikely that the Democratic Unionist party that I lead could give anything at the table, as we are never called to the table. We are not there. I have written to the Prime Minister to ask him why he does not call all parties to make representations. As we take an anti-agreement stand, we are not even called to the table to put our views. In those circumstances, it is hardly likely that we have had such a chance. All that I would say to the hon. Gentleman is this: what does he think was the reason that the other paper was produced giving the IRA-Sinn Fein demands? Will the Government not do something—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman has had a good innings.

Mr. Mallon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and offer my sympathy to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell) on his mother's illness.I am not sure what paper he means. Is it the

Weston Park paper, which I can talk about with confidence because I know what is in it? *[Interruption.]* Yes, it has been published.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I mean this paper.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that we are debating the Second Reading of a Bill.

Mr. Mallon: I think that the hon. Gentleman means part of the Bill that is not in legislative form: in other words, the text that is added on depending on how the card game goes between now and the end of the month. The Social Democratic and Labour party does not negotiate that, and he would not ask me to stand over something that we did not negotiate. I agree that independent members of the district policing partnerships should not be disbarred. There is no logic to a situation in which one ex-paramilitary can sit on a DPP because he has been a district councillor but another who served his time in the next cell cannot because he was not elected to the district council. I want to be clear that that is not part of the Bill. The text on that may, or may not, see its way into legislation, which is why some of the debates in Standing Committee could be interesting.

Lady Hermon: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the distinction that the Secretary of State drew in 2000 between those who were appointed to DPPs because they were councillors and those who stood as independent members was the electoral mandate? That is the crucial difference between councillors who go on to serve on DPPs and independent members.

Mr. Mallon: I obviously agree with the hon. Lady, but I thought that the terms that were rattling about related to the principle of the text rather than the definition of electoral mandates. Perhaps I am wrong. I am sure that the Standing Committee will clarify some of those matters.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) referred to Sinn Fein. Our party took a lot of stick—we were attacked—when we rightly decided, on the basis of Weston Park, that we would nominate people to the Policing Board and ask young Catholics to join the police service. Members of our party had their houses attacked and cars burned by people in, what I would widely call, the republican community. If we had taken a different stance, what would have happened? There would be no Patten proposals to move us forward. Would the PSNI exist? I doubt it. Would the symbols used in policing have changed? The old policing authority would still be in place. The Democratic Unionist party and the SDLP would not be appointed to it, so we have that in common. There would be no new Chief Constable because, in the circumstances, he would not have come in. The ombudsman's report on Omagh would have been ignored, and there would have been no changes to special branch visits.

I say clearly to Sinn Fein that we do not deal with problems in the same way. If it wants to retard progress for its own political reasons, it can do so, but we are not going to join in. We did not join it in the past and we shall not join it in the future.

Helen Jackson: Having made the courageous decision after Weston Park to advocate that young Catholics join the PSNI, has my hon. Friend found that they have suffered harassment in his constituency as a result of that advice?

Mr. Mallon: The hon. Lady's question is valid but, unfortunately, I cannot answer it. Nobody can, but we all know of the presence and intimidation in both communities that is not voiced, does not involve any action and cannot be traced—but it is there. Interestingly and sadly, the same problem is experienced in both communities. How did some of the people whom we have seen on television in the past few weeks make millions dealing in drugs and prostitution when everyone knew that that was happening? Was anybody giving that information to the police? Was anybody in the Shankill road, where those poor people were caught, providing information? They did not do so, because they were dead men and women the next morning if they did. We must ensure that people such as the hon. Lady and me support young people who join the police and their families—that is the heart of the matter. We must make it clear in our communities that we will not allow people to be bullied out of the career that they choose.

Governments need to get the legislative arrangements for policing right, but the onus is on us to get the implementation right. Patten made that clear—legislation could only do so much; the rest would have to be done through the Policing Board. I pay tribute to the members of the Policing Board and the remarkable way in which they have conducted their duties since its formation. I include all members of the board in that tribute; at a time when political processes and Administrations were falling, and when north-south bodies and power-sharing Executives were being suspended, the Policing Board was taking the pressure, and it was a revelation that it was able to keep going. I should like to place on the record that that is my view—I appreciate the efforts that those people made.

I look forward to the day when Patten's vision is fully realised. We are in the second year of a lengthy programme. If we are reduced to looking at things in terms of Catholic and Protestant or focus on the inevitably niggly aspects of legislation we tend to lose sight of the larger vision. I am still convinced that, on the basis of the wishes of people in the north of Ireland of all political persuasions and of all religions, we can achieve the protection of our communities and the betterment of society through good proper policing. We all face that challenge now, but some of the challenges that we have faced in the past are behind us. Many people have helped to make that possible. As the Bill goes through Parliament, we must realise that the more we get the legislation right, the easier it will be for people to get its implementation right.

I welcome the opportunity to say again what I believe about policing. With regard to what was said earlier, this is probably the last time that I shall speak on the Floor of the House about policing—at least, I hope this is the last time I speak on the Floor of the House about policing. If we get the Bill right, as we will, we will provide the foundations for the political institutions to be sustained and for the rest of the political developments to progress.

Let us not waste any more years. Let us not waste any more legislative opportunities. Let us take those opportunities and make policing work in its totality.

[Mr. Mallon]

Yes, there are political and practical implications, and implications in terms of religious denominations. I wish those implications did not exist, but they do. That is the reality. But if we get our end of things right, we can help to make sure that other people will do the same.

5.41 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon), who made a thoughtful and well-considered contribution to the debate. I found a great deal of wisdom in what he said. I am acutely aware that on matters relating to Northern Ireland, I do not come close to the pedigree of the hon. Gentleman or hon. Members on the Unionist Benches. Listening to the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh, I feel ever so slightly humbled.

Liberal Democrats are pleased to give the Bill a broad welcome. It comes to us having already been in the other place, so we have the advantage that much of Government thinking is already on record. As regards drafting, the Bill comes to us in much better shape than is often the case with Bills that start their life with Second Readings in this place.

The coincidence of timing—the debate comes in the wake of events in the Shankill last week—gives our discussions of policing a potency that they might not otherwise have had. The importance of policing in the process of normalisation cannot be overestimated. A further indication of that is the fact that, as has been mentioned, the Bill comes fairly hot on the heels of the 2000 Act.

Reading press reports last week as the two factions of the Ulster Defence Association fought it out in the streets of the Shankill, I was struck by the fact that the apparently victorious faction went on record as saying that the drug-dealing scum were all gone. The fact that that man said that at that time and in that way shows the distance that we still have to go in relation to the normalisation of policing. Two thoughts immediately spring to my mind when I hear such things. First, I would require a great deal of persuasion that those who were doing the chasing out were any better than those being chased out. Secondly, it is surely fundamental in any democracy that if drug-dealing scum or any other sort of scum are to be removed from the streets, those who remove them must be in the police force. What we saw last week suggests that we are a great distance away from that.

I was pleased to hear much of what the Secretary of State said. I was curious when he referred to the disclosure offence in clause 20. Subsection (7) of proposed new section 74A of the Policing (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 states that the offence will be

"liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale."

It is easy to envisage circumstances in which such an offence could be of the utmost gravity. I should be interested to know why the Government have restricted the penalty that is applied in relation to such offences to a financial one. Why is the option of custodial disposal not given to the courts in their consideration?

The Secretary of State referred to the tremendous progress that has been made by the Policing Board since its inception, as did the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh. I do not intend to rehearse those remarks, but I point out that the appointment of the new Chief Constable and the new badge and flag for the police stand in the board's credit column. Some of the clauses represent a strengthening of the Policing Board's role and give it more flexibility, which may bring it more into line with what Patten envisaged.

In particular, the Liberal Democrats welcome the requirement for the Secretary of State to consult the Policing Board and the Chief Constable before introducing new objectives or codes of practice or altering the existing ones. The extension of an explicit obligation on the Secretary of State to undertake that consultation with the board with a view to reaching agreement seems to us an eminently sensible provision that does not diminish his powers to determine or revise long-term policing objectives if he fails to reach such agreement with the board. The Liberal Democrats have always supported a strong Policing Board, which we hope will bring policing closer to the community and the community closer to the police.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. On that very small point, will he explain how the Policing Board is strengthened by a reduction from 10 out of 19—a majority—in the number of members needed to initiate an inquiry? The original legislation ensured that a public inquiry could be initiated only by 10 members of the board, but the Bill reduces that number to a minority of only eight members. With regard to collective responsibility, how is the board strengthened if a minority can compel the undertaking of an inquiry?

Mr. Carmichael: As ever, such matters are a question of checks and balances. My understanding is that there is a balance to that particular check, as the majority of the board's members have to be present and voting. I am aware of the objections raised by the hon. Lady's party in the other place, but I think that a view has to be taken on such matters. The Government have taken their view and I can see some grounds for objection to it, but that is certainly not a point on which I would die in a ditch, if I may use that expression.

One of the issues about the Policing Board that troubled my colleagues in the other place was the provision reducing the minimum number of public meetings that it should hold each year. The Minister will recall that when Patten produced his report, the board was to meet in public once a month. The 2000 Act reduced the number of public meetings to 10 a year and the Bill further lowers that number to eight. On the basis of what was said from the Government Benches in the other place, it seems that the Government's thinking is that there were low attendances at the public meetings that have so far been held and that that is some sort of justification for the reduction. I caution the Government against pursuing that logic. Public meetings of this House are not always particularly well attended, but if they were to suggest that we should meet less frequently because of that, there would be something of a backlash. I hope to hear from the Minister exactly why this further reduction has been proposed now.

Clause 16, which covers core policing principles, is particularly important and the Liberal Democrats are pleased to endorse it. It places at the heart of policing the concept of community policing, which is something that we have always sought to advance in relation to the remainder of the United Kingdom. It is an indication that we are proceeding down the road towards normalisation that we can talk about the development of policing in Northern Ireland in the same terms as we do for the rest of the United Kingdom. I thank the Minister's colleagues in another place for the reassurances that they have given that these principles represent exactly that, and that they are there to help to guide officers in relation to the way in which they should carry out their functions, rather than to give a ruling on that. I also welcome the reassurances given in relation to the European convention on human rights and the need for police officers to adhere to a code of ethics that is fully compatible with the convention and with other international human rights standards.

I turn briefly to part 2 of the Bill, and, in particular, to the civilianisation of the police. The Government will be aware that we have some reservations about this process but, again, I want to thank them for taking on in the other place our concerns about the use of civilian officers for the performance of intimate searches on people detained in custody. That issue was first raised by my noble Friend Baroness Harris of Richmond during the passage of the Police Reform Act 2002, and I am grateful to the Government for tabling amendments in the other place to make it clear that only medical staff may carry out those intrusive searches.

We still have some concerns about the use of civilian staff and, in particular, about how they will be trained. It is certainly fair that it should be up to the Chief Constable to determine the amount of training that civilian officers require, but we do not think it unreasonable that the House should have a say on what guidelines he will be given on the amount of training appropriate for each type of civilian officer. This is not a criticism of the Minister, but, when I hear her colleagues from the Home Office talk about the civilianisation of policing, I am left with a lingering suspicion that they somehow think that policing is not really that difficult, and that we can pick and choose aspects of it that can be divorced and given away to people who are something between a traffic warden and a police officer. I speak as one who, before coming to the House, worked in the criminal courts, albeit in Scotland, and I feel that this is a subtle but effective way of undermining the professional standing of the police in the community. I hope that the Government will be mindful of the importance of this issue as they go down that road.

Mr. McCabe: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the police themselves have clearly identified a number of tasks that they do not think they should carry out, and that, in those circumstances, there is a good case for civilianisation?

Mr. Carmichael: Of course there is, and that is why we do not oppose civilianisation in principle. But it is a question of where we draw the line—of what powers we expect these civilian officers to have and what areas we expect them to operate in. For example, I have no real difficulty with the designation of civilians for court escort duties and the like, provided that the appropriate safeguards are put in place.

The one area that concerns me is the question of what constitutes proper grounds for a search under section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. According to that provision, the law is perfectly straightforward. In fact, such a massive body of case law has built up around that one section that it is now a minefield for working police officers of considerable standing and experience who have had full training, let alone a civilian officer who might stumble into that kind of situation in all innocence. Because such officers would not have the appropriate background or complete training, they might not be in possession of the whole picture. They could therefore jeopardise a significant drugs case without having any intention of misconducting themselves in any way.

Lady Hermon: May I assist the hon. Gentleman by saying that the provisions towards the end of the present Bill have been replicated more or less verbatim from the Police Reform Act 2002? During the Standing Committee on that legislation, the point was raised about intimate searches being degrading treatment, and I understand that the Home Office gave an undertaking at the time that civilian officers would be made familiar not only with the provisions for training laid out in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 but with human rights provisions.

Mr. Carmichael: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. It points up the extreme caution with which we must approach the civilianisation of policing. Eventually, we must ask whether, if we have to give civilian officers such comprehensive training on the wider rules of criminal procedure and evidence, it might not be the right thing to do to employ more properly and fully trained police officers in the first place. This is an immensely difficult issue and it is only fair to the community, the police, and the civilians who are going to be put in that position that the fullest consideration should be given to the manner in which this legislation is introduced. The Standing Committee on the Bill will certainly want to examine the matter in greater detail.

The people of Northern Ireland need and deserve a policing service that is responsive and sensitive to their needs, and which is also held fully accountable by the Policing Board. The Bill represents a modest step down the path towards normalisation. In so far as it moves us down that path, it is welcome, and the Liberal Democrats will support it.

5.57 pm

Mr. Peter Mandelson (Hartlepool): As a general rule, ex-Secretaries of State should not try to do the job of their successors. I rise, therefore, with great modesty and trepidation, knowing that, when we talk about policing in Northern Ireland, we are always walking on eggshells. Although the contents of the Bill are really very limited, fairly inconsequential and bordering on the arcane, one or two aspects of it trouble me. That is why I want to speak this afternoon. I have discussed some of these issues with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and he knows that, in my approach to these

[Mr. Peter Mandelson]

matters, I have the utmost regard for and trust in the way in which he is carrying out his responsibilities in the very difficult circumstances in Northern Ireland.

I would like to clear up one deep misunderstanding at the outset. The Bill has nothing whatever to do with implementing further recommendations of the Patten report. If it were the case that recommendations had been left unimplemented, or that certain provisions of the report were unfulfilled and now needed to be implemented, I am sure that my right hon. Friend would have identified those provisions and recommendations. He did not. Implementation of Patten was achieved in the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000; that was certainly the Government's view and I was a member of that Government. Indeed, in many respects, that Act was Patten plus, with knobs on. Given the difficult circumstances and conditions persisting in Northern Ireland at the time, we went out of our way, to the very outer limits of our ability, to implement Patten lock, stock and barrel. We did that because of the immense importance of creating a fresh start in policing in Northern Ireland. I do not need to rehearse the arguments. They are well known, I am sure, to all those who are here this afternoon. Creating confidence in the police across the community in Northern Ireland, and securing commitment to a new police service from both sides of the political and sectarian divide, was an immensely and supremely important prize. It is testimony to the application of politicians both here and in Northern Ireland at the time, and, if I may say so, it is testimony to the strength, robustness and durability of the original legislation, that that fresh start in policing has indeed been achieved in Northern Ireland. That has certainly been surprising for some.

We implemented Patten and achieved a fresh start in policing while understanding and bearing in mind two very important things throughout. The first was that the Royal Ulster Constabulary was not being dishonoured. The existing force was not being disbanded. Weight was attached to retaining the good will of serving officers whose morale was crucial to maintaining the operational efficiency of the police service in that very troubled part of the United Kingdom. The second was that the arrangements that were being put in place for the governance and accountability of the new police service had to be sufficiently robust to instil public confidence across the community, but not so robust as to make the job of practical policing any more difficult to achieve. Getting the balance right was difficult, but I thought that it was extremely important that we should do so.

I can remember saying this again and again to the wonderful officials who worked for me on the drafting of the original Bill and throughout its passage. Although we had to accept that policing was political—as, of course, it is, everywhere but even more so in Northern Ireland—my bottom-line requirement was that politics should not so intrude into policing that the police became hampered operationally and less able to do their job with complete efficacy. The systems of accountability and of insight and investigation into the police could not be turned into a battering ram to be used by less scrupulous people against the police. I felt that scrutiny and inquiry into the new police service under the new arrangements should not become a means of constantly raking up the past, thus politicising—more than is normally the case in Northern Ireland—the work of the new service. It is testimony to the tremendous sense of responsibility on the part of the Policing Board that was appointed—and the Policing Board as it is presently composed, a point that I would underline—that all the risks and dangers have, in the main, been avoided, and that the very careful equation that we constructed, with the checks and balances that we wrote into the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, has been operated with common sense and maturity.

Rev. Ian Paisley: How would the right hon. Gentleman tell the House that there is not a multiplicity of inquiries that hinder the police, when even the firing of one baton round is inquired into, costing £2,000? Over and over again, we have had such inquiries because one man fired a baton round. Surely it is getting right down to the very minutiae of police activity when an inquiry is held into every baton round that is fired?

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman's question serves to illustrate the concern that I am about to come on to in the remarks that I will make on the new piece of legislation rather than the original Act.

A police service that is constantly at risk of being inquired into and investigated, with its policies and actions questioned and challenged, its judgments called into question, and its practices constantly put under a microscope by the accountability bodies—and, for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, there is more than one such body—cannot easily get on with the job of policing.

Lady Hermon: If memory serves, while the right hon. Member for Hartlepool was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and while the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill was being debated in this House, he wrote a very good article in the *Irish News*. In that article, he made it clear that the distinction that he drew between independent members and elected members of district policing partnerships hinged on the electoral mandate. Will the right hon. Member explain whether his view has changed? Does he now accept that independent members with criminal or terrorist convictions can come on to DPPs without any electoral mandate?

Mr. Mandelson: I will respond to the apparent inconsistency that the hon. Lady has identified. At the time I said—and this was the Government's view—that an electoral mandate should override any other consideration, even that of a previous criminal investigation. That remains my view. However, I also remember saying at this Dispatch Box that, in time—and time heals a lot, if not all, in Northern Ireland—we would want to revisit the issue and consider it in the light of the experience of the peace process and political developments in Northern Ireland. I suspect that that is what lies behind the Government's contemplation of the change to which the hon. Lady refers.

I want to go back to my remarks on the constant, unrelenting pressure on the police, with their every move, judgment and action scrutinised, brought out into the open, put into a goldfish bowl, and debated. My

fear—and I would put it no more strongly than this—is that the provisions of the new Bill will tilt further in that direction, creating risk in the evolution of the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

A balance must be struck between constantly reviewing the police and allowing them to get on with their job—a balance between the need to secure inclusiveness and accountability in the governing arrangements for the police and their ability to get on with their job. A balance must be struck between the party and independent members on the Policing Board and on the district policing partnerships. There must also be a balance between the Chief Constable, who is rightly responsible operationally for what the police do, and the Policing Board, which has responsibility for holding him to account in a general sense but not on particular aspects of the operations that he superintends.

Lembit Öpik: I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there is always a danger of over-regulation, but that might be the price that one has to pay to build confidence in those parts of the Northern Ireland community that did not trust the police. However, does he not accept that one of the biggest frustrations for a proportion of the police force is not what is in this Bill, but the fact that there is mandatory 50:50 recruitment? To follow the logic of his argument, it would be appropriate for the Government to review that provision if they want to remove some of the pressure on the police.

Mr. Mandelson: That is a matter for the Government. Like the hon. Gentleman, I would be perfectly happy to hear their arguments for any changes that they might contemplate in that regard.

All sorts of checks and balances were involved in the original Act. There was not just a balance between the board and the Chief Constable, but a balance and check between the differing responsibilities of the board and the Secretary of State and a balance relating to the respective roles and powers of the ombudsman, the board and the Secretary of State vis-à-vis the police service. By no means, do I claim perfection for the original Act, but we took great care at that time to get it right in policing terms and not just in terms of what was being demanded politically by the different parties in Northern Ireland.

It goes without saying that everything in Northern Ireland involves negotiation. Given the history and nature of the conflict there, every day, every week, every issue and everything is rightly subject to negotiation. That is in the nature of the peace process and the conflict resolution in which we are all engaged. Compromise is the order of the day, and that is right. However, we must be careful not to confuse compromise with political expediency when such important practical matters as policing and the upholding of the rule of law are at stake. We must certainly not confuse compromise with the political expediency that downgrades or displaces the professional needs of the structures of law and order in Northern Ireland that have such a responsibility placed on them in the particular circumstances of the Province. I certainly do not suggest that Ministers are disregarding the professional needs of the police and the structures of law and order—quite the opposite. I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State well enough to know that he would never move an inch in that direction.

However, we must bear in mind that nowhere in the United Kingdom—indeed, in very few places in the western world—are the structures of law and order under greater pressure than they are in Northern Ireland. They are under pressure not just from terrorist activity from the residual number of dissidents, but from organised crime, sectarian violence, intra-community killings and the continuing civil disorder of the sort that we have seen just this last weekend. That provides the backcloth, and the Government need to consider carefully any move that risks unbalancing the existing political framework and the existing system of checks of balances that were so carefully weighed and so carefully written into the original Act. If a wrong move is made, that may make the job of the police even harder than it already is.

For example, the Bill proposes to reduce the already limited safeguard that enables the Secretary of State to question the board's desire to launch inquiries into the police. The board's right of inquiry is of the utmost importance, but the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) illustrated how one can take that right to excess and apply it improperly in a way that discredits the very right that it is important to build into the legislation. In other words, that right must be exercised with caution and not with an excessive political zeal that threatens to destabilise the police or, at the very least, almost drain them of their energy and ability to carry on their normal policing functions.

We must remember that what will take the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach to Hillsborough this week are the possible circumstances in which Sinn Fein and republican members join the Policing Board and the district policing partnerships for the first time. I welcome that; it is long overdue. Sinn Fein has been trading for too long on its commitment to the Good Friday agreement and the peace process without actually signing up to a crucial, central part of the agreement that was made. However, we should not pretend that this would not introduce an entirely new political dimension to policing if and when republican members join the police bodies. We must be aware of the impact that that could have on the governing arrangements of the PSNI.

The Bill also proposes that, out of the Policing Board's 18 or 19 members, the new required number of members needed to approve an inquiry is only eight. If one considers police authorities in most parts of the United Kingdom, most people would think it extraordinary that it would take only eight members of a board to bring about the instigation of what could be a very major and expensive inquiry with major long-term implications for the police. I recall that there was huge pressure to agree to the paltry figure of eight in the original Bill, and the Government believed that the figure of 10 was very much on the low side. We made it absolutely clear that, if we conceded to an ever-lower figure, that would risk exposing the police to unreasonable political pressure that would reduce the credibility of any such decision by the board. After all, it is a major step to set up an inquiry and, if it can be agreed by eight out of 18 or 19 members, that is bound to reduce the credibility of the decision. If the power was

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unreasonably or improperly used, it could lead to an unravelling of confidence by the police and the public in the PSNI's governance. I have heard the reassurances offered by Ministers on that point, but I have yet to be fully convinced that this particular change is necessary or desirable.

The same is true of the proposed extension, after a short period, of the powers of the ombudsman in Northern Ireland. She is only just beginning to make proper use of her existing powers, and not without controversy. It is important to recall that Patten always intended the focus of those powers to be on individual complaints about wrongdoing by the police, so that someone who had got on the wrong side of the police, or had suffered from some improper use of police powers, would have somewhere independent to go in the knowledge that their complaint would be thoroughly and rigorously examined, as it should be. The Bill expands the role of the ombudsman by shifting it away from the investigation of individual complaints to embrace wider and more general investigations into police practices and policies, which are properly the domain of the Policing Board, not the ombudsman, given the original conception of his—now her—role in the Patten report.

Lady Hermon: Under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, the new office of a chief inspector of criminal justice has been established—although the appointment has not yet been made—and the police ombudsman's office will fall within his remit. Does that reassure the right hon. Gentleman about the ombudsman's extensive and increasing powers?

Mr. Mandelson: No, I am afraid that it does not. The ombudsman has a very important job to do in addressing individual complaints brought by members of the community against the Police Service of Northern Ireland. She is only human and cannot be expected to embrace such a wide canvas, or waterfront, of possible calls to investigate not only individual complaints, but the general policies and practices of the police. I am not entirely reassured by the change that the hon. Lady mentions.

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Does my right hon. Friend accept that one of the key benefits of the parliamentary ombudsman is that they are able to identify systemic failures arising from individual cases, and does that not reassure him that some of the changes in the Bill will not be as draconian as he fears?

Mr. Mandelson: If that were the case, one could rely on the undertaking that I gave from the Dispatch Box at the time of the previous legislation that, should the ombudsman identify a pattern of behaviour, she would be able to make it public and present her views to the board and to the Secretary of State without further changing legislation and investing in her, additional powers and responsibilities that she does not have the capacity to undertake at this stage in the development and evolution of her role.

I want to tell the Government this: there is a very complex political situation to be negotiated in Northern Ireland, given the suspension of the institutions and given our overriding desire to restart those institutions, to get devolution under way again and to achieve the full and enduring implementation of the Good Friday agreement. I had to smile slightly when the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) complained that the Government were contemplating doing deals in Northern Ireland. I have to say to him in his absence that if he does not understand that politics in Northern Ireland is about is doing deals to secure the peace process and the advances and progress that we have already achieved, he remains, despite his long service in his job, a stranger to the affairs of Northern Ireland. I make no criticism of the Government's handling of the negotiations or of their present complexity, but care must always be taken never to play politics with the police's effectiveness and ability to do their job, because on that rides the public's confidence in the peace process and political negotiations of which policing forms a part. If the public begin to think that risks are being taken with their security and safety, we will quickly see a rapid erosion of their wider confidence in the political process in Northern Ireland.

We have to be clear that the long-term prize that is at stake is enduring stability, ceasefires and peace in Northern Ireland. The ability of the police, with the rest of the community, to help to transform the Province, for the first time that anyone can remember, into a thoroughly law-abiding, law-upholding place, is fundamental to the achievement of that prize. It is therefore important that nothing is done, for the sake of what might appear to be short-term political progress, to undermine the security of Northern Ireland and the long-term integrity of the peace process.

The Government will take many decisions in the coming days and weeks that bear on the short term and the long term in Northern Ireland, some of which will relate to policing and some of which will relate to the normalisation of security and to the infrastructure that supports its maintenance, and they will of course have my full support in taking those necessary political steps. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State needs to be aware—I know that he is, as I was when I did his job—that he will have to ward off pressures for short-term fixes and concessions that, however expedient or harmless they may look today or in the short term, can bring unforeseen and uncovenanted dangers in the longer term.

David Burnside: Given the right hon. Gentleman's experience of having been Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and his understanding of the feeling in the wider Unionist community about what is called the transition and reform in policing, can he foresee, in the circumstances that will arise over the next few weeks, that the Government of whom he was a member could start to put together a deal that would make it impossible for the law-abiding Unionist parties—the Ulster Unionist party and the Democratic Unionist party—to continue to participate on the Policing Board if the price was a deal to bring Sinn Fein on to that board when it is still involved in terrorism and violence?

Mr. Mandelson: I would regard it as unthinkable for the Government to contemplate any set of actions that would result in it becoming impossible for Unionist representatives to continue to be members of the

Policing Board, and I have absolute confidence that they are not contemplating and would not contemplate such a set of actions.

I know, as does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, that the Government will need to weigh carefully all their decisions—not only on the Bill, but on bigger and weightier matters that will be on their plate in the coming days and weeks—and I have no doubt that they will do so. I hope that the outcome is political success, completion, closure—in every sense of the word—and restarting devolution and the political institutions in Northern Ireland. Every member of the community can and should take pride in the institutions' work and the extent to which they have served the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. They will continue to do that if they are given the chance.

6.30 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). He was an exceedingly good Secretary of State in his all-too-short time in Northern Ireland. He was sensitive about reforming the RUC and he recognised the sacrifice of the 302 officers who gave their lives defending all communities in Northern Ireland from terrorism. The Patten report did not recognise that properly. During his term of office, the RUC was awarded the George Cross. I regret that he was hounded out of office after the period of suspension that he announced in February 2000.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) is no longer in his place. I was sorry that he felt unable to take several "friendly fire" interventions. I hope that I did not misunderstand him, but he said that the name "RUC" had been abolished. However, the title was changed only for operational purposes. Section 1 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 clearly states:

"The body of constables known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary shall continue in being as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (incorporating the Royal Ulster Constabulary)."

For legal reasons, the title "RUC" continues. For operational purposes, the body is the "Police Service of Northern Ireland."

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) and I are in agreement. Both of us are weary of the number of measures that amend or introduce police reform. They include the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998; the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 and the Bill that we are considering today. Like the hon. Gentleman, I hope that the Government have now got it right and that we shall have no more piecemeal amendments to policing and police reform. I am sure that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland appreciates that every time a change is made to policing, it is construed—rightly or wrongly—as a concession to republicans.

David Burnside: Rightly.

Lady Hermon: Perhaps my hon. Friend will elaborate on that later. The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh said that there were no concessions to republicans on the face of the Bill. I agree. However, we anticipate that, if the Provisional IRA is stood down—the euphemism that is being used for disbanding—and it undertakes a final act of decommissioning as it promised the people of Northern Ireland in its statement in May 2000, the Government will further amend legislation. They have such a huge majority that the amendments will unfortunately be accepted, even if they do not implement the Patten report.

I have already alluded to clauses 19 onwards in an intervention on the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael). They repeat the provisions of the Police Reform Act 2002. It introduced four categories of officer: community support officers, investigation officers, detention officers and escort officers. It is therefore curious that the Bill omits community support officers. The Chief Constable, Hugh Orde, is under continuing pressure for resources, and one would therefore expect the Bill to provide for community support officers.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland made a valuable point. The contracted-out services will be given to civilians. Expecting them to abide by a code of ethics is not sufficient. The Secretary of State will recall that the Patten report contained the famous words,

"human rights should be seen as the core of policing"

in Northern Ireland. If we want the Patten report to be implemented fully, civilians who undertake escort or investigation duties must receive human rights training as well as training under the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. The Bill does not go far enough.

I am also worried about district policing partnerships. Clause 13 states:

"In appointing independent members of a DPP the Board shall so far as practicable secure that the members of the DPP (taken together) are representative of the community in the district."

"Representative of the community" has become a popular phrase. It was contained in the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, which established the Parades Commission. Hon. Members may be interested to know that Evelyn White, a young lady from the Garvaghy road, challenged the composition of the Parades Commission because its nine members are all men. Not a single woman serves on the Parades Commission. The Lord Chief Justice heard the case and the phrase "representative of the community" was interpreted in the context of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 as a balance between Catholics and Protestants, not men and women. That is unacceptable.

I ask the Government not to leave the bare phrase,

"representative of the community in the district".

If they genuinely wish to implement the Patten report, they should consider paragraph 6.26, which states:

"Taken as a whole, each DPPB should be broadly representative of the district in terms of religion, gender, age and cultural background."

It would be helpful if those words were included in the Bill instead of the bald phrase, "representative of the community". In previous case law, it was interpreted narrowly. That is unacceptable. All members of the community, including women, should have a say in a district policing partnership.

I hope that the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh will forgive me if I paraphrase him incorrectly, but I believe that he described the Catholic-Protestant

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provision as "the niggly bit". He said, "Let us not disagree over the niggly bits." I say with the greatest respect to him and to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford that although both are keen for the 50:50 recruitment procedure to continue, I have a difficulty with that.

Mr. Mallon: That is not what I said. I referred to the Catholic-Protestant divide, purely because it is an element of the overall legislation with which we are dealing. A completely distinct point that I made was that policing legislation in general contained many niggly parts. Perhaps that stems from the fact that we are a niggly people living in what is currently rather a niggly place. My plea was that we should not lose sight of the ultimate vision in Patten simply because we considered some elements to be niggly. In no way was I disparaging either Catholics or Protestants, or indeed making my point in relation to them.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful for that clarification.

As I was saying, my difficulty with the Bill is caused by its failure to deal with the 50:50 recruitment procedure. Why do I find that so terribly offensive? Along with, I would have thought, all who support the Belfast agreement—which I still passionately support—I find it offensive because, in referendums, the majority of people in Northern Ireland and in the Republic voted in favour of an agreement that, unusually, repeated not just once but twice its reference to a commitment that

"parties affirm in particular . . . the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class or creed."

It also stated that

"the British Government intends as a particular priority. . . to promote equality of opportunity in relation to religion and political opinion."

That was said in 1998, and the overwhelming majority of the people of the island of Ireland endorsed it. I find it grossly offensive that, two years later, in the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, the British Government legalised religious discrimination in the recruitment of police officers. Had they not negotiated an exemption from European Union directives that would have made it illegal by December 2003, we would not be faced with this terribly divisive and counter-productive recruitment procedure for constables. Young Catholics are warmly welcomed into the new Police Service for Northern Ireland, and I am pleased to see them there; but I am deeply concerned about the possibility of their being made to feel that they are there not on merit, but because of their religion. I find that offensive.

During the time of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, many young Catholics bravely entered the force although they and their families had been targeted. The intimidation was dreadful and harrowing for all concerned. Although, I am delighted that so many Catholics are entering the police service, they should be doing so because intimidation has ended and not as a result of a discriminatory recruitment procedure.

I remind the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford of a High Court decision from July 2002. When a young constituent of mine, Mark Parsons, challenged the procedure, Mr. Justice Kerr, a distinguished Northern Ireland judge, considered its compatibility with our human rights obligations under the European convention on human rights. It is, in fact, tolerated because it is of a temporary nature. Section 46 of the 2000 Act is entitled

"Temporary provisions concerning composition of the police".

There should therefore be a review in spring 2004, but the longer the procedure remains the more disenchanted the Unionist community becomes with the Government's failure to keep faith with the Belfast agreement that they supported in 1998. It continues to undermine Unionist confidence in the Government's commitment to the agreement.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lady Hermon: I should be delighted.

Mr. Davies: I said earlier that it was possible to make a strong and intellectually respectable, indeed morally respectable, case against the 50:50 provision in Patten. I understand that case, although I explained earlier why I felt that it must be overridden by other considerations. The hon. Lady should recognise, however, that, according to her logic, she rejects Patten. That has serious implications for the peace process, because the question of what she will replace it with arises immediately, as does the question of how any new consensus on policing involving both communities can begin to be built if Patten has been thrown away. If the 50:50 mechanism, with all its imperfections and anomalies, which I fully acknowledge, is thrown away, Patten is thrown away. The hon. Lady must make that choice.

Lady Hermon: I remind the hon. Gentleman that under the terms of reference given to the Patten commission by the Belfast agreement, the commission was asked to produce proposals that could enjoy widespread support from the community as a whole. I hardly think that legalising religious discrimination can gain such support. It is deeply divisive. When the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs took evidence, the Secretary of State said that such action would be counterproductive, and warned strongly against it. I do not think that the Patten commission fulfilled its terms of reference.

Mr. Davies: I am afraid that, rather uncharacteristically, the hon. Lady has evaded the question. The terms of reference do matter; the fact is that we now have Patten as it stands, and she must either reject it or accept it. If she throws away the 50:50 procedure, the whole thing will unravel and she will have rejected Patten. My question remains: what will she put in its place? What better basis has she conceived for bringing in the nationalist community and creating a police service that genuinely commands the support—and in due course, I hope, the affection and respect—of the people of Northern Ireland, on both sides of the sectarian divide.

Lady Hermon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for another helpful intervention. He will know that during my husband's time as Chief Constable of the RUC, his deputy was a Roman Catholic, as were certain other

Assistant Chief Constables. The Patten commission confirmed that there was no discrimination whatever in the RUC.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee examined the composition of and recruitment to the RUC in 1997. It concluded that the main cause of the low Catholic recruitment was not discrimination but intimidation. If members of a political party—Sinn Fein—hesitate and faff around and cannot condemn, as the hon. Gentleman rightly did, a vicious, nasty, murderous attack on a Catholic recruit in Ballymena, and instead sit on the fence, intimidation will continue. That is shameful and disgraceful of Sinn Fein.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) said that according to the demographic figures there is an almost equal balance between young Catholics and young Protestants of both sexes, so both should be entering the police service quite naturally. It is one of the reasons why I wish Sinn Fein would have the courage that the SDLP showed in the autumn of 2000 in coming on to the Policing Board, because it will mean that the war is over if it is encouraging young republicans to enter the police service. It cannot tolerate them being shot in the back at the same time.

Mr. Donaldson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Patten report is not holy writ and that the Government are not compelled under any circumstances to accept every recommendation in every report produced by an independent body? Therefore, there was never a question of either accepting or rejecting.

Lady Hermon: I thank my hon. Friend for his very helpful intervention.

After 30 years of some of the most stringent anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland, I find it personally offensive—I ask the House to bear it in mind that I have lived there all my life—that the British Government should legalise religious discrimination and negotiate exemption from a European directive that would make such discrimination as we have before us illegal. I thought that I would never see the day. It is intolerable, and it brings disrepute upon those who maintain this provision and wish to see it in the Bill.

I know that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I rest my case.

6.51 pm

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I begin by apologising to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to those on the Government and Opposition Front Benches and to other hon. Members for the fact that I may not be here throughout the winding-up speeches. There was a complaint earlier about the conflict of time and interest. I am not sure that I put that down to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It may have more to do with the modernisation reforms. Perhaps I should leave the matter there.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) raised a point of order with Mr. Speaker earlier, he described this debate as a trivial event in relation to other matters that he wanted to discuss. I think that that is a wrong term. This debate is probably not an earth-shattering event, but having listened to it I have begun to realise why it is important that we are here tonight and why the matters that we are discussing are of considerable significance.

I had wanted to refer to the debate as the further implementation of the Patten report, but, having listened to the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), I think that it might be safer to say that it is part of the ongoing reform of policing in Northern Ireland. Hopefully, it will get us all out of a difficult situation.

It is clear that the provisions of the Bill are about trying to strengthen the role of the Policing Board, given the early experience of its operation, and about trying to clarify the board's relationship with both the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State. The second part of the Bill relates to giving the Chief Constable more flexibility over the deployment of officers and civilian staff. Although people may have differing views about how that part should be pursued, I believe that most would agree that there is a pressing need to have more front-line officers out on the streets in Northern Ireland, so anything that civilianisation can do in that respect should be welcome.

I should like to echo a criticism that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee made about the way in which the Bill was pursued, an issue highlighted in the report of an inquiry on which my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) and I served. I refer to the time scale for dealing with this matter. I appreciate that there is an argument, which the Minister made to the Committee, that elements of the Bill have been widely discussed elsewhere. But there is something rather strange about a state of affairs in which the draft clauses are published on 9 December and the Bill commences its Second Reading in the other place on 16 December. That hardly allows time for pre-legislative scrutiny. If the intention of publishing draft clauses was to ensure that that was the process, then, allowing for comments to the Committee about the other pressures on time, there may be a lesson that we need to allow slightly more time if we are serious about the process.

I want to pick out a few clauses, some of which have already been referred to, and to suggest why they probably make sense and why it is worth our while to pursue them.

I start with clause 3, which is about the meetings of the board. I think it was the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) who said that it was wrong for the board to choose to meet less often and therefore be less publicly accountable. There is little doubt that when Patten reported initially one of the reasons why he stipulated that there should be 12 meetings a year was that he was anxious that there should be a fairly open, consistent, publicly accountable process. But I understand that the board has said that it should not be necessary to lay down in legislation that it must meet 10 times a year. I believe that as well as asking for a reduction it also asked for a provision to allow for occasions when it wants to meet more than once within a 28-day period, so we are simply being asked to show a bit of common sense about its operation in the light of experience so far. If most of us are prepared to

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acknowledge that the board has acquitted itself fairly well so far, it would be absurd not to listen to its experience and try to adjust matters accordingly.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Over the years with regard to the Belfast agreement, and even tonight with regard to the Patten report, we have been lectured that we should not be cherry picking. Surely consistency would say that we should abide by Patten even on this point. Will the hon. Gentleman accept the possibility that if the board asks permission to meet more often it might be to make a more up-to-date request for an increase in salary for the independent members, since they must be working hard?

Mr. McCabe: I leave the hon. Gentleman to conduct his own trade union negotiations. Everyone will have heard his point.

Of course, when it is convenient hon. Members give dire warnings about cherry picking. My view is that people who are seriously committed to the process in Northern Ireland should be prepared to adjust, reform and review as situations develop. I do not believe that there is no scope for that. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree with me and other members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that there may well be an argument for the Committee at some point to review the whole development and operation of the Patten process. There is nothing wrong with learning from experience and trying to adjust accordingly. In fact, to do the opposite is to put on a straitjacket, and that is hopelessly unhelpful in politics.

I turn to cause 12, relating to changes with regard to the police ombudsman. I have been slightly surprised to hear the differing views in the debate. On the one hand, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool told us that the provisions were to extend the ombudsman's powers. Simultaneously the Select Committee heard during the inquiry that the ombudsman's office had actually complained that the changes were designed to reduce the ombudsman's power. We therefore need to discover what is actually happening in respect of these provisions. In fact, this is one of the clearer parts of the Bill, and I am surprised that people are having trouble making sense of it.

The concerns that were expressed related to whether the ombudsman should have retrospective powers, and the changes made through clause 12 have clarified that issue. The use of the word "current" has sought to address that problem, and the use of the word "investigate", rather than a phrase such as "power to make a report", makes the role of the ombudsman much more specific. There has to be a clear case, incident or set of circumstances that the ombudsman is required to investigate. The use of the phrase "public interest", rather than "public concern", addresses the anxiety that synthetic public concern might be whipped up by those who would want to use, or even to abuse, the office of ombudsman. So the concerns that have been expressed in different quarters have been addressed, and if anything, this clause is much tighter and clearer than it could possibly have been at the outset.

I turn to the question of representativeness, by which the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), among others, has been somewhat exercised today. When the Minister was questioned on that issue during the Select Committee inquiry, she made it clear that she was referring the Committee to paragraph 6 of schedule 3 to the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, and to the criteria that must be considered in respect of the nomination of independent members. I will not go through those criteria in detail, but they include the criterion that the individuals concerned must

"have a demonstrable interest in the local community, community safety or policing issues; be resident in, or have a close connection with the . . . area; be able to think and exercise sound judgement"—

we will all have our own opinions on how that one will be tested—

"be able to present information clearly and logically; and have experience of working with others and maintaining networks."

So although people were right to be anxious about representativeness, which is a thorny issue in the Northern Ireland context, it is clear that it will not be possible to nominate and select anyone we care to imagine regardless of consideration of their background, or to use representativeness as a way to override other considerations.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am exercised by the composition of district policing partnerships because the Government repeatedly tell us that they want to implement the Patten report, but that they cannot cherry pick from it and do not wish to do so. The report states clearly:

"As with the Policing Board, the independent members should"—

should—

"be selected to represent the business and trade union interests and to provide expertise in matters pertaining to community safety."

The Patten recommendations make no mention at all of those with criminal or terrorist convictions. How does the hon. Gentleman square what he is saying about the Bill's proposals with the recommendations in Patten?

Mr. McCabe: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I square that very easily, because I do not take the view that we should regard the situation in Northern Ireland as frozen or rigid; I am looking for progress and development. It is clear that there are certain people who could not serve on the Policing Board at the moment, but I look forward to a day when that may be possible. The crucial issue is identifying some clear criteria against which nominations should be judged, and they should include interest and competence in the subject. It is fair to say that through the text under consideration, the Government have indicated which other factors might apply to those with criminal convictions—should their eligibility be considered at all at some future stage.

I had not been particularly concerned about the 50:50 question, until I listened to today's debate. I should say to the hon. Member for North Down in particular that applications from the Roman Catholic community have, I think, risen steadily since the introduction of that proposal. Against that background, we should perhaps judge it as a success.

Lembit Öpik: I apologise for having left the Chamber briefly, but I did watch the debate on the television and

I heard what the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) said. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that a steady rise in applications is not necessarily evidence that the 50:50 rule is responsible for it? More to the point, the real balance that we have to strike relates to whether the resentment caused by 50:50 is worth the benefit, which may indeed have accrued anyway because of changes introduced to the Police Service.

Mr. McCabe: Well, a sustained increase in applications from members of the Roman Catholic community does seem to have coincided with the introduction of the 50:50 rule, but the hon. Gentleman may be right, in that no inquiry or clear-cut evidence has wholly supported that connection. However, if we are looking for areas in which to root out some of the past sense of injustice, we should not ignore that one, on which Patten has rightly focused attention.

Mr. Donaldson: The facts about 50:50 recruitment are actually the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman suggests. Since 50:50 recruitment was introduced, the number of Roman Catholic applicants to the police service has consistently dropped with each recruitment batch. Given the difficulties consequent on that, the Chief Constable has been unable to recruit the number of police officers that he would like, and the full quota for each intake of new recruits has not been met precisely because not enough Roman Catholic recruits are coming forward. So in that respect, 50:50 recruitment is not working.

Mr. McCabe: Well, perhaps this is a phenomenon peculiar to Northern Ireland, but the hon. Gentleman seems to have access to facts that differ from those in my possession. We might have to continue our argument another time, but nothing that was reported to the Select Committee, or which I have seen made available to this House, disputes the notion that there has been a consistent rise in applications from Roman Catholics. I should be happy to continue this debate with the hon. Gentleman at a future date.

When today's debate began, I did not anticipate that we would learn of an entirely new Opposition policy in respect of Northern Ireland, but that is what we got from the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies). I am rather sorry that he is unable to be here at the moment, because I would have liked the opportunity to pursue exactly what he was telling the House. As I understood it, he said clearly that there must be interlinkage—the word that he used—between policies in Northern Ireland. He made it clear that it was not a question of incremental progress or of inch-by-inch reform. Presumably, therefore, he favours the big-bang, comprehensive solution that allows no time for reflection or adjustment. Interlinkage is a permafrost policy. It is not about edging forward or about the disgusting negotiations in which people are inclined to engage in their genuine attempts to avoid further killings or the breakdown of political progress. Interlinkage, as a policy, says that everything is too complex and that if we cannot solve the problem in one fell swoop, we should not bother at all. That approach derides everything that people are trying to do. If it is the policy of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford, who is now back in his place, I worry about what progress we can anticipate in any area of life in Northern Ireland.

The whole experience of change in Northern Ireland has been inch-by-inch progress, and sometimes we have seen reversals. The last Conservative Prime Minister is often credited—rightly—with taking the first tentative steps and edging the process forward, and he did not get the support that he deserved. If he had not taken those brave decisions, I wonder where we would be today. The present Government have continued that process. At times it has felt like two steps forward one step back, but on balance even those in Northern Ireland who are disillusioned with parts of the process would acknowledge that life for the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland is probably better now than it was 15 years ago.

I was disappointed to hear that the Bill should be dismissed as inch-by-inch reform. That is the sort of politics that we should discount as the way to proceed in Northern Ireland. The essence of the Bill is the reverse of the policy described by the hon. Gentleman. We are being asked to reflect on adjustments and changes to policing reform in Northern Ireland, partly as a result of further negotiations and partly as a result of experiences after the implementation of parts of the Patten report in the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.

I cannot see a better way forward for policing or any other area of life in Northern Ireland. Unless we have the option of listening to people's genuine doubts and concerns and adjusting policy to reflect the matters that they raise, some elements of the community will be excluded whenever changes are made. That is an atrocious approach which would ultimately wreck the policy. I urge all hon. Members to acknowledge that we should all unite in favour of incremental change in Northern Ireland, with time to reflect and adjust if necessary. We certainly should not be scared of introducing further legislation to change our arrangements in the light of experience or representations from important elements in the community. That is how we should proceed, and I hope that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman will reflect on his own views before he develops the all-or-nothing policy that he outlined today.

7.16 pm

Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I wish to echo what the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) said earlier, when he mentioned the real reasons for the Bill. My constituents are not writing to me or stopping me in the street to ask for new policing legislation because the Policing Board needs more power: they tell me that we need more police officers. Crime is on the increase. We cannot get police officers to respond to crime when we need them, because there are not enough and they are tied up in other activities. That is the problem.

How can I convince my constituents that the Bill will put more officers on the front line in Northern Ireland? That point is recognised in the report by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which specifically concludes:

> "There is in Northern Ireland a particularly urgent need to release more officers for front-line police work."

There is nothing in the Bill that will achieve that, and that is why I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) when she said that the Bill

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needed a clause that rescinded the 50:50 recruitment policy. That would enable more officers to be recruited immediately.

Recently, the Chief Constable tried to recruit more civilian staff, which would have released more police officers on to the front line, but because of the constraints placed on him by the 50:50 recruitment policy, he was not able to recruit anything like the 300 civilian staff that he wished to recruit.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Jane Kennedy): The hon. Gentleman provokes me to respond. He argues that the constraint on recruitment is the 50:50 policy, but does he accept that it is the physical structure of Garnerville itself that places the greatest limitation on the number of recruits that the Chief Constable can accept?

Mr. Donaldson: No, I do not agree with the Minister. In the last recruitment batch, the quota for the intake was 60. However, only 36 were recruited. That was not because there was not enough room: it was because only 18 applicants from the Roman Catholic community were successful in the recruitment process. The police had to tell some of my constituents, who had also been successful, that because they were Protestants they could not be recruited as there were not enough successful Roman Catholic applicants. It was not because of a lack of accommodation in Garnerville. The Minister is wrong. The police cannot recruit enough new officers because of the 50:50 recruitment rule.

Lembit Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman recall an occasion on which I asked whether the Chief Constable would be restricted in that way and Ministers gave the explicit assurance that he would not?

Mr. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right, because it would be incredible if we needed more police officers and the only problem that we faced was the lack of accommodation at Garnerville. That problem could be resolved, even if only temporarily, pending the construction of the new police training college. I am afraid that I cannot accept the Minister's contention that the problem is accommodation, not the 50:50 policy. That flies in the face of reality.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The hon. Gentleman is right, in that the Chief Constable has not been able to achieve his quotas. That constraint bit before any constraints imposed by the capacity of Garnerville. Does he recall that one of the recommendations in the Patten report included the need for a new police college? It was recommended that the appropriations for the new college should be made in the next financial year. Does he agree that the Government have been derelict in their response to that recommendation, because we still do not have a new police college?

Mr. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Clearly there have been significant delays in implementing the recommendation that there should be a new police training college. As I understand it, the problem lies in finding the right location. However, I am told that that will be sorted out within the next three months so I hope that there will be no further obstacles and that the new college will be constructed and handed over to the Chief Constable.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Surely, it would not matter if the finest police college was sitting there already. Under the terms of the legislation, Protestants would be banned from it. That is what the rule amounts to. The Chief Constable tells me, "My hands are tied. I can't even get detectives in from across the water because of the rules". If that is so, why are we talking about a college that has not been built? Even if it had been built, the rule would still be 50:50 and the rooms could not be filled with recruits. Furthermore, why persist with the idea that people have constantly to reapply and take the tests even if they have passed them two or three times? Why must they be turned down only to start over again?

Mr. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. Young Protestant constituents have visited my office and shed tears of frustration. One young lady from Lisburn had successfully passed all the tests and examinations three times, only to be told, "We cannot take you because you are a Protestant". What does it do to enthusiastic young people who want to serve in the police and make a contribution to the community when they are told that because of their religious viewpoint—because of the church that they attend on Sundays—they cannot be police officers? That is downright blatant discrimination; it is a breach of human rights and the sooner the 50:50 rule is scrapped the better for all of us.

It is an insult to young Roman Catholics to tell them that they have been put in a privileged position. They do not want that; they want to join a police service in which everyone is equal, everyone is accorded equal respect and their religious views are not the issue. Sadly, the 50:50 rule sectarianises the recruitment policy of the police and creates a problem that will exist for many years to come.

Two classes of police officer are being created and that will not help to establish the police service that we want for the future. Like the hon. Member for North Down, and, I think, all hon. Members from Northern Ireland, I want to see more Roman Catholic recruits for the police service. An elderly lady in my constituency told me that the police took a considerable length of time to respond after her home had been broken into recently. She was obviously distressed and said, "It doesn't matter to me whether the police officer who answers my distress call is Protestant or Catholic. All that matters is that there is a police officer to help me when I need help." That is the heart of the issue.

Mr. McCabe: I am trying genuinely to follow the hon. Gentleman's argument and I understand that he is making a sensitive point. He says that whether the officer is Protestant or Catholic does not matter to him and I have no reason to doubt him. However, can he conceive of a situation where it might matter? For example, it might matter in a society that is perceived to be unjust and unfair and one group appears to be in the ascendancy and dominates certain functions—*[Interruption.]* I am not talking specifically about Northern Ireland. That situation has applied in many

societies in the past and may still apply nowadays. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there could be a perception that the police force was not balanced or fair and that we have a duty to address that?

Mr. Donaldson: If the hon. Gentleman talked to some of his own constituents he would probably find people who do not believe that the police are fair or balanced. There are people throughout society—in all our constituencies—who are anti-police or have a grievance against them. That is not unique to Northern Ireland. However, even if that were the problem—which I do not accept—the 50:50 recruitment policy is not the answer.

To clarify my earlier intervention during the hon. Gentleman's speech, it is true that, in general, the number of Roman Catholic recruits entering the police service is higher than in previous years. However, my point is that although when recruitment to the new police service began there was significant interest from the Roman Catholic community, the number has dropped consistently in each subsequent batch of recruits. In the last intake, the number of successful Roman Catholic recruits was down to 18, so the total number of recruits, which was 60, was reduced and restricted to 36. That means that there is a shortfall.

The same policy applies to civilian recruitment. The Chief Constable recently initiated a campaign to recruit additional civilians to free up police officers for transfer or secondment to the district command units. However, the 50:50 rule meant that there was a substantial shortfall in the number of recruits for civilianisation, so officers who could have been released from headquarters duties are not available to the Chief Constable or the district commanders. That is a direct consequence of the 50:50 policy. By not including a provision to rescind that recruitment policy, the Government have created a serious flaw in the Bill.

Other hon. Members have referred to other aspects of the Bill that could undermine the operational capacity of the Chief Constable and make it more difficult. I refer to clauses 9, 10, 18 and 22, which deal respectively with reports of the Chief Constable, inquiries by the board, the provision of information to the board and the disclosure of information and the holding of inquiries.

As the other place acknowledged, some of those provisions change the balance between the Chief Constable and the Policing Board in relation to political or policy issues. We have some concerns about that. Clause 10 provides that the number of members who can cause an inquiry to be held should be reduced from that set out in the 2000 Act. That is unacceptable, as was pointed out earlier. The Bill should include further safeguards to deal with that aspect of the legislation.

As the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) said, the problem is one of public confidence. If we want to recruit more young people—male or female—to be part of the new police service, public confidence is essential. As a representative of a majority Unionist constituency, I have to tell the House that public confidence in policing is lower than it has been for some time. Lisburn, in my constituency, has the largest district command unit in Northern Ireland. From talking to the commanders there, I know that officer numbers are a critical problem. Because of the shortage of manpower, they have had to take measures such as closing police stations at hours when they are normally open to the public and taking officers away from community duties to give them other responsibilities.

Patten told us that we were moving towards community-based policing, yet people in the communities that I represent see fewer police officers today than they did during the height of what was known as the troubles. Their community police officers are being pulled away to do engage in other duties. Therefore, if the Patten report is the ideal, as some have suggested, the legislation and its implementation are clearly not delivering what Patten envisaged: community-based policing.

The SDLP recently proposed the closure of a number of police stations, arguing that doing so would free up more police officers. I am not convinced by that argument. Indeed, many of the police stations that the SDLP talk about are almost effectively closed as it is. I should like them to be opened up as community facilities. Why do we not use some of the part-time officers who are being recruited to man those police stations and to patrol the vicinity of those stations? That would at least make a positive contribution to community-based policing.

We were fortunate that the district command unit in Lisburn was identified as one of the pilot schemes for part-time recruitment. I welcome that and have been urging my local police commander to use those part-time reservists to increase the profile of policing in the community so that people can see that there is some substance to the concept of community-based policing, but there is a problem with police numbers, so the police cannot respond to crime in the way that they would like. That is having a detrimental effect on police morale at the moment.

Public confidence—this is crucial—is being damaged by the large outflow of experienced police officers under the voluntary severance scheme, and recruitment has not been able to match that. That is acknowledged by the Policing Board. In fact, one of the key decisions behind the renewal of the full-time reserve for a further period to 2005 was taken precisely because the severance scheme had resulted in fewer police officers than had been envisaged and recruitment had not been able to match the number that had left.

The full-time reservists, who have made a very valuable contribution to policing in Northern Ireland in the past 30 years, deserve a little better. I urge the Government to consider the position of the full-time reserve and to look beyond 2005. I fear that, because of the way things are going at the moment, we will need the full-time reserve for some time to come, and I should like the Government to take a more positive attitude towards it, as well as expanding the part-time element.

The Government have also referred to the text for consideration. It does not form part of the Bill, but it is the Government's very unusual method of indicating to one political party in particular what they would be prepared to do in the event of that party making certain moves. Of course I am referring to Sinn Fein-IRA. The Government have indicated—the Secretary of State used this terminology earlier in the debate—that in the event of the IRA engaging in acts of completion, which he defined as a commitment to exclusively peaceful

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means and demonstrating that in tangible terms, the Government would be prepared to remove the current bar on convicted terrorists becoming independent members of the district policing partnerships.

We fought very hard against that proposal when the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 was passing through both Houses of Parliament because we believed that it was unacceptable. I believe that it continues to be unacceptable that someone with a terrorist conviction should have a role as an independent member of a district policing partnership. Public confidence in the DPPs could be seriously undermined if that were to happen. The fact that the Government are holding that out as some kind of incentive and are bartering the issue in return for some political movement by the republicans is unacceptable.

We have heard the phrase "a commitment to exclusively peaceful means" for a considerable time. In 1997, all the paramilitary-linked parties signed up to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence. That was supposed to be about a commitment to exclusively peaceful means, as is the agreement itself, but we are now being told that the IRA needs some further incentives to bring them to the point where they make that commitment to exclusively peaceful means.

What are we getting? We are told that the Government are also prepared to enhance the powers of the four Belfast subgroups. I am concerned that that will result in the Balkanisation of policing in Belfast. In political terms, west Belfast is more or less controlled by Sinn Fein, so it will also control the west Belfast subgroup. I should not like to be the police commander in west Belfast who has to account to a subgroup, with the kind of power that the Government propose, in the event that the IRA engages in some act of completion.

The Secretary of State referred to the text for consideration and said that, in the event of those acts of completion, the Government will introduce certain amendments to the legislation. Perhaps the Minister can tell us in summing up when the Government believe that might happen. Are we working to some kind of time scale? Clearly, the House will consider the programme motion on the Bill, and it must have some implication on whether the Government could accept the additional text. At what stage would the Government be prepared to accept it? The House is owed some clarification about the matter.

The Patten report declared that a clear objective was to take politics out of policing. Well, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) made it absolutely clear that the Bill is a consequence of a political deal between the SDLP and the Government. That is why the legislation is being enacted. The Government are now saying that they are prepared to do another deal—this time with Sinn Fein-IRA—and to make further changes to policing on the back of another political deal.

There could be no greater politicisation of policing than the way that the Government are doing one-off deals behind our backs with political parties and then amending the police legislation. That is seriously damaging the Unionist community's confidence in the Government's ability to be in any sense impartial about policing.

Policing has become a political deal. If people want a concession or some political movement, they offer something on policing. I do not believe that that will achieve Chris Patten's stated objective of taking politics out of policing. Policing has become a political football. It has become something to barter with, and it has become common currency in the political negotiations. What does that do for the integrity of the policing institutions in Northern Ireland?

Of course Sinn Fein will not stop there. It is demanding the devolution of policing and justice as the next phase in so-called policing reform. Why does it want that? I believe that it has probably set its sights on capturing the ministry for policing and justice. I cannot imagine anything more absurd than a republican Minister in change of a department for policing and justice in Northern Ireland in the context where the IRA continues to exist as an illegal terrorist organisation.

Of course policing is only part of the Sinn Fein shopping list. Reference was made earlier to the policing implementation plan that accompanies the legislation, but the Government are working to a much bigger implementation plan. This implementation plan, which will evolve over the next few weeks during discussions between the Government and political parties, is about addressing Sinn Fein's demands: the so-called shopping list, which it covers by describing as the full implementation of the agreement. Policing is one part of that shopping list, and I am told that republicans are also pushing for retrospective powers to investigate allegations of police collusion to be included in the deal. We know that they want some kind of arrangement for members of their illegal organisation who are presently on the run. We know that they want substantial demilitarisation, as they describe it: the removal of the watchtowers in south Armagh, further troop withdrawals and further security base closures. All those are on the shopping list. They have a string of demands on human rights and equality issues, and they wish to scrap the legislation on suspension so that, if they do in future what they did at Castlereagh, Stormont or in Colombia, we will not be able to suspend the political institutions. No doubt all those items on the shopping list will appear on the Government's new implementation plan, to be published at some time in the next few weeks, as the Government's contribution to resolving the outstanding issues.

The Government need to be very careful. In their quest to win republican support, they may push the unionist community over the edge. The result may be that they secure republican support but lose unionist support. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool said in response to an intervention that none of this would be effective if one section of the community in Northern Ireland withdraws its support for these institutions. If the Government continue along the route on which they seem to be embarked, a real danger exists that that will be the result, particularly if they are seen to concede on a number of the issues that I have mentioned, simply to buy more support from the republican movement on matters to which it should have given support several years ago.

The Government are indicating, as we know, that this Bill is the latest instalment in an ongoing process whereby they barter concessions on policing, justice and security in return for so-called political progress on the

part of the republican movement. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool said that we must not barter the security of the people of Northern Ireland, and he is right, but that is precisely what the Government are doing. My concern is that they may do it against the advice being given to them at the moment by Army chiefs who are very concerned about some of the proposals to withdraw military installations. Political expediency demands, however, that those concessions be made to the republican movement. Where will it end? What further price will have to be paid because the republican movement's appetite for concessions is insatiable?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman is now straying rather wide of the matter before us, which is policing.

Mr. Donaldson: I was just coming to a close, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Policing in Northern Ireland cannot be seen in isolation from the wider political context, and I was simply trying to set the context in which the Bill has been presented to the House. The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) said that he hoped that this would be the last time that he would have to debate policing; I fear that it may not be. I believe that the Government intend to make further concessions; indeed, they have indicated and confirmed already some of the concessions that they are prepared to make to Sinn Fein-IRA in return for movement on the arms issue.

The Government should proceed with caution, because there is a real danger that the people whom I represent, and the people who are represented by hon. Members on this side of the House, will lose patience with the direction in which they are going. We want a peaceful, normal society in Northern Ireland. We want an end to the terrorism that has plagued Northern Ireland over the last 30 years. The Government have not so far succeeded in achieving that objective through making concessions, and they need to be very careful that such concessions do not result only in a further collapse in public confidence, particularly in the unionist community.

7.45 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): This is the first occasion on which I have been able to speak in a major debate on any aspect of Northern Ireland policy. I am glad to contribute, and I trust that the House will respond to me as someone who has attended many debates, heard many questions and listened to many hours of discussion on the Floor of the House. What I offer may not be to the agreement of the whole House, but it has been long considered.

I have come to this issue by a curious route. For many years in my former occupation as a lecturer, I taught my students about how Belfast was a model of the way forward. I taught them about how Belfast as a city—and Northern Ireland—was reinventing itself. Socially and economically, it was the driving force. It was challenging perceptions of itself—outdated perceptions—as a city with wall-to-wall policing, in which one could not walk safely, and as a city full of slums, which had armed police on every corner. The students were shown how that was changing—the painful way in which it was changing—and how a city could re-engineer itself. Let me say to Members on the Opposition side of the House that we contrasted it, as a shining example, with examples from across Europe of cities that had reinvented themselves such as Barcelona and the port city of Bilbao.

I present that context because, when I went to Belfast in May last year for the first time, as a new Back Bencher only five or six months into my job, my eyes were opened to what had been happening. They were opened, too, to the immense confidence of people on the street, whether I walked down the street with loyalists or with a Sinn Fein councillor, and the confidence that came through when I talked to people involved in a community operation. That confidence that the process was moving forward was in stark contrast to some of the political deliberations that were going on at the time.

From my limited and distant viewpoint, I could see that, in the whole of Northern Ireland, and in Belfast in particular, people were choosing for themselves a way forward that rejected the bloody and wearing conflict of the past. There was an inexorable movement forward. That is not an easy path, but it is an essential one; not a path without pain, but one with a definite purpose. Today, this weekend, and in recent months, we have seen how painful that path is to follow, but we also see with increasing clarity that it is the right path. This Bill is part of that path, which leads away from the rule of the past and the rule of terror towards social, economic and political stability.

If you will indulge me for a moment longer, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to say that, in May, I also saw two clear images, which impact forcibly on the debate today and on the passage of this Bill—the two faces of Northern Ireland. The first and negative face was the almost complete divergence of views held by the many politicians I met formally—"divergence" is perhaps too insubstantial a word. I understand from recent press reports that scientists have found a new colour, which is known as "superblack". As I went from one discussion to another in Northern Ireland politics, I saw superblack and superwhite, and nothing in between. There was no subtle shading. The reverse and positive face was the recognition by many, if not all of the same politicians, when speaking informally or over a pint, of the many shades of compromise and of the colours and tones. The latter gave me hope; the former—the public soapbox politics—gave me only despair.

As a traveller to Northern Ireland, I know that many people approach the problem with the certainties that only an outsider can have. I was clear in my mind where the solutions lay and knew that, somewhere in between the many positions, a common thread would show the definite way ahead. I came away with all my great certainties much diminished. That was probably right and proper. It was a little too optimistic to hope that the angst that had been generations in the making would be unravelled by a novice in a few days, but I did glean some important insights that are relevant to the Bill.

I came away with the powerful optimism, which many hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber share, that the benefits of the peace process—the oft-named dividend of fewer lives lost and economic growth—were so cherished that the people of Northern Ireland would

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not let them slip from their grasp. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) because some of my comments are relevant to his concerns. We have tip-toed around the additional text for consideration, which stands as a separate clause outside the Bill. I am also worried about that and want reassurances on it, but I come at the problem from a different angle. For me, the whole process has been one of painful compromise as we have made incremental progress, inch by inch.

There has been hurt and difficulty on both sides. Much of the anguish has been personal as people who suffered at the hands of former terrorists have had to swallow hard. Many of those same people have also said, however, that they want progress to continue. That has to be done delicately and, as the hon. Gentleman said, we have to keep everyone onside. It is not good enough to move too far to one side to bring one group on board if we lose everyone else off the ship. Everyone has to go forward together.

Despite the reassurances I seek, I am sure that we have made progress on the road to a better future, and that this Bill is right in word and spirit. But the devil is in the detail, and never has the phrase been so apt. Elements of the Bill seem like Faustian pacts. One of the greatest objections from the Unionist community is that it foresees the possibility of Sinn Fein sitting at the top table of the Policing Board and on district policing partnerships. I do not need to rehearse the well-aired objections to that, centring on the failure of the IRA to decommission fully and to put its arms beyond use, but my message to colleagues, Unionists and others, is simple and direct: that particular little devil must be exorcised before representation of Sinn Fein on the Policing Board is allowed. I seek an assurance on that.

We can achieve that by acts of completion. Hon. Members have asked what constitutes an act of completion. By now, after so many hours of debate on the Floor of the House and so many lines within newspaper columns, we know that they mean putting the guns and the arms permanently aside. That applies to the IRA, but it must also apply to any so-called paramilitaries who maintain the idea that the best way to influence a settlement in Northern Ireland is to keep the threat of violence as a bargaining chip. If there are no acts of completion there can be no place on the Policing Board or the DPPs. Accept the rules and become a player, or stay on the sidelines if it is not possible to agree to the rules of the game. I want the process to move forward and to be as inclusive as possible, but I also want the certainty that people are fully committed in word and deed to the peace process. The phrase "turning over a new leaf" is too light and flippant to represent that commitment properly.

Let me make it clear, however, that it is desirable—this is where I approach the problem from a different angle—to have Sinn Fein members on the Policing Board at the appropriate time if the party can demonstrate that its members and elected representatives are completely committed to peaceful democratic processes. That is the ultimate painful path of reconciliation and progress towards long-term peace and stability for Northern Ireland. As we have seen from the long haul in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the world where conflict has ravaged a society, the solution is to bring in the outcasts from the cold to make them part of the process and the political structures.

As we have seen from the faltering phases of the peace process, the inexorable climb towards democracy is painful, but all partners recognise how much there is to lose by opting out. Once the benefits of participating in democracy are realised—once people have worked for and achieved progress—no party that is seriously committed to a peaceful solution will ever want to pull out. That is why, with the right safeguards and at the appropriate time, I am fully committed to all members of the democratic community being represented on the policing boards and elsewhere.

Let me put to the Minister those aspects of the Bill on which I seek reassurance. There are no vacancies on the Policing Board that would allow Sinn Fein or any new candidates to be considered for membership. At present, all 19 members are directly appointed by the Secretary of State under direct rule. If, however, acts of completion were to occur, those conditions would allow the restoration of devolution, which would allow the board to be reconstituted. That would then allow political nominations to be made under the d'Hondt formula, which would give Sinn Fein the opportunity to recommend members.

The other area of controversy, for similar reasons, is the eligibility of ex-prisoners and those convicted and given a custodial sentence, whether suspended or not. Again, I understand that the Government do not feel that the conditions are right to include any changes to the eligibility criteria until and unless further conclusive acts of completion by paramilitaries are carried out to the satisfaction of those involved. While there is a chance that paramilitaries might resume diplomacy down a gun barrel, it is inconceivable that those with related sentences of imprisonment could be allowed to sit inside the criminal justice system. Equally, however, it would be wrong to rule out that possibility for those who have turned their back on their past ways and who may genuinely want to be involved in ensuring the future successful implementation of policing in Northern Ireland.

I understand that the Government have undertaken to review that in the light of a commitment by paramilitaries to acts of completion. That is to be welcomed, although I find it inconceivable that that commitment will be made at this time. The additional texts put in place three safeguards—the triple lock. Any individual who wishes to be considered must agree to a declaration of non-violence and must accept a quarantine of five years before undergoing a separate commencement order subject to an affirmative resolution. That will bring independent members in line with political members. It does not suggest that we ignore past misdemeanours. We would have to recognise, however, individuals who have made it clear that they intend to play a full part in a democratic society. As I said, the idea of turning over a new leaf does not do justice to the transformation that such people would have to make. Such an approach gives hope to those who would renounce violence in any civil society, as we have seen across the world, and who would adopt instead legitimate means of representation.

Above and beyond that, clear criteria are laid out. They include a demonstrable interest in the local community, such as community safety or policing issues, and the requirement that a person must be a resident of, or have a close connection with, a council area. Those have to be satisfied. They are the guiding criteria beyond the triple lock and other considerations. All that is conditional, however. As the Prime Minister stated last year, the phrase "acts of completion"

"does not merely mean a statement or a declaration of words, it does mean giving up violence completely and totally, in a way that gives everyone satisfaction and confidence that the IRA has ceased its campaign, so that we can move forward with democratic process, with every party that wants to be in government abiding by the same rules."

It is not difficult to understand that message. It is not ambiguous or opaque, but clear and direct—disarm, give up violence, sign up to democratic and peaceful means exclusively. You can join the club, but those are the rules, which are set by politicians who believe in democratic debate. "Can you sign up to those rules?" is the message that we must put out beyond the Chamber.

That message has been clear and explicit ever since the Prime Minister's Belfast harbour speech, when he stated that republicans must

"make the commitment to exclusively peaceful means real, total and permanent."

If that can be achieved and if the rules are signed up to, we can, as the Prime Minister said,

"implement the rest of the Agreement, including on normalisation, in its entirety and not in stages but together."

In the Bill and the additional text, we are waiting to see if those rules are acceptable to those who are not yet completely weaned off dependency on the threat of violence. How much do they want to join the democratic club? Do they recognise that the majority of people in Northern Ireland subscribe to those rules, and do not want a return to the old ways? Do they recognise the desire of many in the House and outside to see them fully on board and fully engaged with the rules set by rational society? When they are so engaged, they will have too much to lose to let go. I hope that they will engage, because it is in everyone's interest to move forward and regain the momentum on long-term peace and prosperity that has temporarily stalled.

Lady Hermon: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman because I was following his speech closely. He will remember that the IRA issued a statement on 6 May 2000 in which it promised the people of Northern Ireland and the people of Ireland that it would put weapons permanently and verifiably beyond use to maximise public confidence. It lied to the people of Northern Ireland then, so why we should we believe it this time when it says that acts of completion have been completed?

Huw Irranca-Davies: That is a hugely valid point, as that sort of incident destroys confidence in the whole peace process. I am therefore categoric in saying that we must seek clear assurances on complete disarmament, the destruction of weapons and taking the gun out of the hand—there can be no grey areas. I began my contribution by saying that, in the politics of Northern Ireland, I was struck by the extremes of opinion on both sides. However, this is one issue where things do have to be black and white—we must have that assurance. I want representatives of Sinn Fein and every other group who have made that commitment to serve on the boards—that is their duty as representatives of all the communities in Northern Ireland. However, the hon. Lady's point is extremely valid.

I have relatives, not in the north of Ireland, but in the south or Eire. I recall a conversation with my relatives in Dublin when the peace process was starting many years ago. They told me, "You are too optimistic about what you see from across the water in south Wales. You see the problem in far too simple terms. It is not going to happen because our troubles are too embedded. The factions in our society are too deep-rooted, and the problems run through generations." However, I think that both we in the House and the people of Northern Ireland are proving them wrong. We must have confidence in the peace process and paramilitaries must put their weapons beyond use. With the right assurances, I believe that the Bill is another step forward in that process. I appreciate the concerns that have been expressed, but we have a duty to move that process forward a little bit more.

8.4 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): We listened with great interest and care to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies). We welcome his first visit to Northern Ireland and appreciate the things on which he picked up. However, let me tell him that we who sit in Parliament do not speak for people from afar—we go down into the ring. He met people over a pint—he can be sure that I would not drink such a thing at all—and they told him all those things, but they are not elected, are not sitting in the Chamber and do not carry the burden in the heat of the day. They do not know what it is to have their homes bombed, their friends maimed or their families attacked.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I bow to the hon. Gentleman's great experience and the fact that he represents the very communities that we are talking about. However, in case I was not clear, I sat down and talked with people in those communities—not people back in south Wales—who told me what was going on.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind all hon. Members that we are discussing the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I was simply commenting on a speech that you did not rule out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker; I therefore thought that I was in order.

Some of us have to go down into the fight, and have to fight for our votes. When we are returned, we speak with a mandate. I have the largest Unionist mandate of anybody in Northern Ireland, and am not being boastful when I say that I have been elected at the top of the poll five times for Europe. However, the hon. Member for Ogmore has not analysed the character or motivation of Irish nationalism and Irish republicanism. I shall provide a simple illustration. There was a terrible bombing in an Orange hall at Tullyallen on the Armagh border, in which men were murdered. I went down to see families in the

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neighbourhood who were connected to the church that I belong to. I asked a lady who had lost her husband, "Do you have any idea, dear, who did that?" She said, "Yes, the man who did it is sitting in there, at the top of my husband's coffin. He is weeping and calling him by his Christian name, saying, 'Who would do that to my friend?'" When the net started to close around the murderers, that man left everything and skipped the country, because he was a guilty man, never to return.

That does not change overnight. We are asking tonight not for words but deeds. The IRA must disband and shut down its murder operation. It must say goodbye to that, and its weaponry, stained with the blood of our kith and kin and of its Roman Catholic colleagues and neighbours, must be put to the fire. That is the issue—the House would be foolish to think that one representative standing up and telling us that the war is over will end anything, because it will not. The hon. Member for Ogmore said we should have trust, but he knows perfectly well that the party that I represent is not enamoured with the Bill, the Policing Board or the way in which it has worked. We had no part in it—more than that, we opposed it. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) had much to tell us, but our attitude was entirely different in that debate.

However, the Policing Board came into existence, and because we had the numbers, we were told that we could have places on the board. I went to see the then Secretary of State, one back from the present one. I said to him, "Can you give me a promise that if I move on this and put two men on to the Policing Board, you will not use that as a lever to try and get the IRA on the Policing Board?" He replied, "Certainly not. What's more," he said, "if you don't join up on that day"—he pointed to a date in the calendar—"you'll not be in until there is an election, and then the matter will be reviewed." I asked, "Are you telling me what you are telling the IRA: that if they don't come in now, they will not be in until there is an election?" He said, "Yes." I said, "I'd like to believe you," but I did not believe him.

We were hardly into the Policing Board before agitation started to get the IRA on to the board. The police chief has been a propagandist. He wants the IRA on the board. How can I have any confidence in those who say that they will keep the IRA out of the Policing Board? The IRA could have been on the board. Let us not forget that. Some hon. Members seem to think that IRA members were shut out of the board. They shut themselves out of the board. I must be fair: the police chief would not have had members of my party on the board, and I think some of the Unionist members would not have been on the board, either.

We must face the facts, and we do not believe what the Government are saying. We have heard it all before; they have said it all before. The last statement from the hon. Member for Ogmore about what he was asking sounded to me like a planted statement—exactly what the Government would like to respond to. I have sat in the House for more than 30 years. There is nothing green about me. I will listen with great interest to what the Minister says on the matter. I have made my own comment.

In Northern Ireland, we have serious trouble. There is deterioration. I was amazed to hear a former Secretary of State tell us that things were moving and so on. I have only to switch on my radio at 6.30 am and listen to the first news: muggings, murders, elderly women raped, homes ravaged—a catalogue of darkness, every morning. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds) knows all about it, because it happens in his area. He sits up half the night taking calls, then takes out his car, goes to the affected area and tries to instil confidence in people who have lost confidence.

What we need is not a fancy Bill, cobbled together to get murderers into position on policing boards. We need real policing in Northern Ireland—policing that will shut up and shut off the people who are doing those things and gaining strength. The amazing thing is that we have, sitting unemployed, a body of men who are fully skilled and fully trained and know all about such matters. They could be called in at a moment's notice and brought back for the current emergency, but because of the 50:50 principle in the Bill they will not be called back and they will not be brought in to do a job that they could do in the present situation. So the bombings, burnings and murders will go on and the situation will deteriorate. Of course, the IRA wants that to happen, because it is only from a state of mayhem that it will get the concessions that it seeks.

On the 50:50 principle, let me say to the hon. Member for Ogmore and the rest of the House that it is not right to make a concession to anybody when that concession is wrong. The 50:50 principle is wrong. It is wrong in European law, it is wrong in moral law, and it is illegal under our own laws. People are told, "Oh, you'll be recruited this time, because it's 50:50." Some of them go away angry because they are not recruited, but the reason they are not recruited is not that they are Roman Catholics, but that they do not come up to the required standards. They are not accepted because they do not have the necessary qualifications. Slowly, however, the standards are coming down.

The general public do not know that the new recruits are allowed to do some things and not allowed to do others. A new recruit in the RUC is not allowed to fire a baton round for a long period, until he is passed to do so. I mentioned in the House this afternoon the excessive expenditure on the ombudsman's inquiries. At present the police have to report to the ombudsman on every occasion a baton round is discharged. That results in an inquiry by her office and a full printed report. Even when the baton round was fired without complaint, it is investigated and reported. The cost of such investigations is £2,000 per baton round fired. That is the situation in Northern Ireland.

An investigator is employed at £13 per hour, and a senior investigator at £41 per hour. To date the reports have simply recorded that the rounds were fired as a necessary part of policing, yet the cost of the investigations is excessive. In the past nine months, the police ombudsman has spent £3.5 million on such investigations and reports, with an average complaint and report costing more than £1,000.

There is mayhem, murder and burnings on the streets. Old people cannot go out at night. There is no peace. I say to the House that our first duty is to give the people the right to live. They cannot live under the present circumstances. That is why the people of Northern

Ireland have had enough, and why public representatives in the House must take a tough line on the issue. There can be no compromise. Those who commit the acts that I have mentioned must be made to obey the law. If they will not obey the law, they must be imprisoned.

The Government must be firm. The courts must impose much stiffer sentences. The court system needs to be tightened up and should be a real threat to lawbreakers. We need to devise a new anti-terror law that will bring all agencies together in one common battle to defeat terrorism. We need to postpone the fourth year of the Patten severance policy. We need to offer immediate contracts to former RUC officers to fill the gaps that now exist, but cannot be filled. There is no way in which they can be filled. The police thought that they could bring policemen from over here, but they cannot do so, so we have a serious problem. We must upgrade.

Various Governments have treated the full-time reserves abominably. The reserves have been insulted. They comprise men who gave up their jobs and entered the full-time reserve without proper security for the future, and they have now been dumped simply because they IRA did not like the fact that they were RUC men. Sinn Fein, which did not like the RUC, does not like the present Policing Board. It is issuing the same attacks on the Policing Board as it issued against the RUC in its literature. I come from a constituency where terrorists tried to kill a young Roman Catholic who had been recruited, and his father and mother. The policy is the same. What is more, this House should be aware that the IRA has been feeding into every firm in Northern Ireland a piece of literature saying "Treat ex-RUC men the way we always treated them." That is official. It is in the paper. Would Members believe that, after a man has circulated that at a place of employment, people can get up and say "It's all over"? We believe that such men are liars and murderers. What do they care about the truth? They know nothing about it.

Political policing needs to stop. We have political policing in Northern Ireland. When somebody joins, they are asked "Are you a Protestant or a Roman Catholic?" After they have passed the test, whether or not they are a decent fellow, they are told "We're very sorry, but you're not going to be a policeman here because you don't go to the right church." That is what happens and it is wrong. If that happened on the other side of the fence and Protestants were doing that, we would be hounded. We are told that we must make concessions. To whom are we making concessions? We are doing so to men who have devised the greatest system of terrorism in the world. We are seeing in Colombia their ability to teach others to repeat the same acts.

It is all coming out in the wash, but why do the Government want to put these men into office in Northern Ireland, when at an international level they want us to hound them? It is about time that the Government started to hound these men, no matter what side they come from. I have had my bedroom windows smashed with bullets from so-called loyalists. My wife, a local councillor, has been attacked by them. I know all about them. We have only to read the literature that these men circulate—I am talking about so-called loyalist gunmen—about me to know that they look on me as danger man No. 1. I have been through all that. When my son was at Queen's university, the nuts of his car wheels were screwed off to the last thread. When he came out and started to drive, if one of those wheels had come off, he would probably have been killed and the car would have been wrecked. I have been through all that and I want to say that better men than me have died in this battle. I am here tonight to say to the House and plead with it: let us get the job of real policing done.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He speaks with great passion, but does he agree that the best way to move forward is not to attack the institutions, which I think are being established in the right way and with the right structures, even though there is much comment about them, but to insist that civic leaders of all political persuasions should rally behind them and encourage people to get involved and behave responsibly towards them?

Rev. Ian Paisley: That is a beautiful thing to say in the House of Commons, but we do not have democratic institutions in Northern Ireland. This House, in its wisdom, destroyed democracy. Votes do not count. The people on Shankill road do not get any counts. It is hard-working councillors such as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, North and others who get the vote, but they are taken by the hand of the Government. What did the former Secretary of State say about Adair? She said that he was an unsung hero of the peace process. That is what we are up against.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I again ask the hon. Gentleman to bring his comments back to the Bill. I understand the background, but I think that we must now concentrate on the Bill itself.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Your colleague led me astray, Madam Deputy Speaker. He will have to be blamed for the sin that he has committed, but I understand your guidance. I am glad to continue, as I need to deal with some matters of utmost importance, but the principles must be established. The principles of good policing are that it is legal and morally correct, and can stand up and face scrutiny.

We have heard about the office of ombudsman. Of course, the ombudsman is currently a woman. When she was appointed, I stood on my feet in this House and called attention to her political relationship—her husband is an active member of the SDLP and I believe that he is to stand as a candidate for election as a Member of the Legislative Assembly at the next election. He is also a serving councillor on Ballymena council. If any Government had given to the wife of an official Unionist the office of ombudsman, Labour Members would have been shouting out and crying aloud about what a terrible thing had been done. If the Government had dreamed of giving the appointment to a Democratic Unionist, all hell would have been let loose on the Labour Benches. Of course, we are not on the quangos. They do not allow us to join any quangos. We are lepers. This Government keep us off everything, but the day will come when the people will have something to say. It is perhaps going to come more quickly than they think. All that I am saying is that the ombudsman's office needs to be made democratic.

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

I do not believe that policemen who have served and retired should have their past dug up by an ombudsman who has the power to investigate all back-cases. A line must drawn in the sand to say "So far and no further." If such investigation starts, what will happen? Every other policeman in the force will be demoralised. That is what is happening. There was supposed to be somebody to oversee the ombudsman's office, but where is that legislation? The Government are not rushing that through the House. Of course, the IRA would not give any concessions if they did so. I am saying that we should have an independent inquiry into the ombudsman's office. After all, the Policing Board wanted her to investigate certain things and she was reticent about doing so. It was only after the board met again that she was prepared to do those things. We know what happened at the debacle in Omagh. These people in Omagh are not DUP supporters; many of them are SDLP supporters.

Let me say to the House tonight that it needs to open its eyes to many things in the Bill. They have not all been discussed, and we could go on all night dealing with this matter. I trust that the House will come to the point at which it is prepared to grasp the nettle. On Wednesday, the two Prime Ministers will be in Belfast. One leader—me—will not be invited, not even to meet them outside the talks to put my case. That means that the majority of Unionists who think like me will not be heard. I say to the House and to the Government: "Ignore these people at your peril, because they are the heart, and out of the heartland came your police, your Army and the people who were faithful on the day when faithfulness cost." I say to the Government: "Have sense, make no more concessions, start doing the job of proper policing and people will rally to you. The Roman Catholic population will rally to you." Some of the Roman Catholic population live in desperate peril because they are under the threat of the gunman, but the police cannot help them. They cannot call a policeman because he cannot go to help them. The Roman Catholic population knows what I am saying, and feels the same way. Let us have proper policing; when we have it, we will not need to argue about some of the things that we have had to argue about tonight, because they will not even be thought of.

8.30 pm

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): May I start by apologising for missing some of the debate? I had to go to see some constituents. Some hon. Members will know my background and that I grew up in Northern Ireland. One of my earliest memories as a very young child was pointing out that our neighbour was a police inspector. The lecture that I got from my father still resounds with me, because I had also pointed out that this police inspector was a Catholic. As a five-year-old, I did not know what I was saying, but I had said it in the wrong place. That was pre-troubles, but the lecture that I got still resounds in my memory. I therefore enter this debate with some trepidation.

I try not to speak on Northern Ireland matters, because I get quite angry listening to the selective arguments justifying past actions or inactions, rehashing old positions that do not relate to the debate, fighting old battles or erecting new barriers to progress. I hear what the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) has said—I have heard what he has said all my life—but some of the issues that he raised made me quite angry, so I shall not respond to them. I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) that I do not share his optimism; I do not think that he recognises certain aspects of the Ulster psyche. That is an issue to which we need to return in the Bill.

Some of the things that have been said in previous debates about what is to happen to the Policing Board have not proved to be correct. We must also treat the siren voices with caution when approaching this Bill. They will not be proved correct, and we need to concentrate on that fact. We also need to address the fundamental question of how to bring people in from the cold. How do we persuade ex-terrorists to uphold the law? The way in which the Government are approaching that question is absolutely right.

It was stated earlier that the policing of Northern Ireland was political. Policing has always been political there, from the earliest days of the creation of the state. One of the things that worries me is that some people regard no change as acceptable. If such people are going to erect barriers, perhaps the time has come to hold a referendum on Northern Ireland in the mainland of the United Kingdom, to see whether the people here still want the obstructions from the Ulster Unionists, whether they think that the continued investment in Northern Ireland is right, and whether they want to hear the kind of comments that are being made.

Some of us have argued for a much more radical policy than the one that the Government are proposing, but I have long recognised that we cannot move faster than people are prepared to move. The Government's approach is about taking people with them—

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): What would you know about it?

Brian White: I actually grew up in Belfast. The hon. Gentleman may not appreciate that.

Mrs. Iris Robinson (Strangford): And you left.

Brian White: I left when I was 18, at the height of the troubles, but the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) must recognise that the kind of comments that members of his party make were one of the reasons why I left. There was no hope coming from that quarter. It is important, if we are to have hope for Northern Ireland, that we should move forward. I reject the siren voices that are coming from the Democratic Unionist party.

Much of the Bill is uncontroversial: the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has said as much. However, as others have said, we should move forward inch by inch—for example, on issues such as the Policing Board. This debate has reminded me of the arguments over whether the Metropolitan police should have a police authority. People said, "You can't have that," but when the authority was created, all the arguments disappeared. Many of the arguments that we have heard tonight have been hot air; they will be seen to have been unjustified when the changes arrive.

Earlier today, I thought that the Father of the House was going to be removed from the Chamber because he was talking about the middle east. He rightly emphasised what can happen, in that serious conflict, when dialogue breaks down. We have to remember what has happened in Northern Ireland when talking has stopped. There are other routes that can be taken, and we must be aware of that.

There is a provision in the Bill about which I am concerned. One of the suggested changes is that, instead of the board's objectives being consistent with the Secretary of State's objectives, it should have regard to them. If we consider other legislation—where, for example, independent regulators have to have regard to Government policy, as opposed to being consistent with Government policy—we find that Government policy is actually undermined. I am concerned that the suggested change will have that effect. I hope that the Minister can assure me that that will not happen.

There are those of us who support the Government and who feel that the way in which to make progress in Northern Ireland is through dialogue. We have to try to achieve consensus. We should not listen to siren voices that argue for backwardness and for not making any changes. If we listened to those voices, there would be no peace process.

The SDLP has taken a lot of stick in this debate. However, the party has been courageous in saying that Catholics ought to join the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It should be given credit for that. Unlike Sinn Fein, it has said that it wants the institutions to work. We should respond to that, and not vilify the SDLP as some have tried to do. Much of today's debate has not been about the Bill; it has been about rehashing old arguments.

We have to ensure that the tests on Sinn Fein are of the highest order so as to ensure that the party is committed to the process. If it is not—and it will soon become clear whether it is or not—the Government will have to say that they will not make the proposed changes. The Bill as it stands is the right way to go, developing consensus. This unstable world contains examples of what could happen if we get this wrong. The Bill is another step in the peace process and we ought to support it. We have to make the arguments for change and, if Northern Ireland is to have a future, we have to reject the kind of voices that I have heard all my life. One of the reasons why I do not often contribute to debates on Northern Ireland is that I get angry with some of the comments that are made, and I try not to get angry during debates.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to ensure that this Bill goes forward but also to ensure that any changes have the support of the majority in both communities. The SDLP is arguing strongly for people to join the police service and to make the institutions work. That ought to be supported.

8.39 pm

David Burnside (South Antrim): Following the previous speaker, I will try to be an optimistic voice on behalf of my constituents. Most of the people in Northern Ireland are happy living in Northern Ireland. We like living there. It is not all depression and bad news. A lot of good things are happening in the Province and there is a lot of optimism. However, we have to be realistic as well as optimistic. I will be opposing the changes and I will do so on principle.

Not many Conservatives are present for this debate—in fact, there are not many Conservatives in the House—but I have an old-fashioned attitude to institutions that are working and that should not change, and they include this House, this Parliament and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. We had a very fine police force called the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Its record against terrorism and crime was unrivalled throughout the world. Even if we take terrorist-defined crime out of the equation, it had the best detection rates of any force in the UK. It had high morale, gained respect and received co-operation from the community—both Protestant and Catholic. That force was treated disgracefully by the Patten report, which is one of the weakest parts of the peace process. It has disillusioned the Unionist community more than any other aspect of the peace process.

If I am re-elected to this place the next time or the time after that, I shall look forward to the elective dictatorship here being more finely balanced. I look forward to a few more Conservatives and a few more Ulster Unionists being here. [HON. MEMBERS: "And a few more from the DUP."] A few more Ulster Unionists within the united Unionist family. I envisage the circumstances in which we could negotiate the legal incorporation to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) referred. She was right when she mentioned a document in the Library referring to the incorporation of the name of the RUC, but she went to a memorial service at St. Anne's in Belfast for the old RUC. There is no visibility, and that is wrong. Perhaps the problem can be fixed, but the RUC should not have been treated in the way that it was.

Policing concessions are being made and suggested tonight and, as part of the political process, they are being negotiated behind the scenes with the SDLP and Sinn Fein in the nationalist-republican camp further to weaken policing in Northern Ireland. Deals are being done and discussions are taking place. A form of front organisation will appear at Hillsborough later this week, but the deals are being done. I do not want to be pessimistic, but the Government must understand that Unionist Members are not bluffing. We are not bluffing when we say, "If you make further concessions way beyond the Good Friday agreement, such as putting terrorists on to the district policing partnerships"—there is a different position with the Policing Board—"I, as Ulster Unionist Member of Parliament, will refer back to the decision taken by the Ulster Unionist Council before Christmas. We will not be on the Policing Board."

The Government will remove the police authority and replace it with the Policing Board. They will bring terrorists in who will present operational problems to the police's divisional commanders. That will make policing on the ground worse and it will not deal with the threat of crime in Northern Ireland. Whether it is the mafia, the drug dealing and the violence or whether we call it terrorist or criminal activity, I cannot see a difference. Such activities are all intertwined and they are all one. Such activities are committed by both republicans and loyalists.

[David Burnside]

The Government are weakening policing and they are doing so as the result of political concessions in a political process. Ulster Unionists and Democratic Unionists will not sit in an Executive with Sinn Fein because of its hypocrisy and because of what went on in Colombia, Castlereagh and Stormontgate. If we will not sit in the Executive with Sinn Fein, we will not sit on a Policing Board with its members. Sinn Fein is not a legitimate normal political party. It has not gone through the transition.

I look forward with optimism, because I believe that people can change. I hope that those who have been involved in violence in Northern Ireland—whether they are republican or loyalist—can have a future as well as a past. However, the evidence is that that will not happen in the foreseeable future. Sinn Fein-IRA is playing a double game. The Government may think that these and further concessions on policing will help, but they are weakening policing in Northern Ireland and that will not produce a stable political process that has the consent of the Unionist and nationalist peoples. The Government are getting it badly wrong by misjudging the mood of the Unionist people. They will see that reflected if and when there is an election on 1 May.

I hope that the Government will listen to us, because I am not trying to be pessimistic, but realistic. We are saying to them, "Your legislation is not improving policing in Northern Ireland, and you have done enough harm already." Let us try to restore the morale that existed in the old RUC. Let us try to build up community policing and to get the support of the majority of the Protestant and Catholic population who always supported the RUC. Let us regain and rebuild the morale that existed in a fine force that was decimated and treated disgracefully by this Government.

8.45 pm

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): In supporting the Bill, I share the humility that was demonstrated by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael), as I am conscious that my involvement in and association with the issues surrounding Northern Ireland are very slight in comparison with many hon. Members who contributed to the debate. Since my involvement with the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, however, I have developed a perspective that I should like to convey.

The proposals outlined in the Bill are hardly the most dramatic—by and large, they are refinements of existing legislation—but given the passion expressed by some hon. Members about even its seemingly arcane and detailed aspects, I cannot accept the view of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) that the way to deal with the Northern Ireland situation is to take a multi-party and big banner approach to resolving all the issues involved in policing in one omnibus piece of legislation. It is obvious that the passions generated and the depth of feeling that arises as a result of even the smallest change to the existing position in Northern Ireland are such as to make that approach completely impossible. The way forward is the incremental approach that the Government have adopted in changing legislation as and when circumstances change.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) suggested an apocalyptic outcome for the approach that we have adopted, but I want to contrast what I saw when I first went to Northern Ireland in 1972 with the situation in Belfast now. That clearly demonstrates the benefits that have accrued from the Government's approach. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State talked about the changes that have taken place in Belfast since 1994. I went to Belfast in 1972, when I was relatively young. One in three or one in four buildings had been bombed out, the city was saturated with members of the armed forces, and pervasive tension existed everywhere. It was a frightening experience that I will never forget. I contrast that with my first visit as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in 2001, when I saw a city that seemed relaxed, self confident and prosperous—a total transformation from the vision that I had carried around with me for 30 years. It is sad that many who have not visited Belfast have the 1972 rather than the current vision of that city. Apocalyptic pronouncements reinforce that impression.

Every change to effect the transformation happened only because people were prepared to act in good faith, take things on trust, and swallow reservations, and deeply held feelings and prejudices that were based on legitimate personal experience. They did that because the opportunities gave Belfast a future.

The Patten report recognised that for change to accelerate in Northern Ireland, it was necessary to have a police force that was trusted and represented all communities. When I first read the profound changes that Patten proposed, I felt a frisson of foreboding that they would never work. I feared that the prevailing culture in Northern Ireland meant that the changes would not be accepted. However, my foreboding was unjustified. The Policing Board exists. People said that it would not work and that no members of the Catholic community would participate. They are participating and the body is working.

The comments that have been made today about the Policing Board's performance are reassuring. The changes are a testimony to its commitment, ability and inspiration of trust. They would have been unimaginable 10 years ago. As well as the cross-community Policing Board, we have a new name, new badge, new chief officer, new ethical policy, a new commitment to community policing and enhanced recruitment from all sections of society.

No other organisation has undergone such profound changes in such a short time. That is a credit to those in the former RUC who have accepted and worked through the changes, whatever the extent of their initial instinctive resentment of them. It is also a credit to the moderate, nationalist community and the SDLP, which supported the changes, and the courageous young Catholics who joined the Northern Ireland police force in spite of the evident intimidation from some dissident republican forces.

Lady Hermon: If everything in the Police Service is as rosy as the hon. Gentleman paints it, why did the Secretary of State's predecessor speak at length in Liverpool university about Northern Ireland becoming a cold house for Protestants?

Mr. Bailey: I do not claim that everything is rosy. I pay tribute to those in the police force for effecting an

enormous number of changes in a short time. In those circumstances, it would be remarkable if everything were rosy.

Rev. Martin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman referred to objections from dissidents. Did he realise that a former Minister of Education in the Northern Ireland Assembly had lobbied in Washington for another investigation into the Police Service of Northern Ireland and British policing in Northern Ireland? Did he know that this morning, the Sinn Fein Member of the Legislative Assembly for West Tyrone castigated the police, who were called out in the early hours of Sunday morning to deal with a riot in Omagh? The police rather than the rioters were being blamed for the riot.

Mr. Bailey: I may not have been aware of those details, but they can only substantiate my basic point that elements of the Catholic and nationalist community are trying to intimidate those who want to make this police force work.

During one of the Committee's visits to Belfast, we had an opportunity to observe recruits in action and training. We had already had an opportunity to interview the Chief Constable, who spoke of the superb quality of the new influx of recruits. After watching them train, we spoke to them individually to try to gain an insight into their personal experience of the process they were undergoing. One could not but be impressed by their enthusiasm and dedication, which in time, no doubt, will be translated into professionalism.

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): I note the hon. Gentleman's approval of the quality of those young persons. Should we not be equipping them with a new police training college? Is that not one of the most important things we should be doing? The existing staff and personnel are marvellous, the existing cadets are marvellous, but the building is not up to scratch.

Mr. Bailey: I agree. Let me issue a plea to the Minister, however. The one complaint that I heard from the recruits was that the distribution of the new uniforms was somewhat arbitrary, and not very prompt. It strikes me that an easy win could be secured by at least ensuring that the uniforms were provided as soon as possible. That may not be the most profound issue affecting Northern Ireland at the moment, but I hope it will be noted. Once we have sorted it out, perhaps we can think about the new training college.

Much has been said today about the 50:50 issue. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) made some logical and passionate observations; her beliefs are obviously deeply held. I recognise that there are matters of concern, but the evidence so far suggests that the system has led to an increase in the number of Catholic recruits.

I think that this commitment is important for more than one reason. It is, for instance, symbolic of the Government's commitment to ending what I accept may have been a perceived imbalance, and perceived cultural problems, experienced by Catholics with the former RUC. Above all, however, I believe that this public commitment and the improved recruitment that has arisen from it undermine Sinn Fein's approach, which, as we know, involves trying to convey to the nationalist community that the RUC has not changed. For that reason alone, I think it is important to retain the policy at least for the time being.

I think it was the hon. Member for Lagan Valley who spoke of "civilianisation". I know that civilianisation has the potential to release more people for front-line policing. He said that that had been a slow process. My understanding is that since effectively it has been farmed out to a private organisation it has improved considerably. Obviously we need to review the progress that is made, because potentially it is a very important way of releasing people for front-line policing.

The overwhelming message that I received when I was over there was that the main obstacle to recruitment was the Sinn Fein objection and the intimidation arising in part from the position it had adopted.

I accept the comment of the hon. Member for North Down that the issue has to be dealt with in the long term if we are to achieve a Northern Ireland police force that is more evenly balanced between the two communities. I see the various matters incorporated into the text for consideration as perhaps an attempt to initiate a debate that may enable us to resolve some of these issues in the long term.

Before talking about the text for consideration, I should like to mention the district policing partnerships. There was concern about the appointment of independent members, which comes under clause 13, and it was recognised that in some areas there would be councils that would result in DPPs being monolithically representative of one community. These points were put to my hon. Friend the Minister and she made it quite clear that she saw the appointment of independent members as a way of balancing the situation, ensuring that there was legitimate representation of all sections within a particular community.

I shall not go through the code of practice and the requirements that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) read out. I was sufficiently reassured on that matter to think that the fears that had been raised would not be realised.

I should like to speak for a few minutes about the text for consideration. I recognise that this is a hugely sensitive issue, but I would first commend the Government for at least putting this in such a way that it is there for open, honest, transparent debate. I have heard a great deal this evening about deals done behind closed doors and so on, but here we have an issue put before the House that gives hon. Members an opportunity to talk about it, Express their fears and make their points long before there is any chance of its becoming legislation.

It is anomalous that a councillor with a prison record, but not someone who is appointed as an independent member, can after five years be acceptable as a member of a DPP. I acknowledge that there are deep concerns that former terrorists could be appointed and undermine the independence and work of the police in certain areas, but the commitment given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, that this could not happen until after a verifiable completion, should be sufficient to satisfy people that this is not an immediate likelihood. At the same time, it should be debated.

[Mr. Bailey]

What concerns me is that I feel that there are hon. Members who will never wish the issue to be debated, however much the political scene in Northern Ireland changes. I understand the feelings of those who have argued that we should not talk to terrorists, that we should never do a deal. The thought of dealing with people who have a record of murder, violence and so on is unpleasant; it is anathema. But that simply freezes the status quo. We must at some stage have some sort of dialogue that at least gives them an opportunity to play a part in normal, mainstream, civilised society. Otherwise, nothing will change.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking a second intervention. Can he point to a single recommendation in the Patten report that suggests that those with criminal and terrorist convictions should become independent members of district policing partnerships?

Mr. Bailey: I do not think that there is one. What we are talking about is the Weston Park discussions and the possibility that things may change at some point in the future, whereby this could become a legitimate issue for consideration. At the moment the time is not right, and the depth of feeling here today has been clearly demonstrated. Such a development would result in the Unionist community's withdrawal from the process, which is clearly not acceptable. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of change in the future, and I therefore think it right that it be included and discussed. However, we must also recognise that this particular way forward is simply not available at the moment, and that a profound change on the part of the IRA and Sinn Fein is required before it becomes so.

I support the Bill, which moves forward community policing by a further few inches. It offers an opportunity to debate the difficult issues surrounding the text for consideration, and above all, it puts further pressure on Sinn Fein to demonstrate that at some time in the near future, it will commit itself to a democratic process in Northern Ireland, and thereby dramatically change the way that people in that area live their lives.

9.7 pm

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I approach this debate not as someone who has formed his opinions after an afternoon visit to Northern Ireland and a pint in the local pub, nor as someone who ran away from Northern Ireland in his teens, but as someone who has lived in that community, who has grieved with that community, who has felt the pain of that community, and who recognises that some of the most valuable contributions made in Northern Ireland in past decades have been made by those who served in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and who now serve in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

I do not share the view, put forward by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), that the Patten report should be treated as if it were holy writ, and that everything that happens in policing in Northern Ireland should be judged by those standards, as if they were something to be admired and attained. The Patten report was a disaster for policing in Northern Ireland, but it was her party leader and her colleagues who were responsible for that contribution. It was the remit set to Patten in the Belfast agreement that led to the destruction of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Lady Hermon *rose—*

Mr. Robinson: I shall certainly give way to the hon. Lady, if she wants to try.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Since the Patten report is anathema to his party, can he explain why his colleagues have no hesitation in taking their places on the Policing Board, which, of course, was the creation of the Patten report?

Mr. Robinson: I am not sure whether I should get into arguments that I might think justified in answering in a primary school, but which would perhaps be a waste of time in this honourable House. I would have thought it fairly obvious that, just because Democratic Unionists do not get their way, we do not walk off and say that we are not playing. We have to work within the institutions that are there, while we seek to change them. We are present on the Policing Board, even though we did not like its creation and the surrounding structures, and for exactly the same reason, even though we do not like the Belfast agreement, we are in the Northern Ireland Assembly, convincing people that change is necessary, and doing so very successfully. Perhaps it is our success in that area that concerns the hon. Lady more than anything else.

The Patten report led to much of the destruction of the policing service in Northern Ireland and has been the cause of many of the difficulties that we now face. Not least of those is the issue of 50:50 recruitment, which is again addressed in the Bill. It is a grotesque discrimination against the Protestant community in Northern Ireland that 50 per cent. of those recruited into the police service have to be Roman Catholic, while the other 50 per cent. come from all other denominations and none. Roman Catholic recruitment is favoured, even though that section of the community is a minority in Northern Ireland.

As I have said before, in the House, in the Select Committee and elsewhere, I want to see an increase in recruitment from the Roman Catholic community to the police service. That is desirable and would be good for policing in Northern Ireland. However, it must take place on merit. People must be recruited on the basis that they deserve to be so and have been judged against all others who wish to be recruited. People are being judged suitable to join the police service, but cannot be recruited because there are not enough people from another religion to balance them, and that is clearly unsatisfactory. The merit principle has been downgraded and the police service has not had the numbers it needs to do the job that needs to be done.

Changes are required, but the Government's disdain for the Unionist community is apparent when they introduce a Bill to meet the criteria set down by the SDLP for changes in policing, while having in waiting a

further draft Bill that they hope will be satisfactory to Sinn Fein-IRA. At the same time, all the complaints made by Unionists in Northern Ireland about policing are disregarded. The Government make no attempt to address our requirements. I question the strength of the Government's position when they have to pander to two small parties—SDLP and Sinn Fein—and disregard the two larger parties in Northern Ireland. That is not a tenable position.

I have listened to the eloquent comments by some hon. Members who look forward to the day when Sinn Fein can be persuaded to represent their community on the district policing partnerships. Where were those people in all the years when the Government discriminated against my party in its representation on the police authority? I did not hear any of them arguing for our representation, but they are prepared to change laws to allow the representation of a smaller party. It shows something of the state of mind of the Government and their supporters that they are prepared to do many a thing for Sinn Fein that they are not prepared to do for the Unionist community.

The Bill is Patten plus. It goes even beyond the love of the Patten report felt by the hon. Member for North Down. The intent is to woo Sinn Fein into the policing arrangements. However, the Government should be alert to the warning signals in their recent discussions with Sinn Fein-IRA, in which the provisional movement has demanded that policing powers be devolved to Northern Ireland, so that it can have direct control over those powers. The Government should listen carefully before they try to do any deal with Sinn Fein-IRA on that basis. For just one moment, they should imagine how people in Northern Ireland who have suffered from IRA terrorism for decades would feel if we ever saw the day when those same IRA terrorist representatives were in charge of law and order in Northern Ireland. Some law, some order—if the representatives of Sinn Fein-IRA were in charge of policing under devolved responsibility in Northern Ireland. I urge the Government to think twice before going down that road, or they will bring down very hot coals on their head.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) argued that the upgrading and updating of legislation is natural and normal, and that one should expect it. One should consider policing experiences and make changes accordingly. As a general principle, there is a lot of truth in that. The House should indeed be doing that. If experience on the ground suggests that changes are necessary to make policing more effective and efficient, the House should legislate for those changes. But does anybody honestly believe that the Bill, and the Bill in waiting that the Government hope to introduce by way of amendment if they can get Sinn Fein to sign up on time, are being introduced for the purpose of ensuring greater efficiency and effectiveness in Northern Ireland? They will do nothing of the kind.

The Minister of State, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister are all happy to divulge the public reason for the measure. They say that it meets a commitment that was made at Weston Park. Exactly what went at Weston Park is neither precise nor clear. We know that discussions took place, which included matters covered in the Bill and in the further draft that the Secretary of State made available to us. He has not, however, been prepared to divulge the extent to which those discussions involved all the parties. The extent to which they were agreed by all the parties is certainly disputed. The extent to which other leaders might have acquiesced in some of those matters is not clear.

What is clear is that the purpose of the Bill is to make good commitments that were made to at least one party at Weston Park—the SDLP. Perhaps it also gives part of what was required by Sinn Fein. Let us not have the nonsense, introduced in this debate, that we are gathered here because it has dawned on the Government that the experience on the ground of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 demands that these changes be made. Nothing of the sort! A sordid, dirty deal was done at Weston Park. The Government have admitted that they entered into a political deal. That is the truth. The Government can spin things however they want; they can coach their Back Benchers as much as they like to drop in a word about the desirability of the changes, but the reality is that they did a deal to win the Provisional IRA and the SDLP over to the political process.

What problems should the Government have addressed in the Bill? Let them go to Northern Ireland and ask ordinary people about the policing problems that need to be addressed. The Government would be told instantly that people ring the police but they do not come round because no car is available. There are not enough officers on the beat. Resources are so low that the police cannot meet the needs on the ground. People would tell the Government that police stations are being closed at a time when a greater police presence is needed. Those are the issues that need to be addressed. The police need to be made more effective, not to be turned into a political tool to satisfy the SDLP and Sinn Fein.

The hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) indicated that he is angry and therefore does not attend debates on Northern Ireland Bills because he does not like hearing what Unionists have to say, as it seems to have that effect on him. Well, if that were the basis on which some of us entered the House, we would have to recognise—

Huw Irranca-Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Robinson: I will save the hon. Gentleman from intervening. Clearly, he does not want to be associated with the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Brian White). I do not want that to happen, so I should make it clear that I was referring to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East. I welcome the fact the hon. Gentleman wants to distance himself from the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East.

Clearly, the House has to address the reality that it is about time that Labour Members listened to what Unionist Members are saying about such issues, whether or not it fits in with their own thinking. The elections make it very clear that there is a Unionist majority in Northern Ireland. The census makes it very clear that there will be a Unionist majority in Northern Ireland for a very long time.

Instead of attempting to accommodate small political parties in Northern Ireland, it is about time that the Government listened to the voice of—*[Interruption.]*

[Mr. Robinson]

The Secretary of State seems to think that I have said something outrageous, but I would challenge Labour Members: if they think that what I am saying is untoward, they might like to stand in elections in Northern Ireland. There is always the possibility that they could go around, trying to recruit, and they could send out the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East to find out how many people he could get to join the Labour party.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are discussing the policing of Northern Ireland?

Mr. Robinson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for bringing me back to the Bill. I urge the House to recognise the fact that the Bill does not address the issues that need to be addressed. It will further alienate those in the Unionist community in Northern Ireland who want only good, sound policing in Northern Ireland. One of the sad realities of the past few years is that police morale has plummeted because changes have been made for political reasons to the disadvantage of good policing in Northern Ireland. That has happened as a result of the Belfast agreement, the Patten report and the Government's action. There is nothing more hurtful to the Police Service of Northern Ireland than finding out that—after so many years in the front line of the conflict, defending the community in Northern Ireland—it is the terrorists against whom they held the line who are being rewarded and the police who are being punished.

9.22 pm

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North): I am pleased to have the opportunity to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) in this important debate. I briefly want to make a few comments on the Bill. I suppose that "Here we go again" could be the title of the debate because this is, I think, the third time that the House has discussed legislation on the police in Northern Ireland in a little over four years. That any Government should have to legislate so many times on one issue really does raise some questions.

My hon. Friend has rightly pointed to the reason why this Bill and other legislation have been introduced. The Bill has nothing to do with the necessity to address issues to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of policing; it is a result of the need, in the Government's view, to introduce legislation to implement concessions to the SDLP and Sinn Fein, as part of the political process. That is the reality of why we are debating the Bill, which does not address the real concerns of our constituents in Northern Ireland. It will do nothing to improve the police resources, their effectiveness, their numbers or their morale.

I have to tell the Minister that a pipe bomb was thrown through the front living room window of three elderly pensioners in my constituency last night. The police have told me that that pipe bomb is different from those that have been discovered previously—it is more powerful. Had those people been in their living room at the time, they would have undoubtedly suffered serious injury if not death. Their living room has been wrecked. To hear some Members in this Chamber tonight, however, one would think that everything was sweetness and light in Northern Ireland.

We can add to that incident the rioting on the Limestone road in my constituency in recent days, and the dreadful and despicable events on the Shankill road and in other parts of my constituency and the constituencies of other hon. Members. We need only look at the reports of the dreadful rioting in the town of Omagh at the weekend, to which the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) referred. A Sinn Fein spokesman and a representative for that area—not a dissident spokesman, by the way, but a spokesman for the Provisional Sinn Fein movement, part of the Government of Northern Ireland—attacked the police. The police suffered 18 injuries in Omagh, and this man—Mr. McElduff, who is the MLA for the area—criticised the police, not those who were involved in the rioting. When we see those kinds of events—the number of shootings and bombings in the three years since the Belfast agreement was signed have increased in relation to the three years before the agreement—we must ask serious questions about the direction of Government policy.

It is clear that changes and legislation have been introduced as a result of Patten, which was designed to appease the SDLP and Sinn Fein. More changes have been introduced as a result of agreements entered into at the Weston Park talks, which, again, were to appease one section of the community. What kind of message does that send out to the ordinary, decent people of Northern Ireland who want effective law and order? When they ring the police station, they do not want to be told that there are not enough police vehicles to provide them with security and to answer their needs. The Government, however, only seem to be interested in legislating on political grounds and for political reasons.

Lady Hermon: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's unhappiness with the Bill and with the Weston Park talks. Will he outline to the House in what circumstances, if any, Democratic Unionist party members would take seats on the Policing Board with Sinn Fein members?

Mr. Dodds: Given the tenor of the contributions that have come from Ulster Unionist Members in the House tonight, I am amazed at that question. The reality is that Sinn Fein-IRA members are not acceptable on the Policing Board of Northern Ireland. That is the bottom line. In other spheres and in other realms in which terrorism is an issue, we are busy saying that we must hunt down and deal with those responsible. In Northern Ireland, however, an organisation is carrying out and is involved in terrorism as we speak, and as we sit here tonight. It is not something that they have left behind. They are still involved in and running these organisations. They are still racketeering and targeting. In republican areas, the IRA is as active today as it was before in implementing law and order, as it sees it, in terms of its own community. To suggest that somehow, in a week's time, two weeks' time or a month's time, such people will suddenly become acceptable as members who can have some say over policing in Northern Ireland will be at odds with the views of many people

whom the hon. Lady represents, and, I hope—on the basis of the contributions that have been made—with the views of her hon. Friends in the Ulster Unionist party.

On the so-called text for consideration—the IRA-Sinn Fein clauses that the Government have waiting in the wings should the appropriate moment arrive—there is great concern in Belfast constituencies at the proposals for the four Belfast boards. They would put the police in a difficult situation, certainly in west Belfast. Serving police officers and senior officers have expressed concern about what that would mean in terms of accountability. They are worried about to whom they would be answerable if the Bill is successful and Sinn Fein-IRA and convicted terrorists and criminals take their places on those boards.

The idea that the Bill will do anything to improve police morale or police effectiveness has to be discounted. That is not the case at all. Police morale is at rock bottom. The Government do not have to take our word for it. If they talk to police officers directly they will tell them about the elevation of the terrorists, the appeasement of Sinn Fein-IRA and the fact that they have been set in positions over policing at a time when the police are starved of resources. Even able candidates who apply cannot get into the police for religious reasons. All of that is unacceptable. The Minister should address those concerns seriously for the people of Northern Ireland.

9.31 pm

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): I broadly agree with the concluding remarks of the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds): much of the problem on the ground relates to police resources and police morale. He put that well and it is not necessary for me to say it again. However, it may be useful for me to tell the House that I shall not detain hon. Members.

I should also explain why I have not been present throughout the debate. I was here at the start and, sure enough, I am here at the end. I do not know whether it is something that we have done to our hours and working arrangements, but for 20 years I have lived with the difficulty of being in two places at once. I now face the more difficult problem of being in three places at once and have not mastered it. It was my duty to be here today, but I also had a summons, with the authority of the House, to attend a Northern Ireland Statutory Instrument Committee of extraordinary importance. The order was 76 pages long and dealt with energy regulation in Northern Ireland. I had to be there, so it was not possible to be in the Chamber. As a consequence, I am ashamed to say that I missed half of what the Secretary of State had to say and, regrettably, all of what my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) had to say. *[Interruption.]* There is some ribaldry, but I am being perfectly serious.

The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) is a thoughtful and brave man. He has lived through all the problems and I listen to him with respect. Our newer colleague, the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael), who is a native of the beautiful island of Islay, applied his considerable skills as a lawyer and scholar in a fascinating contribution on the issues of civilianisation and intimate searches—a difficult and delicate subject for sure. He told us that a considerable volume of case law is being developed on that. It is essential that the staff involved in such searches, especially in drug-related cases, are well trained and meticulous or, to put it in the vernacular, they could easily throw an important drugs trial. He made that point well.

It was interesting to listen to the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who spoke with authority about checks and balances, not least between the ombudsman, the Policing Board, the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State. One of our anxieties is that the old so-called tripartite balance between the Chief Constable, the Secretary of State and the board is shifting.

That brings me to the remarks of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool about never playing politics with the effectiveness of the police. I agree, but I am not sure that shifting the balance between the Chief Constable, the Secretary of State and the board is not political. The right hon. Gentleman told my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford that people have to do deals in politics in Northern Ireland. There is a fine line between doing deals and playing politics. One day, someone will help me with a definition, but, having participated in politics for a long time, I can say that there is a shadowy interface between playing politics and doing deals.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) rightly said that civilians must have human rights training as well as practical knowledge of the rules of evidence. She also helped the House by clarifying the narrow and wider definition of a representative of the community. In fact, I thought that she and the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland made complementary speeches. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe), who is not in the Chamber—I know why, because I should have been at the same dinner—spoke wisely about pre-legislative scrutiny, and his remarks may well repay reading tomorrow morning, because everyone in the House aspires to such scrutiny as a better way of legislating.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) hit the nail on the head when he said that although numbers are the real problem, the Bill says nothing about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford agrees with that and with his analysis of the real reasons for introducing the Bill.

The hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) reminded us of his conversations with people who live in the Province. I thought that he brought a sincere note to the debate, but it became clear that some Members who have lived in Northern Ireland all their life may not thank those of us who have lived in England all our life for telling them what is good for them. I have always been shy of doing so myself, as hon. Members who have served with me in Committee will know.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): The hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) made a similar point when he more or less accused Labour Members of dilettante comments because they had not lived in Ireland all their life. However, there is a new practical imperative in some cases, such as the less than happy caravan of

[Mr. Eric Joyce]

individuals who disembarked at Cairnryan at the start of the weekend, creating interesting policing challenges in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Taylor: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting some backbone into me. The plain fact is that Members who represent Northern Ireland represent parts of my country. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, of which I am a citizen. I am elected to Parliament to represent a constituency in the United Kingdom, so perhaps I should have been a bit bolder in the first place.

Mr. Peter Robinson *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: I have started something now.

Mr. Robinson: I hope that when Members read what was said, they will accept that I have no difficulty with Members from other parts of the United Kingdom giving their advice and views on matters relating to Northern Ireland. However, I object to Members from other parts of the United Kingdom telling us that they know better than us what the people of Northern Ireland think and believe.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman would certainly acquit me of that. I have never told anybody from Northern Ireland what was good for them. He may be interested to know that, before he came to the House, the late Enoch Powell said something almost identical to me.

I must move on in accordance with convention and with one eye on the clock. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), with all his experience and power of recall, spoke of deterioration and loss of morale—I agree with what he said—and, in a separate context, of participation in policing boards, about which there is a good deal of domestic argument in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Brian White) would have preferred a more radical solution. The hon. Member for South Antrim (David Burnside) spoke warmly of the past record of the RUC—let us not forget the RUC George Cross Foundation—and even anticipated a united Unionist family. I remind him that my party had the word "Unionist" in its old long title, but I do not think he had me in mind.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) spoke with approval of what he called profound changes, and paid tribute to those in the police who had enabled them to take place.

The text for consideration is a disturbing matter, in our view, and is scarcely to be contemplated as it stands. It would be conceivable only in the context of acts of completion, as they have come to be called, and as defined.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) set out the Democratic Unionist party's case for participation in police bodies, but castigated the 50:50 proposals. He invited Labour, I think, to stand in elections in Northern Ireland. Before doing that, the Labour party might allow people in Northern Ireland to join it.

I shall not seek to redeploy the arguments set out so well by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford. We shall not oppose the measure tonight, but we shall seek to amend and improve it in Committee, as my party did in another place.

9.41 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Jane Kennedy): I begin by referring to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Brian White). The lecture that he received as a young boy, which he described to us, still echoes in his memory. It serves to draw the attention of the House to the dangers continuing to face those who have the courage to serve as police officers in Northern Ireland.

I regret the somewhat churlish response of the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) to hon. Members representing constituencies elsewhere in the UK. It does nothing to enhance his argument when he dismisses out of hand thoughtful, incisive and constructive comments and contributions to a debate that impacts on all citizens of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (David Burnside) warned about deals being done to weaken policing. He joined the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) and a number of other hon. Members to urge the Government to proceed with great care and to listen to the concerns that would be expressed by the Unionist community. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley called on us to proceed with great caution. May I assure hon. Members representing Unionist traditions in the House that I have listened carefully to the comments that they made? In the other place, a great deal of thought and consideration was given to representations received by the Government.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee drew attention to the shortage of police officers. Hon. Members went further and said dismissively that there was nothing in the Bill to put more officers on front-line duty. On the contrary, the Bill proposes important measures that give greater flexibility to the Chief Constable in the deployment of civilian staff, including contracted-out staff. The measures, which have been included at the express request of the Chief Constable, are vital to free up officers for front-line duties. I know that the Policing Board supports him in that regard.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford, in a typically robust contribution, challenged us about what the Bill does not do, as opposed to what it does. Hon. Members who have indicated that they may oppose the Bill in a vote oppose it for what it does not do, in particular because it is silent on the 50:50 procedures for recruitment to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Given the exchanges with Madam Deputy Speaker that took place earlier, Mr. Speaker, I venture down this path with some trepidation, but I believe that it will help the House if I try to pick up on some of the debate about the 50:50 policy, which is obviously still an extremely sensitive issue. I shall try to shed some light on the exchange that took place between my hon. Friend the

Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) and the hon. Member for Lagan Valley. My hon. Friend was right to say that there had been a substantial increase in the proportion of Catholics applying to join the police. In the four recruitment campaigns that there have been so far, the proportion has been consistently at or above 35 per cent. The highest proportion applying to the Royal Ulster Constabulary was 22 per cent. Frequently, it was a good deal less. Chris Patten himself envisaged in his report an annual recruitment figure of 370. In the first year, no fewer than 530 recruits entered training. The Police Service of Northern Ireland hopes to recruit a broadly similar figure this year. The Chief Constable is currently considering with the Policing Board the scope for bringing in experienced officers from GB forces.

It has been suggested that 50:50 is not working. On the contrary, we believe that the level of response from the Catholic community since the implementation of Patten's recruitment measures has been unprecedented. Overall, 36 per cent. of applicants have so far been Catholic. The proportion of Catholics in the Police Service of Northern Ireland regulars has already risen from 8 per cent. to 11.3 per cent. That is well on target for achieving the quadrupling of the proportion of Catholics within 10 years, as Patten envisaged.

Hon. Members may be right to question whether that is entirely the effect of 50:50 recruitment. Other factors may well be at play, such as the fact that we now have a police service that is supported by the Catholic Church and welcomed by the Social Democratic and Labour party, and which has also been welcomed by the Irish Government and internationally and is recognised as a new beginning for policing. It may be all those factors that are attracting recruits to the Police Service of Northern Ireland from the Catholic and nationalist communities.

Mr. Carmichael: May I suggest to the Minister that she might be going too far in attributing all that success to the 50:50 policy? Surely, the real contribution is the reduction in intimidation.

Jane Kennedy: That is the point that I was trying to make. Perhaps I was not being clear enough, as I broadly agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. The fact is, however, that intimidation remains and continues to be a problem. It is therefore an issue that needs to addressed, and I hope to return to it in a moment.

Although precise figures are not yet available, it is worth noting that the Police Service of Northern Ireland has appointed recruits from areas such as Londonderry, Strabane and Newry. Appointments from such areas would have been almost unheard of prior to the implementation of the Patten report.

David Burnside: I thank the Minister for giving way. As she said, the intimidation still takes place and all of us in the House condemn it and wish that it did not exist. Will she confirm to the House that that intimidation comes from Sinn Fein-Provisional IRA and not some dissident republicans?

Jane Kennedy: The overt intimidation is coming directly from dissident republican organisations. I believe that the failure to condemn it is a serious failing for which Sinn Fein needs to answer. There is no excuse for adopting the position that it took in failing to condemn the attacks on young new recruits to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

A number of hon. Members asked why applicants to the Police Service of Northern Ireland are required to requalify and constantly to reapply. We have considered that issue afresh and sought advice from the Equality Commission. Hon. Members may wish to test the matter further in Standing Committee. In the light of our further considerations, we have concluded that the current practice of discrete competitions should continue. Rolling the pool of candidates forward to subsequent competitions would present the Police Service of Northern Ireland with major practical difficulties and would not give roll-over candidates any significant advantage.

Mr. Quentin Davies: As I have already warned the hon. Lady, we intend to table an amendment on this issue in Committee, if the Bill is given a Second Reading. Does she recognise that, far from creating problems for the PSNI, this would save a lot of money? At present, not only are people being frustrated by having to re-apply and go through the same procedures many times, but it is costing public money for them to do so.

Jane Kennedy: Given what the hon. Gentleman has said, I look forward to debating the issue with him in greater detail in Committee. I will not answer his question now; I shall consider it so that I can give a fuller response at that time.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) said in an intervention that recruitment was dependent on equal participation and encouragement from political leaders. That is very much the point that we were making on intimidation. Paragraph 15.2 of the Patten report states:

"The key to making that police service representative of those communities"—

in Northern Ireland—

". . . is that the leaders of communities now actively encourage their young people to apply to join the police service."

The report goes on to detail school teachers, priests, bishops, sports authorities and others, all of whom it says

"should take steps to remove all discouragements to members of their communities applying to join the police . . . We cannot stress this recommendation too strongly."

It is time for all members of civil society in Northern Ireland to embrace that recommendation.

Rev. Ian Paisley: It has been announced that there has been a bombing tonight in Enniskillen. Does the Minister know anything further about casualties?

Jane Kennedy: All I know about the incident to which the hon. Gentleman refers is that a small explosive device has gone off at the town hall in Enniskillen, causing superficial damage. The area had been evacuated and no injuries resulted from the explosion. Hon. Members may also wish to know that a similar warning was received in Omagh, but no device was found. The incident to which the hon. Gentleman has

[Jane Kennedy]

drawn our attention simply serves to illustrate the environment in which we are working as we seek to resolve these important issues in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) also raised the issue of the text for consideration, as did a number of other Members. He wished to discuss it in detail and to test our thinking on laying the text in public in the way we did. The Government published various commitments relating to policing in the revised implementation plan of August 2001, which arose from the talks at Weston Park. These included commitments to consider, as part of a review, the continued need for the bar on all ex-prisoners ever serving on a district policing partnership, and the powers of the Belfast sub-groups. The consideration covered the question of whether the time was yet right to make any changes, and what changes might be appropriate when such a time came. I hope to deal with the concerns expressed by a number of hon. Members on this issue.

Several hon. Members queried whether the time was right. Having given a great deal of thought to the agreement to consider these matters, we made it clear what we would propose to do. However, our conclusion was that the time was not yet right to introduce changes in these areas. In particular, the removal of the disqualification of ex-prisoners could, in our view, happen only in the context of acts of completion as envisaged by the Prime Minister in his speech in Belfast last October. However, we believed that it would be helpful to set out how we would intend to deal with the issues, should we, at some point in the future, conclude that the time was right to legislate on them. That is why we published the separate text in a spirit of openness, wishing to dispel some of the distrust that clearly exists towards the acts of the Government.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) said that these provisions were in the Bill, but they are not. They are for separate consideration. Ex-prisoners can already serve on DPPs as political members if they have been elected as a local councillor. The text for consideration would bring the rules for independent members of DPPs into line with those for political members. This issue is not just about terrorist ex-prisoners; it covers all those who have served a custodial sentence at any point in their lives.

Why a five-year quarantine period? What was the thinking behind making that recommendation as a separate text for consideration? Our thinking was that it would bring independent members into line with district councillors. It is the triple-lock mechanism that was mentioned earlier. As the text shows, the provisions are modelled on those of the Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989. However, the House may wish to know that, in England and Wales, people are disqualified from membership of a police authority if, among other reasons, they have been convicted within the previous five years of a criminal offence and had a custodial sentence imposed. In considering this matter, I took an interest in what applied elsewhere in the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), in an incisive and deeply thoughtful first contribution to a debate on Northern Ireland, served notice that we should look forward to him brightening our counsels in future. The hon. Member for North Antrim was one of those who dismissed contributions such as that made by my hon. Friend, saying that my hon. Friend did not understand the nature of Irish republicanism because only those who had lived in Northern Ireland and experienced it could do so. I dispute that. I would very much like to debate it at length with the hon. Gentleman, perhaps in a more social setting. Every hon. Member has constituents who could be affected by the issues that we are dealing with today.

A number of hon. Members asked when Sinn Fein would join the Policing Board. That will be a matter for Sinn Fein, but I hope that it will be soon. Will we let the party on the Policing Board now? That is a serious question and it deserves a serious answer. At the moment, there are no vacancies on the board. All 19 members are appointed by the Secretary of State under direct rule. However, if acts of completion were to occur, the circumstances would be created in which the Government would hope to be able to restore devolution.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The Minister refers to acts of completion occurring. She does not say what those are. Will she be absolutely clear that what is required is nothing less than the completion of decommissioning and disbandment?

Jane Kennedy: I could not put it more clearly than the Prime Minister himself, who has said it not only in his speech in October but here on the Floor of the House—as have my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office.

This is not about bartering and deals. When we published the text for consideration, the Government made it clear that the time was not right to introduce changes such as those that we are discussing today. However, as the editorial in the *Belfast Telegraph* said the following day, when the guns are silenced, all things are possible.

If the current situation changes and we find ourselves in a different set of circumstances where acts of completion are a reality, the environment will be different. In those circumstances and only in those circumstances, the changes that are set out in the text for consideration would be justified. This is not about deals or bartering; it is about looking to the future and being prepared to imagine new possibilities that could arise if we saw an end to terrorism in Northern Ireland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) complained that the time scale was too short to enable effective pre-legislative scrutiny to take place. I concede that the timetable is not ideal. However, I want to respond to the Select Committee's criticism about the Northern Ireland Office's lack of a consultation period for the Bill. The Government note the criticism about the speed involved but, as the Committee recognised, we were under pressure to introduce the Bill as soon as possible to give it the opportunity of receiving Royal Assent before the start of the campaign for the Assembly elections in May.

Even in the time available to me, I have not had the opportunity to respond to everyone. I hope that I shall have the opportunity to do so in Standing Committee. I look forward to that.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 334, Noes 11.

Division No. 86] **[9. 59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnham, Andy
Cabom, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mallaber, Judy
Mallon, Seamus
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil

Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, David
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Fraser Kemp and
Mr. Jim Murphy

NOES

Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Hermon, Lady
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Viggers, Peter
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Nigel Dodds and
David Burnside

Question accordingly agreed to.

POLICE (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL [*LORDS*] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [28 June 2001 and 29 October 2002],

That the following provisions shall apply to the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill [*Lords*]—

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

Proceedings in Standing Committee

2. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 4th March 2003.

3. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on consideration are commenced.

6. Sessional Order B (programming committees) made by the House on 28th June 2001 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—*[Mr. Fitzpatrick.]*

Question agreed to.

POLICE (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL [*LORDS*] *[MONEY]*

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with Bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—[Keith Hill.]

Question agreed to.

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Mr Peter Atkinson be added to the Procedure Committee.—*[Keith Hill.]*

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Mr Mark Lazarowicz be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and David Hamilton be added to the Committee.—*[Keith Hill, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

COMMUNICATIONS BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [28 June 2001 and 29 October 2002],

That in accordance with the report [6th February 2003] from Standing Committee E, the Order of 3rd December 2002 (Communications Bill (Programme)) shall be varied as follows—

Consideration and Third Reading

1. Paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Order (Consideration and Third Reading) shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings on consideration and Third Reading shall be concluded in two days.

3. Proceedings on consideration shall be taken on each of the days as shown in the first column of the following Table and shall be taken in the order so shown, and each part of the proceedings shall (if not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the time specified in the second column of the Table.

Proceedings	*Time for conclusion of proceedings*
First day	
New Clauses relating to Parts 3 and 4, new Schedules relating to Parts 3 and 4, Amendments relating to Clauses in Parts 3 and 4 and Amendments relating to Schedules 9 to 15	The moment of interruption
Second day	
Remaining new Clauses, remaining new Schedules, Amendments relating to Clauses in Parts 1, 2, 5 and 6, Amendments relating to Schedules 1 to 8, Amendments relating to Schedules 16 to 19 and remaining proceedings on consideration	One hour before the moment of interruption

4. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on the second of those days.—*[Keith Hill.]*

Question agreed to.

Illegal Camping

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Fitzpatrick.]*

10.14 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): The problem of illegal camping in my constituency is substantial. It affects, typically, two to three communities in South Derbyshire at any one time. At present the local nuisance is concentrated just outside the village of Barrow upon Trent, and also in the area adjacent to Shardlow, at the junction with the A50, close to the border with north-west Leicestershire. However, I have been able to reflect on serious intrusions over the last 18 months to two years in Foston, Willington, Walton upon Trent, Church Gresley, Findern, Stenson, Coton Park, Shelton Lock and Swarkestone. In all those cases people chose to camp on sites owned not by them but by others, and often to leave large amounts of waste to be cleared by either the landowner or a public authority.

The residents of South Derbyshire are fed up to the back teeth with the problem, and seek from the public authorities—I shall deal with the activities of one of those authorities tonight—relief from both the nuisance caused by the campers and the astounding costs of clearing up the waste, which must be borne by public authorities and landowners.

Illegal waste dumping virtually always coincides with the arrival of people who camp illegally. The law is absolutely clear: this is a crime. What startles me regularly is that it is a crime that seems largely unknown to many of the enforcement agencies with which I deal. I have to explain regularly to the local police that it is a crime. In one extraordinary incident, a police officer watched someone cut up a car on Gresley common. When a local resident asked whether that was not an offence, the police officer said, "No; it is his own car, as far as I know. He was sold it by a local resident." The fact is that creating waste in a place that is not licensed for its disposal, which cutting up a car would certainly do, is an offence. I had to explain that to the police, who went away to consult the law before confirming it.

The position, however, is scarcely happier when it comes to the agency that is responsible for enforcing the law. Section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 covers most issues relating to this, and makes it illegal to dump waste on a site that is not licensed for the purpose. The Controlled Waste (Regulation of Carriers and Seizure of Vehicles) regulations 1991 relate to the carriage of waste. Their purpose is to stop people from using any old van or truck to move waste around.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Paragraph 6.2 of the recently produced Government draft guidance on managing unauthorised gypsy and travelling encampments says:

"There are creative ways in which fly-tipping of trade waste could be avoided or reduced."

Does not my hon. Friend think that it would be helpful if, rather than just saying that there are creative ways, the Government spelt out those creative ways to try to reduce this nuisance?

Mr. Todd: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is startling that in the consultation on the new protocols

[Mr. Todd]

for dealing with illegal camping the Environment Agency is not mentioned at all. When I asked the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which generated this proposal, whether the Agency should be involved in considering what to do in these instances, I was stunned by the reply "That's a good idea", because no one seemed to have thought of it until now. There is a difficulty in integrating the activities of the various agencies in dealing with this problem.

I turn to one area of doubt in the law relating to the carriage of waste. That is cleared up on the Environment Agency's website, which says:

"If the waste was carried in and deposited from a motor vehicle, the person controlling the use of the vehicle or who is in a position to do so is treated as knowingly causing the waste to be deposited whether or not instructions were given."

That deals with a commonplace reason for failure to enforce. I have known Agency inspectors arrive on some of these sites, see waste in the back of a van or truck, ask about the ownership of the van, receive an evasive answer and then wander off, saying "They wouldn't tell me the truth". That is not a legitimate response. It is clear that the carriage of waste in a vehicle not licensed for the purpose is an offence. Indeed, in certain circumstances it can lead to seizure of the vehicle. Yet persuading the Agency to take that tough stance and impound vehicles is very difficult.

I turn briefly to some experiences in my constituency, beginning, because I like to be positive, with some positive experiences.

During the foot and mouth outbreak it was difficult to persuade the Environment Agency to take action against people who were illegally camping. The reason given then was "We can't go on to the land, because we cannot risk spreading foot and mouth." Eventually we beat through that concern with the obvious point that it was not stopping the travellers operating from the sites. A raid was carried out at Swarkestone, with the police, in which a person was caught clearly committing an offence and was prosecuted locally.

As far as I can tell from talking to the Agency officer involved, that was virtually the only prosecution by the Environment Agency of someone illegally camping. There were quite a number of prosecutions—they are on the Agency's website—relating to people who fly-tip, but those are often settled residents, who present rather less trouble in being tracked down. In this instance the Agency managed to prosecute someone who did not live at that location or anywhere near. It did so with some success, and I am grateful.

The second recent experience touches tangentially on the Agency's role. There is a site of appalling squalor at the junction of the A50 and M1 on the boundary of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), a site that has been an unpleasant nuisance to local residents for a considerable time. A person was spotted dumping on the site by an alert police officer. When that person was questioned he declined to give information about who he was. The officer being very determined—I congratulate him on that—took him to court. The fine that was levied was modest, but I commend one step that the magistrates took, which was to demand cash from his pocket before he even left the court, so that he could not feel that he had got away with it.

Those were the positive steps, but I have examples of the Environment Agency's giving an array of excuses for why it has chosen not to pursue what were clear breaches of environmental law. The first excuse was that people are very rude. Well, that is true. I have visited some of these sites, and such people can be extremely rude. Another excuse, which is produced by one of the local offices in my area, is that there is concern about the health and safety of Environment Agency staff. Also, the people involved are not simply rude; they will not give details of who they are, so action is very difficult to take. However, all of those problems are easily dealt with by arranging a visit in co-operation with the police. If someone declines to give details, that is of course an offence, and the police can take action against that individual. If people are rude, that can also lead to an offence, depending on quite how rude they are. Through such steps, the police and the Environment Agency acting together can achieve results.

To add insult to injury, in the particular instance that I am thinking of, the Environment Agency said, "Well, we're not going to take any action while these people are on site. We will send someone down from the local gypsy liaison council"—such a person would know very few of these people, and would have very little influence on them—"and we are prepared to wait two or three weeks while these people lay waste to the site, until the council representative turns up to talk to them. When they eventually leave"—presumably after the landowner gains possession of the site—"we will go through the rubbish, and see if we can find some settled residents who have foolishly given them this waste, and prosecute the settled residents instead." That is certainly aiming for the soft targets.

It can be a frustrating experience from time to time, but there are encouraging signs. I hear that the Environment Agency is considering taking more robust steps to deal with the carriage of waste in particular, by trying to identify those who are committing such offences. That would be a shrewd strategy. Much the most important possessions of the majority of these people are the vehicles that they use. Threatening the seizure of those vehicles would improve the quality of behaviour by a large margin.

Further action is required. First, it is not sensible to have a national consultation on the framework for dealing with this problem that does not involve the Environment Agency. I insist that the Minister say that the agency will actively engage in the process with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Office, in preparing guidelines for this problem. Secondly, the Environment Agency should be included in local protocols as a matter of course. The agency in Derbyshire is not so included, and when I put the suggestion to the county council—the co-ordinating authority—it said that it was interesting, and that it would certainly take it on board. Well, that is not good enough. There should be clear guidance stating that, if there is a local protocol, the Environment Agency should be involved in it.

Thirdly, there should be active partnership with the police. It should not be necessary for me constantly to prod and push the two sides together to take action, but I am afraid that that is the case. Prodding the police is necessary in part because, as I have evidenced, there is sometimes a rather incomplete knowledge of

environmental law. However, we have got past that problem now, at least in my area. Also, the agency is certainly very unwilling to enter sites that, in its view, might be unpleasant to visit. Fourthly, there needs to be greater proactivity and less concern with the softer targets. Finally, yes, it is a good idea to look carefully at vehicle seizure powers. I look forward to a vigorous response to that idea, and I await the Minister's response, in which he sets out how his Department and the Environment Agency can assist residents in South Derbyshire and elsewhere who are afflicted by this appalling nuisance.

10.29 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on his case, on what is a serious issue. The management of waste generated by illegal camping is a problem in many parts of the country and I am aware of the arguments—which are genuinely made—that the Environment Agency does not pay sufficient attention to that. I hope that I can explain that that is not the case, but I am the first to admit that more resolute and determined action is needed. We need more joined-up activity between the agency, local authorities and Departments, including my own.

I also commend my hon. Friend because this is not the first occasion on which he has raised the issue. He has requested other Adjournment debates, initiated at least one private Member's Bill and, I believe, is currently promoting another Bill.

The key to the problem is the fly-tipping protocol that has been drawn up by the Local Government Association and the Environment Agency. Under that protocol, local authorities deal with the fly tipping of household waste and small commercial and industrial waste, which forms the bulk of waste fly-tipped by illegal campers. Therefore in most circumstances, it is for the local authority to act. The protocol allows the Environment Agency to concentrate on the fly tipping of hazardous waste and serious environmental crime. Given the limitations of resources and personnel, that is probably a sensible division. The agency also, however, sometimes carries out joint surveillance and enforcement operations with local authorities.

My hon. Friend mentioned the case involving the site by the A50/M1 junction in Leicestershire, in which the offender was subsequently prosecuted and fined. The case raises several issues and I shall return to it before I finish.

The Government acknowledge that gypsies and travellers have a right to pursue a nomadic lifestyle—nothing that my hon. Friend said suggested otherwise—and many live peaceably next to their settled neighbours. However, the right of gypsies and travellers to enjoy that lifestyle has to be reconciled with the right of the settled community to enjoy theirs. Both communities need to understand their responsibilities as well as their rights. That is the theory: it is the application that can be a problem.

Some traveller groups camp illegally, which can attract levels of nuisance and distress to the settled community. As my hon. Friend said, the typical consequences can range from unacceptable behaviour, lack of respect—to put it mildly—for other people's property, and the costs of removing rubbish.

Fly tipping unquestionably blights our towns and countryside. It is an antisocial activity, whoever is responsible for it and wherever it comes from. Contrary to the view held by many people, there are stringent controls in place to ensure that waste is managed properly. Illegal waste disposal is a criminal offence. Those caught and found guilty of it can receive penalties of up to five years' imprisonment or an unlimited fine. One of the main problems is getting the magistrates courts to recognise the seriousness of the offences and to apply the necessary penalties to act as a genuine deterrent.

When waste is deposited illegally, local authorities and the Environment Agency have the powers to remove it and dispose of it properly, under section 59 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. My hon. Friend argued tonight, as he has on previous occasions, that those powers are too seldom used. However, it is not the responsibility of the Government to decide how local authorities and the Environment Agency should use the powers that are available to them. I encourage them to take strong enforcement action and to prosecute the perpetrators of such crimes wherever possible. My hon. Friend well articulated the feeling of local people that where powers are available, they are insufficiently used. Both the local authority and the Environment Agency have additional powers to bring prosecutions for the illegal disposal of waste and for breach of the duty of care requirements.

Everyone realises that fly tipping is a tricky issue. The main difficulty is to prevent waste being from being fly-tipped in the first place, and then to catch the culprits. The main problem is not the level of penalty but the perception of the likelihood of apprehension. However, the Government are serious about tackling the growing problem of fly tipping, and we are considering whether to amend legislation to extend the range of powers available both to local authorities and to the agency.

I recently visited the fly tipping forum—I understand that it has been given a new name—which develops policies to try to prevent fly tipping. I was struck by the determination of the group of experts associated with the Environment Agency to investigate all means of trying to apprehend fly tippers. Some of those ideas were innovative and I look forward to receiving a report on how to develop them.

We have already amended the Environmental Protection (Duty of Care) Regulations 1991 to give local authorities powers to inspect the duty of care records kept by businesses. Sometimes, former traveller encampments can become subject to further fly tipping, of business waste. The amendment will help local authorities to investigate fly tipping incidents and to prevent fly tipping from taking place. The power comes into effect on 20 February.

The Environment Agency is establishing a central unit to co-ordinate its approach to environmental crime. I am pleased that both the chairman and the chief executive of the agency are determined to crack down much harder on environmental crime—as am I.

Mr. Todd: Will my right hon. Friend take a look at the experience in Wales where the Environment Agency has

[Mr. Todd]

set aside a budget for the pursuit of fly tipping and for research into it? Apparently, that is not mirrored in the English Environment Agency.

Mr. Meacher: I am well aware of that. My understanding is that the Welsh unit has been strikingly successful. It is a model that the Environment Agency wants to follow in other parts of the country. I strongly encourage that.

We are also considering further ideas for tackling fly tipping, including those mentioned in the consultation paper that we issued recently, entitled, "Living Places—Powers, Rights, Responsibilities". The consultation period is due to close on 14 February. We shall certainly follow up closely the observations of consultees. We are determined to pursue these matters thoroughly.

We are aware of the agency's desire for powers of arrest for fly tipping, and for other changes to legislation, which is an appropriate point to refer to the case in Leicestershire to which my hon. Friend drew our attention. In December last year, officers from the Environment Agency and officers from the Leicestershire constabulary discussed a strategy for dealing with illegal tipping by itinerants in the vicinity of the A50/M1 intersection.

On 13 January this year, the Environment Agency was contacted by Leicestershire police to confirm that their officers had witnessed about 3 tonnes of soil being deposited among the other waste at the site. The offender was unable to respond satisfactorily to accusations of illegal tipping lodged by the police, and they were able to arrest him under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. An Environment Agency officer assisted the police in interviewing the offender and provided the police with specimen charges. The offender was subsequently bailed to appear at a later date to answer to the charges lodged against him.

The offender, who is apparently known to the police under several aliases, appeared at Loughborough magistrates court and pleaded guilty to one charge of depositing waste without the benefit of a waste management licence, contrary, as my hon. Friend said, to section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. He was fined £250 and ordered to pay £65 costs. I think that that is derisory.

We should learn from the issues that the case has raised. The Environment Agency has said that, without police assistance, it is unlikely that it would have been able to take any action against the man. The problem facing the agency is that, without the power of arrest, many itinerants can give false names and addresses. Many of their vehicles are not registered with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and many itinerants have no fixed abode.

The agency gathers evidence, produces charges and then serves court summonses on offenders. Without correct names or addresses, the summonses never reach offenders. The police have powers under PACE to arrest individuals on the spot if they are not satisfied with the information that they are given. They also have access to identification tools, such as fingerprinting and DNA. We need to learn the lessons about the Environment Agency's capacity to act effectively, given that it does not have powers of arrest.

The police in Leicestershire are very keen to make progress on joint working with the local agency office and are attending a joint seminar on seizing vehicles involved in illegal waste activities. That is exactly the kind of co-operation that we need.

Mr. Todd: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way again. He highlights the core of the issue—the co-operation currently possible under the law between the Environment Agency and the police—but is he not concerned, as I was, about the very thin knowledge of environmental crime that the police often have and the difficulty of achieving co-working, perhaps without clearer direction from the Home Office? Will he perhaps discuss this matter with colleagues in the Home Office?

Mr. Meacher: I am very pleased to give that undertaking. My hon. Friend puts his finger on it: the difficulty is achieving co-operative working on an issue that he and I regard as extremely serious. Given the range of other duties and functions of the police and the Environment Agency, matters of this kind do not get the focused and targeted attention that is needed. There is a failure to achieve such joined-up activity, and I am pleased to do what I can to try to ensure that it is improved.

Finally, I shall refer to an issue, which, I think, my hon. Friend raised: whether the Environment Agency should be given more specific guidance about travellers. The Environment Agency is, of course, fully aware of its powers in relation to fly tipping, although it is well aware of the lack of powers to which I refer. In most cases, the local authority would deal with the majority of fly-tipping incidents involving illegal campers. Again, co-operation with local authorities, which varies across the country, is very important.

What are the Government doing to tackle the problem of fly tipping? As I have said, we are introducing powers to enable local authorities to check businesses' duty of care waste transfer notes—something that local authorities have wanted for a long time. Businesses should keep those notes whenever waste is transferred from one party to another. Enabling local authorities to check such documents should allow them to ensure that businesses are disposing of their waste correctly. Those powers will come into force on 20 February.

With regard to evicting travellers from illegal sites, there are already substantial powers—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at fifteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 11 February 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mesothelioma

1. **Mr. Tony Lloyd** (Manchester, Central): What the life expectancy of a mesothelioma sufferer is; and what steps he is taking to improve this. [96673]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): The one-year survival rate for adults diagnosed with mesothelioma between 1986 and 1990 was about 27 per cent. A number of clinical trials relating to the condition are under way. Once the evidence from those trials is available we will consider whether the National Institute for Clinical Excellence should be asked to develop clinical guidelines for the treatment of mesothelioma.

Mr. Lloyd: Does my hon. Friend recognise that mesothelioma is something of a Cinderella in the world of cancer? Many cancer specialists argue that we actually need access to specialist facilities for mesothelioma so that people can be diagnosed promptly and receive rapid treatment. Survival rates would thus be pushed up massively, as they have been in other countries. The real issue is that mesothelioma sufferers are not diagnosed early enough; GPs and other gatekeepers must be much more aware that that killer disease can cease to be a killer if people are diagnosed early.

Ms Blears: I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned for mesothelioma sufferers in his area. He is right: 90 per cent. of those cancers are linked to exposure to asbestos. Diagnosis is difficult and there is controversy about the type of treatment that is appropriate. There are two clinical trials looking into chemotherapy, surgery and palliative care to find out which combination of those treatments is the most effective. We need early diagnosis and good treatment for that cancer, as for other forms of cancer, and my hon. Friend will be aware of the massive amount of investment that the Government are putting into cancer treatment, with new equipment, more surgeons and new drugs.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): The hon. Lady will be aware that one of the side effects of this lung condition is that it causes great anxiety and that one of the most effective ways of treating anxiety is to use the herb kava kava, which the Government are about to ban despite the fact that there are serious disputes over the medical evidence, including research from the United States. Will the hon. Lady give an undertaking to look at the research again? If she is going to ban kava kava, will she also ban aspirin and paracetamol, which account for a number of lives every year?

Ms Blears: Clearly, this kind of cancer is extremely serious. That is why the Government are exploring all kinds of treatment—from chemotherapy, to surgery and to palliative care. The hon. Gentleman knows very well indeed that the evidence on kava kava has been looked at on five separate occasions by expert medical committees and expert scientific advisers. The evidence is clear: the links with liver disease and hepato-toxicity are such that kava kava needs to be withdrawn from the market. However, the importance of treating this type of cancer is a top priority for the Government.

Hospital Cleanliness

2. **Mr. Bill Wiggin** (Leominster): If he will make a statement on hospital cleanliness. [96674]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): Patients told us that they wanted hospitals to be cleaner and more comfortable. The NHS plan provided a framework to meet that expectation, supported by £60 million. As a result of that investment, and the efforts of the NHS, there are now no hospitals where environmental standards, including cleanliness, have been assessed as less than acceptable by independent inspection teams.

Mr. Wiggin: A hundred thousand people a year catch hospital-acquired infections; 5,000 of those people die from them. That costs the Government at least £1 billion a year and a 10 per cent. reduction in hospital-acquired infections would free up 364,056 bed days. We are grateful for the Government's attempted response because the matter is so serious, but why are hospitals still dirty after six years of a Labour Government who told us that there were only 24 hours to save the NHS?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the issue is serious, although his figures slightly exaggerate the position. What is important is that we have the data collection for a baseline on which to make an assessment. We are doing that for the first time. We have also put £60 million into cleanliness in our hospitals. Our inspection teams say that our hospitals are getting cleaner. It is also important to remember that performance indicators and star ratings will ensure cleanliness in our hospitals.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): It is offensive and sickening to hear Opposition Members turn this into a

political issue when we all know that the cuts made in the health service during the 1980s and early '90s were responsible for the downgrading of hospital cleanliness. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the work that has been done, but it remains a scandal that illnesses arising from the spread of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus continue to multiply in our hospitals. Sadly, when we visit hospitals we often notice that the standards of cleanliness and hygiene have not returned to what they were a couple of decades ago.

Mr. Lammy: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The introduction of modern matrons will assist in that process, as will a tough, new inspection process conducted by the Commission for Health Improvement.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Why is it that the Government claim to be putting so much more money into the hospital service yet, certainly in Worcestershire, the standards in hospitals and the number of beds are going down?

Mr. Lammy: I am quite sure that that is not true. Clinicians, housekeepers, porters and receptionists are working as hard in Worcestershire as they are around the country. We are putting in that extra investment, and it is important that it is linked to performance and inspection, which will guarantee that we have the national standards across the board. The hon. Gentleman will know that what got us to this point was the compulsory competitive tendering that was brought in by the former Administration.

Bed Blocking

3. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): How many hospital beds are occupied by geriatric patients who could be cared for outside hospital. [96675]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The number of delayed discharges continues to fall because of the investment and reforms that the Government are making. Following the £300 million additional investment in tackling delayed discharges that we made in October 2001, delayed discharges have fallen by 24 per cent. Since 1997, the number of delayed discharges for those over 75 has fallen by 39 per cent.

Mr. Robathan: Is it not the case that there is a reduction in residential care homes? Is not that reduction in places for the elderly caused by failed Government policies, motivated in part by prejudice against private care homes? Perhaps the Minister can explain what is the logic in fining local authorities, which will further reduce the ability of social services departments to care for the elderly and others, when the reduction is actually the result of failed Government policy?

Mr. Hutton: No, a 39 per cent. fall in delayed discharges does not equate under any objective analysis to a failure in Government policy. We are improving the range of services available to treat more older people, more quickly, when they can come out of hospital. The hon. Gentleman may disagree with those on the Conservative Front Bench, but the problem that he and, I suspect, probably all his hon. Friends have is that they cannot complain about a lack of funding for social care services—I assume that that is what he is arguing about—when his party has never been able to commit itself to matching the existing spending that is being provided. In their entire time in office between 1992 and 1997, the Conservatives only managed a 0.1 per cent. increase in social services spending. We are doing significantly better than that, and until the hon. Gentleman and his friends can match the investment that we are making, they had better go away and do their sums again.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the national health service in north Staffordshire is presently in the process of reducing elderly care beds in the NHS by about 50 per cent. At the same time, there is enormous concern that, in spite of the additional resources that the Government are making available to social services and the NHS, there is a growing gap between resources available under the NHS and those available to social services to provide the care that is necessary, particularly intermediate care. Will my right hon. Friend look at that situation because there is enormous concern about it in north Staffordshire? I would be enormously grateful to him if I could be advised what he intends to try to do about it.

Mr. Hutton: I always take very seriously what my hon. Friend brings to the attention of the House, and I will certainly make inquiries into the issue that he raises. We are building up capacity in the NHS and social care to treat more people, particularly more older people, more quickly, with a wider range of more capable services. However, I assure my hon. Friend that I will look into the issue that he raises and I will come back to him with some answers.

Mr. Boris Johnson (Henley): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the many thousands of local people who have raised money in south Oxfordshire and elsewhere to rebuild the Watlington hospital, thus helping to alleviate the crisis in bed blocking because it will provide 60 beds for long-term care, respite care and care for the elderly? Will he take the opportunity now to congratulate all those people on doing so on their own initiative and perhaps to apologise for the Labour Government's decision to close that hospital?

Mr. Hutton: The Labour Government made no such decision. I would certainly want to congratulate the hon. Gentleman's constituents on making that investment and putting the work into Watlington hospital, which I know myself because I used to live very close to Watlington. I am delighted that a future has been found for the hospital. We will be increasingly considering a wider range of roles for smaller community cottage hospitals to play in the NHS of the future, and we will be able to do so because of the investment that we are putting in, which he and his hon. Friends would take out of the NHS.

Health Provision

4. **Peter Bradley** (The Wrekin): What progress he has made in reducing the postcode lottery in health provision. [96676]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): New national standards and the work of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence are spearheading our attack on the postcode lottery of care. However, the biggest lottery in health care is between patients who have to wait for treatment on the NHS and those who can afford to pay for it privately. I can tell the House today that, building on the choices already offered to NHS heart patients, it is my intention to make choice of hospital available to more NHS patients who need an operation, so that by December 2005 all NHS patients will have choice within the health service, instead of having to opt out.

Peter Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, but I wish to direct his attention to a different kind of postcode lottery. I acknowledge the significant increase in funding for the Telford and Wrekin primary care trust of 34 per cent. revenue and 14 per cent. capital over the next three years, which is the top of the range in both orders. However, will he acknowledge that Telford and Wrekin start from the position of having £719 to spend per patient per year, compared with an average nationally of £819, and that we start £12 million, or 9 per cent., behind our fair shares target? In three years' time we will have closed that gap to £10.5 million, or 6 per cent., but will he use targeted funding to help Telford and Wrekin and other PCTs to close that gap more quickly?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the problems that his local health service and primary care trust face. As he knows, that is why we adjusted the formula for redistributing cash, and I made a statement to the House in December announcing new resources and a new formula. Those will inevitably take time to kick in, but he is right to say that the PCT in his area has received a well above the national average share of resources—more than 30 per cent.—which will allow the local health service to plan to meet needs in the local community. It is better that such decisions are taken at a local level, instead of through extra targeted funding that we could provide nationally.

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest): When will the document on configuring hospital services, which will have the aim of preventing inequalities and the postcode lottery, be published?

Mr. Milburn: Very shortly.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): My right hon. Friend will know that the Royal Bolton hospital is very short of capacity, and I hope that he will come to see that for himself before too long. Does he agree, therefore, that the introduction of the Greater Manchester choice programme will alleviate some of that pressure and help my constituents to access operations in the hospitals in the Greater Manchester conurbation?

Mr. Milburn: Yes, I hope to visit the Bolton area before too long to fulfil a promise that I gave to my hon. Friend. He will be aware that parts of the north-west, including his own, have some of the highest waiting times for hospital treatment. Overall, waiting times are falling, but they are still too long in some areas. That is why we will announce plans today for patients to exercise choice. If they cannot get a short waiting time at their local hospital, they will be able to choose another hospital. That will be the case in Greater Manchester and in other parts of the country, so that we can test the new approach and ensure that patients can exercise informed choice in elective surgery in all parts of the NHS. We intend to bring forward that scheme in July and to extend it to the whole country next year.

Mr. Andrew Rosindell (Romford): Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that one of the worst aspects of the postcode lottery is that relating to coronary heart disease? Has he had time to see the figures published by the British Heart Foundation, which were printed in last week's *Romford Recorder*, showing that the London borough of Havering has one of the worst records for that? Will he outline what the Government intend to do to improve that service?

Mr. Milburn: I regret to say that I have not read the *Romford Recorder*—

Mr. Rosindell: Do so today.

Mr. Milburn: If the hon. Gentleman insists and provided that he is not in it. He is right to raise the issue. Coronary heart disease is the biggest killer in our country—it kills between 125,00 and 150,000 people a year. We know two things: first, many of the deaths and morbidity are preventable if action is taken, which is why I am pleased that, over the course of the last three years, the prescribing of cholesterol-lowering drugs, which prevent heart attacks, has doubled because of extra resources going in. Secondly, in too many parts of the country, where the incidence of coronary heart disease is highest, the rates of heart surgery have been lowest. That is why targeted funding is being made available to ensure that we close the health gap between the poorest areas and the more prosperous parts of the country. All that I would say to the hon. Gentleman, in all candour, is that if we want to achieve a 20 per cent. cut in heart surgery waiting times, that cannot be achieved by making 20 per cent. cuts in funding.

Andy Burnham (Leigh): May I warmly welcome today's extension of the choice programme to patients in Greater Manchester? In doing so, will the Secretary of State assure me that all patients across Greater Manchester will be included under that scheme, and not just those nearest the available capacity? In the long term, will he consider developing sufficient diagnostic

and treatment capacity in the west of the Greater Manchester area, closer to the homes of my constituents?

Mr. Milburn: We will certainly consider that latter issue. As my hon. Friend is aware, late last year, we issued invitations both to the national health service and to private sector providers to build new diagnostic and treatment centres in those parts of the country where waiting times are longest. The DTCs—which are surgery centres—separate emergency work from elective work so that operations are not cancelled and waiting times can be brought down. On my hon. Friend's first point, choice for waiting, whether for an orthopaedic operation or for an eye operation, will apply from the summer of this year in all parts of Greater Manchester, and will apply in all parts of the country from next year.

Carers

5. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire): What assessment he has made of the needs of carers before introducing the Community Care (Delayed Discharges Bill). [96677]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): We have considered the needs of carers carefully when developing policy on delayed discharges. Patients being in hospital when they would be more appropriately cared for in the community is bad for them and their families and carers. At the Report stage of the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Bill, several Government amendments were accepted that will bring services to carers within the scope of the Bill.

Andrew Selous: I thank the Minister for that reply, but does she accept the real distress caused to carers by the omission of any reference to their needs in the draft Bill? Can she assure the House that as a result of this legislation there will be no repetition of the type of incident that happened in my constituency recently, in which a mentally ill patient was sent home from hospital without his carer even knowing, causing a great deal of distress, as the gentleman could not be found for some considerable time?

Jacqui Smith: Both through the Bill and the hospital discharge workbook that we have published recently, we are improving and building on good practice and ensuring that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, carers are involved in the important decisions about discharge and the services that need to be put in place afterwards. I agree with him that that is a priority. That is why Carers UK welcomed the amendments to the Bill and said that they are

"an important step forward for carers' rights."

I am therefore very pleased that the Government brought forward those amendments. They represent, along with the considerable extra investment that the Government are putting into providing services for carers, the priority and recognition that the Government have for their extremely important contribution.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): While welcoming the huge contribution that carers make, does the Minister agree that relatives should not be forced into an excessive commitment of care because of a lack of adequate social services support? In that context, does she agree that the decision of the Liberal Democrat-controlled Milton Keynes council to increase maximum home care charges from £21.25 a week to £100 a week is not helpful? If my constituents are unable to afford those charges, what does she advise them to do?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I have no doubt that, as she usually does, she is campaigning on behalf of people in her constituency who need those social care services. I hope that all local authorities, when taking decisions on provision and charging, will bear in mind the considerable extra investment that the Government have put into social services. There will be a doubling of the real-terms increase over the next three years. I hope that local authorities will ensure that that is reflected in better services and better access for vulnerable people.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Does the Minister recall that this Bill had a rough time in this House, being criticised on Second and Third Reading by hon. Members on her side of the House as well as on this side; and does she realise that it was mauled on Second Reading in another place? There is now little prospect of it reaching the statute book by 1 April. Would it not be best to withdraw the Bill?

Jacqui Smith: No. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), pointed out that our considerable extra investment has already brought about reductions in delayed discharge. We believe in the need to back up that investment with reforms to the system. Those reforms should put the needs of people—especially the older people who are currently trapped in hospital—at the centre of our system. I am disappointed that Opposition Members talk a lot about delayed discharge and the needs of older people but fail to support the investment and reforms that will ensure that progress can continue.

Nurse Recruitment

6. **Mr. Ivan Henderson** (Harwich): If he will make a statement on nurse recruitment in the past three months. [96678]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The latest figures show that the number of nurses who are working in the national health service rose by an estimated 22,500 in the 18 months leading up to March last year. The target in the NHS plan for an extra 20,000 nurses by 2004 was therefore met two years early.

To increase the number of nurses, therapists and health care scientists still further, the latest phase of our recruitment campaign will be launched later this month.

Mr. Henderson: Last week, on one of my regular visits to Colchester general hospital—which serves my constituents—a number of nurses asked about the introduction of foundation hospitals. Will my right hon. Friend assure me and those nurses—who included newly recruited nurses and nurses in training—that their job security and pay and conditions will be protected under any changes that arise through the introduction of foundation hospitals?

Mr. Milburn: That is our intention. As my hon. Friend knows, our agenda for change negotiations that we concluded with the NHS trade unions late last year are currently being debated among members of a variety of trade unions. Providing that there is a vote in favour of the result of those negotiations, the agenda for change will go ahead. It will apply to NHS foundation trusts and NHS trusts. I hope that nurses and others will see the advantage of that. It promises fairer and better pay for nurses. Clearly, the more responsibilities that nurses take on, the more rewards they can get.

In the past, nurses' pay was staged, the number of nurses in training was falling, and the number of nurses in post was being cut. Today, the number of nurses in the NHS is rising, more nurses are in post and more nurses are getting fairer and better pay as a result. All of that has resulted from the Government's decision to put extra resources into the NHS; and all of it will be jeopardised, as my hon. Friend knows, by the policy of the Opposition to remove those resources.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): If all the targets for nurse recruitment have been met, why did agency spending on nurses rise to nearly £500 million last year? That spending has doubled under this Government. Is it not the case that NHS Professionals is failing and that the Secretary of State has had to order a review into its working as several large hospitals have withdrawn from it? Is it not the Secretary of State's failure to retain nurses that has led to wasteful spending on agency nurses? He has eventually shown that he can spend more, but he has not shown that he can spend wisely.

Mr. Milburn: Well, on the number of nurses in the NHS, the hon. Gentleman knows fine well that the targets that were set in the NHS plan—which he and others said could not be met—have been met well ahead of target. I am talking not only about the number of nurses working in the NHS, but about the number of nurses who have been recruited to the NHS. The hon. Gentleman knows also that vacancy rates among nurses are falling. It is true that nurse vacancies exist in many parts of the country, including his own. That will take time to put right. Therefore, in the short term, bank and agency nurses will be used. It is important that the NHS comes together to use its purchasing muscle to ensure that it gets the best deal where agency and bank nurses are used. That is what NHS Professionals has been trying to do, but I know that there is more to do. However, because resources are going into the NHS, more nurses are working in the NHS. It is our intention to keep the momentum moving forward.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I am delighted at the increase in recruitment, but has my right hon. Friend any figures about what percentage of recruitment is taking place in the United Kingdom and involves training in the United Kingdom? I ask because I have spent quite a lot of time over the past 18 months visiting the Bradford royal infirmary and St. James's in Leeds. I am aware of the high quality of nursing that is provided in those two hospitals by nurses from throughout the world. However, I am concerned about the impact that our recruitment is having on places such as the Philippines.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right to raise these concerns. As she knows, the national health service has for many years relied on nurses and, indeed, doctors and other health care professionals from overseas. It is worth saying that, without those overseas clinical professionals, the NHS would not be able to provide the quality of care that it does. We in the NHS owe those people an enormous debt of gratitude.

We will continue to recruit where it is appropriate to do so. For example, we have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of the Philippines, because the unusual situation there is that it has a surplus, rather than a shortage, of nurses. I can also report to my hon. Friend that, over the past two or three years, 13,000 nurses who had left the NHS have returned to it. A further 1,800 are in the pipeline and are preparing to return. That has come about because of the policies that are being pursued, the reforms to the career structures of nurses and, most important, the extra resources that are going into the NHS.

Mr. John Baron (Billericay): Further to that last question, the Secretary of State will know that in the five years since Nelson Mandela appealed to Britain to stop poaching nurses from South Africa, the number of them entering this country has risen more than fivefold. Meanwhile, we suck in more and more nurses from developing countries across the world. Despite the Government's code of conduct on the issue, a major part of the problem is that only about a half of the private agencies that are used by the Government and the NHS to recruit nurses from abroad have signed up to the code. If the Secretary of State accepts that poor countries need their nurses even more than we do, when will the Government stop sidestepping this issue and ban the NHS from dealing with agencies that ignore the rules?

Mr. Milburn: There is no question of sidestepping this important issue. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman thinks that it is an important issue now because, when his Government were in power, they did nothing about it. As far as this Government's actions are concerned, as he is aware, we do not actively recruit from developing countries, including South Africa. What is more, I can assure him and the House that we do not use agencies that actively recruit from developing countries, including South Africa.

General Medical Practice

7. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What action he is taking to attract more people into general medical practice. [96679]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The Government are committed to recruiting and retaining more GPs. That is why we have introduced new financial incentives for doctors coming into general practice and to delay their retirement. That goes together with more flexible working and better child care. The new general medical services contract will also act as a further incentive to recruitment and retention.

Mr. Blizzard: My right hon. Friend may be aware of a recent survey of GP vacancies carried out by the British Medical Association. Is he aware that some of the figures in the survey are out of date? For example, in my constituency the vacancy rate is 3.5 per cent. and not 7.8 per cent. However, there are still 4.5 vacant GP posts in my area, and they are in surgeries that serve the least prosperous neighbourhoods. What more can my right hon. Friend do to attract GPs to those areas so that the poorest communities do not suffer from the general difficulty in recruiting people to general practice?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out those facts. More GPs have been recruited in his part of the country, and we will continue to explore ways in which we can improve recruitment and retention. I have told him and the House that the new contract that we are negotiating with the British Medical Association and the NHS Confederation will address many of his concerns. We have not reached a final agreement on that contract, but I hope that we will be able to do so shortly. I am confident that if we can reach an agreement we will find a better way of recruiting and retaining more GPs in general practice and dealing with the funding issues that my hon. Friend raised in his pertinent question.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): These promises are not new. The NHS plan promised to recruit an extra 2,000 GPs between 2000 and 2004. How many have been recruited so far?

Mr. Hutton: Four hundred and eighty-three.

Dr. Fox: With a year to go, the Government have not even achieved a quarter of the number that they said was required to make the NHS plan work. Up and down the country, PCTs are telling us that because of Government-imposed commitments and deficits carried by the PCTs there will be little or no money for primary care development this year. The GP contract keeps slipping back and morale is falling; 28 per cent. of GPs say that they are seriously contemplating a career change; the number of GP vacancies has risen by 70 per cent. in the past year; and the number of applicants for each vacancy has fallen from 8.5 in 2000 to just 4.4 now. Will the Minister admit that his stewardship of general practice has been an unmitigated disaster?

Mr. Hutton: No, I certainly would not. The hon. Gentleman's game is clear and transparent to all of us. He wants to talk down the national health service because he wants to convince the British public that it can never be the service that we want it to be. In truth, the picture is very different, as there are 1,500 more GPs working in the NHS now than when he was in government, when his right hon. and hon. Friends were cutting the number of GPs going into training. However, those numbers are now increasing substantially. Yes, there is more recruitment and retention work to be done, and we will do it. However, we will take no strictures from the hon. Gentleman, because his policies would take money out of the national health service, which is something that we simply will not tolerate.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): Does my right hon. Friend think that further measures to improve the nation's public health will help to increase the numbers going into general practice? Such measures could include a ban on smoking in restaurants and other public places. If another brave, bold Government Back Bencher could be found to make the case for such a ban, perhaps under the ten-minute rule, would my right hon. Friend undertake to listen to such a case?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister does not need to answer that question.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Can the Minister explain why so many GPs in my constituency are complaining about the increasing burden of paperwork and form-filling? If he wants to recruit more GPs, would it not be better to look after the GPs that we have by removing some of that form-filling and all that red tape, enabling them to treat patients, which is why they entered the service in the first place?

Mr. Hutton: I agree. We need to reduce bureaucracy and the red tape associated with general practice, which is precisely what the new general medical services contracts will do.

Care Homes

8. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York): What steps he is taking to increase the number of nursing home beds and improve domiciliary nursing and social care services in areas with a shortage of such beds and services. [96680]

9. **Mr. Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford): How many places are available in care homes in England; and if he will make a statement. [96881]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): The latest data show that there were some 528,000 places in care homes for residential or nursing care in England. On 23 July, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced new targets for older people's services, along with an investment of £1 billion to meet them. Those funds will help to provide 500,000 more pieces of community equipment, 70,000 more social care intermediate care places, 30,000 more home

care services of over five hours a week, and higher fees for care homes where councils judge that that is necessary.

Hugh Bayley: My hon. Friend will be aware that there is a continuing, acute shortage of nursing-care beds in and around York, so it was with great pleasure that I noted that last April the Government made £1.4 million available to my local primary care trust to provide intermediate care. Regrettably, however, there is still no plan for where those beds will be provided, let alone a construction process. Will my hon. Friend speak to the local primary care trust and get a clear statement of the time scale for providing those much-needed additional beds? When she does so, will she also look at the possibility of the PCT providing 24-hour district nursing services, which might reduce the demand for beds, because some people who would otherwise go into care homes would instead be able to return to their own homes?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the need to develop intermediate care as a bridge between hospital and home, and often as a way of keeping people out of hospital in the first place. Notwithstanding his concern about the additional investment, I am pleased to note that in his area there are an extra 579 places for intermediate care, over and above that provided in 1999–2000. Given that we are, in addition, making extra investment available, as he pointed out, I undertake to look into the time scale for the development of further additional intermediate care provision in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr. Prisk: In my constituency, yet another care home, Park house, has just closed, turning away many vulnerable people. Rather sadly, a few days later, three of the former residents had passed away. Because the Government's care standards apply to newly registered homes, there is a financial barrier to us being able to turn that back into an operating establishment. Does the Minister recognise that the standards are a barrier to new homes being opened? Will she be more flexible about the way in which the standards are applied, so that new home places can be provided?

Jacqui Smith: As I discussed with the National Care Homes Association last Thursday, the introduction of national standards is an important step forward for provision, and many providers have argued for it over the years. The hon. Gentleman knows that we have been and are being flexible about environmental care standards with respect to existing homes, but we have a responsibility to improve provision for our older people in the care home sector, in particular. That is why we have maintained the standards, which received wide agreement for new provision and extensions to existing provision. Alongside that, we have ensured that local authorities have the investment necessary to pay the level of fees that will allow us to improve quality for our older people, not just in care home provision, but more broadly across the services that they need.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): How many hospitals employ social worker teams to draw down provision of care in the community? I understand that the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), visited Ealing hospital, which has done pioneering work on bed blocking. The interconnection between that and care provision in the community is extremely important.

Jacqui Smith: Increasingly, with the extra investment made available to social services departments, they are taking more seriously their responsibility to maintain a presence in hospitals and to consider particularly the needs of older people and ways of ensuring that they are discharged more quickly, and they are undertaking that work more effectively. I know that there are also increasing numbers of accident and emergency departments where there are social workers and other professionals who can ensure that older people who come through that route can get care elsewhere, if they do not need to be admitted to hospital. My hon. Friend makes an important point which, with reference to the hospital discharge work book that I mentioned earlier, we are promoting through new investment and new guidance.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): When will the Minister come out of her perpetual state of denial and recognise that there is a serious crisis in long-term care? Does she fully appreciate the distress and the problems being caused in certain parts of the country because of the loss of more than 60,000 beds over the past five years and the reduction of more than 100,000 care home packages for domiciliary care for households? More and more individuals cannot find places in their immediate vicinity and have to move further from home, family and friends to find a bed. The Minister cannot continue to live in her Alice in Wonderland-type world. She must face facts and come up with realistic ways of addressing the problem, which is causing so much distress to so many in this country.

Jacqui Smith: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need a realistic approach in addressing the problem. In particular, we need to provide local authorities with the resources to be able to support the kind of provision that is necessary. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where has the money gone?"] Out of the £300 million that we made available as the building care capacity grant, over £7 million went to the hon. Gentleman's county of Essex, which, for example, spent £413,000 to create new posts for older people's mental health services and spent money on additional assessor capacity and additional home-care training places. That is why it has been able to reduce delayed discharges from 16.9 per cent. in 1997 to 3.4 per cent. in September 2002 and to increase intermediate care places by 139 over 1999.

We live in the real world, but we provide the money in order to ensure that that real world can be made a reality for the people that we serve, unlike hon. Members opposite.

Teenage Cancer

11. **Rev. Martin Smyth** (Belfast, South): If he will make a statement on provision for teenage cancer patients. [96683]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): We are aware that teenagers with cancer have specific needs, and we are taking action to meet them. We are providing funding to enable more teenage cancer patients to enter trials of the latest treatments, and we are looking at how teenagers can participate in the design of health services centred around their particular needs.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will she commend the work of the Teenage Cancer Trust? Because these units have been set up, cancer specialists have noticed a 15 per cent. improvement in recovery rates. Surely this improvement should be spread throughout the country.

Ms Blears: I am delighted to welcome the work of the Teenage Cancer Trust. I have no doubt that by providing an environment in which teenagers with cancer can be together it is aiding their recovery. It must be devastating for any family to discover that their teenager has cancer, and providing them with services appropriate to their needs is extremely important to us as a Government. I am hopeful that the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health will begin to draw the views of young people, children, teenagers and adolescents into designing our health services, an area that has been lacking in the past. The Teenage Cancer Trust can help to show us the way in this regard.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): A great deal of interest in this subject was shown at the palliative services care conference, hosted by my local primary care trust, that I attended last Friday. Can my hon. Friend say what success the Government are having this year in getting to the front-line services, especially the services provided by hospices, the £50 million of additional spending they announced last year for palliative care services for cancer patients and those others who suffer from terminal conditions?

Ms Blears: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important area of concern to hon. Members across the House. He highlights the fact that we have put an extra £50 million into specialist palliative care. We have set up a unique mechanism, a national partnership group involving the voluntary sectors—Help the Hospices and all those other partners who work in this area with us—chaired by the national cancer director, Professor Mike Richards, to ensure that the money not only reaches the front line but is spent in a way that makes a real difference to people in these circumstances. I look forward with great enthusiasm to the work of that national partnership group, which will make a significant impact in this very important area of care.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): The Minister will be aware of the success of King Edward VII hospital in Midhurst in treating teenage and other cancer patients. The residents of west Sussex are grateful to the Government for the two-month moratorium for that hospital. Can the hon. Lady set out the latest position on whether the hospital will remain open for the long term?

Ms Blears: As the hon. Gentleman knows from the debate in Westminster Hall just a couple of weeks ago, the NHS has been working closely with the liquidator of King Edward VII hospital, and we have been able to provide some interim support to the hospital to ensure that it can continue to care for NHS patients. Clearly, the situation is still developing. The matter is in the hands of the liquidator, and the NHS will continue to work extremely closely with the hospital because our top priority is to ensure that NHS patients get continuity of high-quality care. That will be our foremost priority in relation to King Edward VII hospital.

Foundation Trusts

12. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What non-financial freedom will be given to foundation trusts. [96684]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The non-financial freedoms that will be open to NHS foundation trusts were set out in "A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts", which was published on 11 December 2002.

Ms Drown: That guide said that foundation trusts would not have to have patients forums, but it did not mention much else. Some of the trusts that hope to gain foundation status are hoping that they will not have to supply information to the Department of Health and that they will be able to abandon Government initiatives such as modern matrons. Will that be the case, and if so, how will we deal with parliamentary answers? For example, will we no longer be able to say how many nurses the NHS has because we can only say how many there are in non-foundation trust hospitals?

Mr. Hutton: It is important that we strike a better balance between what is done at the centre in the NHS and what is done on the front line. That is very much what our proposals on foundation trusts are designed to do. It is perfectly possible to strike that better balance without compromising what my hon. Friend rightly identified as very important information about the performance of the NHS that all hon. Members would want to have. Those data will not be compromised or lost. That is one issue on which I hope I can at least reassure her.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I hope that the Macclesfield district general hospital, which has a three-star rating, will apply for foundation status. Is it the Government's view that that new status will give hospitals an opportunity to respond more quickly and positively to local needs? Is it not very important that the hospital trusts have a very close liaison with the primary care trusts? Otherwise, conflict could occur between them.

Mr. Hutton: Yes; I can certainly say to the hon. Gentleman that local service delivery and responsiveness are very much what we want NHS foundation trusts to be able to provide. We want them to be able to respond more effectively and quickly because less weight from the centre is bearing down on them. Generally, it has been my experience that, in all the hospitals that I have visited, people are able to identify problems, but it is usually local people who are

best able and best placed to design solutions. I think that we should let that happen wherever possible. The Macclesfield hospital is an excellent hospital and the staff there are doing a brilliant job and thoroughly deserve their three stars. Of course, precisely what happens in relation to its application for foundation status is a matter for the trust and the local community.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): As part of the Government's proposals on foundation trusts, the idea of local governance has been brought forward, which is very interesting. In developing that idea, will my right hon. Friend assure me that local communities will have a say in whether applications for foundation trusts will be made in the first instance? In an area such as west Yorkshire, for example, where the three-star Bradford trust may well be a foundation applicant, would it not be appropriate for my constituents in Wakefield to have a say in the process?

Mr. Hutton: We spelt out in the guide a clear process whereby applications would be made. I think that I can give my hon. Friend a very clear assurance on the point on which he sought clarification.

Ambulance Services

13. **Sir Patrick Cormack** (South Staffordshire): If he will make a statement on ambulance services in England and Wales. [96685]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): The ambulance service in England has made real progress. Compared with 1997, trusts are responding significantly more quickly to a significantly larger number of calls. Ambulances are better equipped and paramedics better trained. The service still faces challenges, but with support and investment it will continue to succeed.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I thank the Minister for that rather general answer, but does he agree that the Staffordshire ambulance service, both in response time and general efficiency, has an exemplary performance? *[Interruption.]* I am glad that the Secretary of State is echoing those remarks from the Front Bench. What is the Minister doing specifically to encourage Staffordshire and to encourage other services to be as good as Staffordshire?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right: Staffordshire has done particularly well, especially given the outbreak of a diarrhoea and vomiting bug last month. What is happening in Staffordshire is that the emergency care networks are requiring the ambulance trust to work with the primary care trust, the A and E department and also the emergency care collaborative, bringing best practice to Staffordshire as to the rest of the country.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): While echoing the compliments paid by my hon. Friend to the Staffordshire ambulance service, hon. Members should be aware that in almost every part of the country ambulances with patients inside are sitting outside accident and emergency departments that are unable to admit them because managers will not take them in order to meet the four-hour waiting targets. At an extreme, we have discovered that ambulances have had to wait for 414 minutes for a patient to be admitted. Two weeks ago, in the west midlands, 50 per cent. of ambulances were tied up at A and E departments. Ambulance services have warned that they may not always be able to answer 999 calls. The situation is a scandal. Will the Minister say what he is going to do to put a stop to it? Will he explain why he has told ambulance service chief executives—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lammy: I have to ask the hon. Gentleman not to talk down the ambulance service in that way. He is mistaken about the target—the clock starts to run after 15 minutes, so there is no incentive to wait outside in the manner that he suggests. What are we doing about the situation? The emergency care network requires our primary care trusts to work with the community, ambulance trusts, A and E departments and emergency care collaboratives. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman goes to see the collaboratives and the network at work.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Minister write to all ambulance trusts to ensure that they are complying with the Department's requirements on combating methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus—MRSA—given that corners are being cut regarding ambulances' cleanliness because they are being used so intensively?

Mr. Lammy: My hon. Friend may know that the chief medical officer is considering that matter and issuing best practice advice. At the same time, we are attempting to collect the right data across the NHS so that we can measure the incidence of hospital-acquired infection.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon): As regards ambulance services in England and Wales, in the last quarter the average response rate for category 8 calls—eight minutes in urban areas—was 51.8 per cent. For the best area it was 70 per cent. and for the very worst it was 38.5 per cent. Does not that suggest to the Minister that his colleague in Cardiff is either not doing her job or is not up to her job?

Mr. Lammy: That is very much a matter for Wales.

Hospital Treatment (Waiting Times)

14. **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): If he will make a statement on progress with the reduction of time for patients waiting for admission to hospital for treatment. [96686]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Waiting times on virtually every indicator continue to fall. The latest figures show that the number of patients waiting more than 12 months for hospital admission has fallen by 62 per cent. in the last year. Almost half of

NHS trusts now have no patient waiting more than 12 months for hospital admission, which is ahead of the target set for April this year.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. Although there have been drastic improvements in waiting times, there are still areas that require greater attention. Will he examine the situation, especially in west Yorkshire and in my constituency? Will he also consider the problem of delays for people who are waiting for digital hearing aids, as it could be two years before my constituents receive that service?

Mr. Milburn: First, on digital hearing aids, my hon. Friend will be aware that last week I announced that an extra £94 million will be made available so that the 1.8 million people who are hard of hearing or deaf will get access to digital hearing aids on the national health service, for free.

Secondly, on waiting times for treatment, my hon. Friend is right to say that although waiting times across the piece are falling, there are pockets where they remain too long. As a consequence of the announcements that I will make today, from July this year, in his area of west Yorkshire, patients needing eye operations will have the choice of an alternative hospital where the waiting time for treatment is shorter. That will apply not only in parts of the north, but in parts of the south.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): Is the Secretary of State aware that the reason for delayed admission to hospital in Oxfordshire is our dreadful shortage of nurses? Does he realise that we are short of approximately 400 nurses—a vacancy rate of 14 per cent.? When will he extend the freedoms that he plans for foundation hospitals to all hospitals so that we can pay the right rate for recruiting, motivating and retaining nurses? Without that, we shall never make progress.

Mr. Milburn: We want as many NHS hospitals and trusts as possible to gain the advantages of foundation status. However, the increase in resources is the main reason for the fall in waiting times in the NHS. The hon. Gentleman cannot acknowledge that because the Conservative party wants to decrease rather than increase NHS resources.

North Atlantic Council

12.30 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about yesterday's meeting of the North Atlantic Council.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The North Atlantic Council has been examining the technical procedure for tasking NATO military authorities to undertake contingency planning to deter or defend against a possible—[HON. MEMBERS: "Where is he?"]

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is bad manners. I have granted an urgent question, which a Minister is required to answer. The Minister is here and should be heard.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that points of order are taken after the urgent question.

Mr. Ingram: Perhaps I should begin again because I do not know whether the country heard the answer that I was giving to the request for an urgent question. The Secretary of State is on his way to Washington to undertake important consultations with a major ally. *[Interruption.]* I am pleased that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) shows some sensitivity.

The North Atlantic Council has been examining the technical procedure for tasking the NATO military authorities to undertake contingency planning to deter or defend against a possible threat to Turkey. Yesterday, three allies broke the silence procedure. They sought further information on the timing of such tasking. I emphasise that there is no debate on the need for the alliance to provide assistance to a NATO member if so requested.

Yesterday, Turkey requested consultations under article 4 of the north Atlantic treaty. The North Atlantic Council meeting that was scheduled for this morning has been adjourned until 4.30 pm Brussels time for further consideration of the proposal. It is too early to speculate on the outcome of the continuing deliberations.

Mr. Jenkin: First, it is astonishing that the Government had to be dragged to the Dispatch Box to discuss a major international crisis in NATO instead of voluntarily making a statement. It is even more astonishing that the Secretary of State did not come to the House yesterday, when we asked for a statement, instead of scuttling out of the country, albeit on legitimate business, to avoid cross-examination.

The Opposition broadly continue to support the Government's determination to disarm Saddam Hussein. We gave our fullest support to UN resolution 1441, which demanded

"a currently accurate, full and complete declaration".

That has not been forthcoming. It also stated that Saddam Hussein should

"co-operate fully in the implementation of this resolution".

He has not done that. It further demanded

"immediate, unimpeded, unconditional and unrestricted access".

He has failed to provide that. Resolution 1441 also made it clear that it was a final opportunity for Saddam to comply, and that failure to do that would mean serious consequences.

It is now time for all those who supported United Nations resolution 1441 to hold to their course. Times when international unity is of such paramount importance are rare. The world and the people whom we represent demand clarity, resolve and unity. I warn the Minister that we are worried about the Government's undermining of British public opinion with such appalling, reprehensible and cack-handed initiatives as the dodgy dossier that No. 10 published last week. Can it be overstated how utterly counterproductive that action has proved to be? How can the Prime Minister now restore his personal authority after he has been so abjectly found out? When did the Secretary of State or the Minister first see the document? Did they give their approval for its publication?

Even more importantly, unless Europe and the United States can unite, what hope is there that other nations or our own people will follow our lead? All the Saddam Husseins and bin Ladens of this world must be delighted with the allies' present splits and confusion. The Queen's Speech reaffirmed just a few months ago that NATO was

"the cornerstone of Britain's national security."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 November 2002; Vol. 641, c. 4.]

NATO is needed above all today to be the focus of international unity. Instead, it faces an unprecedented crisis because of the French-led refusal to allow it even to plan for the defence of one of its member states. It is a pity that the Secretary of State's prior engagements prevented him from attending the Munich security conference with me at the weekend. All the other NATO Defence Ministers were discussing this issue there. What hope is there for our peace and security in Europe if this cornerstone of our security structure is now crumbling? What action are the Government taking to shore up the Atlantic alliance?

I have to tell the Minister—he will not wish to be reminded—that I and my colleagues have long been warning that the Government's support for the European Union's foreign and defence policy was playing into the hands of those who would destroy NATO. Today's chaos stems directly from the St. Malo declaration of 1998, which gave birth to an autonomous EU defence capability outside NATO. This was followed by EU declarations from Helsinki, Cologne, Nice, Faro, Copenhagen and, to cap it all, last week's Le Touquet summit with France. What on earth possessed the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to sign a declaration last week with President Chirac proclaiming, with a certain irony, that

"European security and defence policy should match the worldwide ambitions of the EU's common foreign and security policy"?

It is just a few days later—that declaration has hardly stood the test of time. It just added to the chaos that the Prime Minister first created at St. Malo.

[Mr. Jenkin]

Even if France eventually supports a second resolution, and joins in military action against Iraq, how will the Secretary of State and the Government prevent the minority in Europe from continuing to undermine NATO? The Government's complacency about NATO, about which we have been warning for years, has now been overwhelmed by events. We have always argued consistently that NATO must remain the paramount alliance for British and European security—the cornerstone of Britain's security.

Will the Government now commit themselves to restoring the primacy of NATO in Europe—a move that could command majority support in Europe, as it is France, Belgium and Germany that are now isolated? Will the Government now stop promoting EU security structures outside the NATO alliance, and put their diplomatic money where their mouth is and stop aiding and abetting France and its long-held ambition to destroy NATO?

Mr. Ingram: Let me try to deal with all the salient questions that the hon. Gentleman asked. There were not many. First, the Government have not been dragged to the House on this issue. We have responded to this urgent request, and our assessment of it was set out in the response that I gave to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that he listened to that, but if he did not absorb what I said at the time, he should read it tomorrow in *Hansard*.

The hon. Gentleman described the Secretary of State "scuttling out of the country". That is a very strange description of a senior Minister meeting our major ally as we seek to deal with one of the greatest crises that we have faced for a long, long time. That relates not to the future of NATO, but to all matters pertaining to Iraq and what will flow from it.

The hon. Gentleman referred to resolution 1441. He should be aware, as I am sure the country is only too well aware, that the Government have made their position clear time after time. We are determined that Saddam Hussein be held to account to the will of the international community. That is set out in resolution 1441, and in the 16 resolutions that preceded it.

The headline, as it were, for the hon. Gentleman's comments was the "dodgy dossier". That dossier is a Government document based, as is stated on the front cover, on a number of sources, including intelligence material. The first and third sections, which gave rise to most of the media coverage of its publication, are based largely on intelligence material. The first describes the extreme lengths to which Saddam has gone to hide his weapons and obstruct the inspectors: fact. The third describes the impact of the regime on the Iraqi people: fact. The second section describes the way in which the regime is structured: fact. Some of that is based on a work by Dr. Ibrahim al-Marashi, which, as has been made clear in retrospect, should have been acknowledged. *[Interruption.]* I ask the hon. Gentleman and others who find this humorous to bear in mind that I have listed the three facts on which the dossier is based. Do they disagree with any of those facts?

Let me now deal with the great moment in my life that occurred at the weekend, when I recognised that the hon. Gentleman was at the same conference as me in Munich. I did not know he was going; the Secretary of State did not know he was going. Perhaps if the Secretary of State had known that the hon. Gentleman was going, he would have changed his arrangements in order to hear the wonderful contribution that the hon. Gentleman made. The hon. Gentleman will have heard me, at the closing session of the conference, setting out very clearly our position on matters to which I have referred before, and also on some of the debate that was emerging over that weekend.

During a series of questions based on his obsession with the European Union, the hon. Gentleman alighted on his obsession with the French. Let me say this about NATO and the European security and defence policy and all that flows from it. All the NATO countries support this development; America supports it. Our reason for proceeding on those two fronts is to do with lifting capabilities so that there can be the best delivery and best possible interoperability in order to meet the threats that must be faced on a range of fronts.

If there is any doubt in the hon. Gentleman's mind that NATO is the cornerstone of the Government's security policy, I ask him to look at all the answers that have been given time and again. We have never called into question NATO and our commitment to it. Moreover, if the hon. Gentleman examines our present involvement in current decisions on Iraq, he will see that we are standing alongside the majority in NATO, trying to find a resolution to a difficult question.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) demonstrated the Conservative party's ability to sink to any occasion. Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that those of us who support the Government's determination to pursue the United Nations route, and who commend the Prime Minister's quest for a second Security Council resolution if need be, are nevertheless deeply concerned about the possibility that the "bull in a china shop" antics of Donald Rumsfeld will inflict serious damage on NATO cohesion, and also demonstrate how important it is for the Government to stress the fact that the next important stage in the essential disarming of Saddam Hussein is the appearance of the inspectors' report on Friday?

Mr. Ingram: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his broad support for the Government's approach. We have said where the Government's preference lies on the second resolution, but I should point out that in fact, it would be not the second resolution but the 18th. I shall not respond to his criticisms of the United States Secretary of Defence, whom I heard at the Munich conference give a very clear exposition of what needs to be done in support of the United Nations. The United States clearly has very strong views on this issue, and I would guess that the vast majority of the countries that were represented at that conference wholly supported his arguments. There were differences among one or two countries on the question of how we move forward, but that is the nature of an alliance. If differences exist, they have got to be expressed and understood by all the other members of the alliance. Then, we must find a consensus in order to move forward.

My right hon. Friend concluded by mentioning the need to ensure that Saddam Hussein does disarm—a point that we have made time and again. If he is not going to disarm in line with the will of the international community, he will be made to disarm.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I welcome this timely question from the shadow Defence Secretary, and I congratulate him on it. The reality is that one thing is certain in NATO, in this House and in the country: the case for war has not yet been proved by this Government, and anything that can help to inform the British public about the very important times ahead is to be welcomed. Does the Minister agree that the responsibility for resolving the current crisis in NATO lies with both sides, and that we must not allow multilateral treaties, international law or even the UN and NATO to become collateral damage in the legitimate desire to disarm Iraq? Allies on both sides of the Atlantic should take a step back and tone down the rhetoric.

Does the Minister agree that it is rather contradictory of the French to block planning on the ground that it will endorse war, while at the same time dispatching the Charles de Gaulle to the east of the Mediterranean? Does he also agree that if Turkey requests protection under article 4, it should be granted? France, Germany and Belgium have made their point—they should back down now. Does the Minister further agree that our focus should be on disarming Iraq, preferably through peaceful means, and not on squabbling within NATO? The allies have disagreed before, and no doubt they will disagree again. If Britain has a pivotal role to play, as the Prime Minister claims, now is the time to play it.

Mr. Ingram: Let me disagree with the hon. Gentleman's saying that the case has not been made. I do not think that he has been listening to what Hans Blix reported to the United Nations, or to the questions that he then raised, which still need to be answered. However, if the hon. Gentleman is still not convinced, he should wait until 14 February, when the final report is made; he should not close his mind now and make a prejudgment. This has been a balanced process.

I shared a platform with the hon. Gentleman not that long ago, when he made the bold statement that the Liberal Democrats would tell this Government that they should not be dictated to by the United Nations. I do not know exactly what he meant by that—perhaps he will have the opportunity to clarify his position during another debate. I know that his party is split between those who are anti-war, who will be marching this weekend, and those who are saying, "Let's not march." So they are all over the place on this issue, including the very leadership of the party. He made a typical Liberal Democrat response—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House is far too noisy. I point out that there was a great deal of keenness yesterday to get an urgent question. That request was put and, obviously, granted. I ask only that the Minister be allowed to respond. Also, when further questions are asked, they should be very brief.

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) said that the fault for the crisis lay with both sides. I do not accept that at all. Indeed, I see no question of fault in this matter. What I see is argumentation as the different countries in NATO try to articulate their position. The Government's position is clear: we stand with 16 of the 19 NATO members in moving towards providing the very thing that the hon. Gentleman said that he wanted, in the final part of his question.

This is about solidarity with Turkey and about defending a NATO member. It is not about NATO involvement in any operations against Iraq. The proposals to the NAC amount to prudent planning for defence and deterrence in relation to one ally, Turkey. They are consistent with NATO responsibilities and obligations. They do not imply any automaticity of NATO actions or deployments. We are obviously disappointed that three allies broke silence about what we believed were sensible proposals put forward by NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson. The lack of consensus is to do with timing, not substance. The large majority of allies believe that prudent planning should begin now.

Those discussions continue. The hon. Member for Hereford has used rhetoric and bluster to try to allocate fault and say that one nation is worse than another. That is no way for allies to go forward. The hon. Gentleman asks that the rhetoric be toned down, but he exacerbates it with his bluster.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although this is a great crisis in NATO, it is more a sad comment on the parlous state of a once-great party? The Conservative Opposition have turned the crisis into an excuse for slagging off the French and the EU. Will not that seriously undermine the prospects for getting a second resolution in the UN, and a peaceful resolution of the Iraq crisis?

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend makes the important point at the end of his question. The aim is to resolve the situation in Iraq. All of us wish that that can be done by peaceful means, but only Saddam Hussein can deliver the peaceful route. He can do that by delivering on what the UN has said in resolution after resolution. I am sure that, if we get a second resolution—although I repeat that it will be the 18th resolution on this matter—all allies will respond to the will of the UN, as set out in that determination. That is what we, collectively, must work to achieve.

I do not believe that this is a great crisis for NATO, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) suggested at the beginning of his question. Those who study the history of the organisation will know that it has been at crisis' door before. Problems tend to get resolved, as all the allies share the same objectives—to defend borders and provide security, as well as to ensure peace and stability throughout the world.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I am one of those Opposition Members who are predisposed to support the Government on matters of national security. We have urged those of our constituents who have found the case less than compelling to trust the

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

Prime Minister, on the ground that he must have intelligence information not available to us. Does the Minister realise that the publication of a document suggesting that the Government had so little information that they had to pad more than 50 per cent. of the document with material culled from the internet undermines the support that we have given, betrays Labour Back Benchers, and embarrasses those allies that rested their defence in the UN on that document? Who accepts responsibility for publishing the document? Have they resigned?

Mr. Ingram: I do not know whether anyone has resigned yet, but I am sure that, if that were to happen in the future, there would be great excitement among Labour Back-Bench Members about a possible reshuffle. I am grateful for the support of the right hon. Gentleman, and of those hon. Members who have looked at the facts of the situation, at the barbarity of Saddam Hussein's regime, and at the way he has consistently refused to accept the will of the international community. The right hon. Gentleman should think about what I said earlier in response to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin)—that the dossier was based on three significant facts. The right hon. Gentleman should go forward consistently with those messages. In that way, I am sure that he will continue to build support in his constituency for what we believe to be right.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Does not the Minister accept that the stance taken by the French and some other countries in this time of crisis reflects a desire for peace rather than war? Is not it time that the Government reflected on the feeling, around the world and in this country, that George Bush is leading us by the nose into a war that is neither necessary nor wanted by anyone, and which will result in an awful lot of deaths of innocent people? Is not it time to stop, reflect—and, possibly, to turn around for once?

Mr. Ingram: I do not accept the premise of that question. All countries in the UN, and certainly the members of the Security Council, are committed to peace and not war. That is certainly true of those countries that may find themselves engaged in the conflict. Everything that this country has done with its allies has been aimed at finding a peaceful solution. I should respect my hon. Friend more if, in his question, he had condemned Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime. I heard nothing from him about that. We get an anti-American rant all the time, from people who forget that the matter is about the will of the UN. I disagree with my hon. Friend's premise, but I join him in wanting peace. He should come over to our side and help to show a unity of purpose among democratic countries. In that way, that tyrant and dictator can be thrown out.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does the Minister accept, on reflection, that the Government are not convincing large numbers of people? Does it not therefore behove the Government to show that they are open in these matters? Would not it have been better if the Secretary of State for Defence had come to the House of his own volition yesterday and made the statement that the Minister has now made? Would it not have been better if someone had explained to the House before about what has come to be called the "dodgy" document? Would it not be better now if the House were to have a proper debate of this matter, on a substantive motion, so that the public could be reassured? The Minister must understand that many of us would like to say, "Trust the Prime Minister," but that we are unable to do so, given the evidence that is before us. Will he accept that this is a serious crisis, in this country as well as everywhere else?

Mr. Ingram: I do not think that the Government have said anything to indicate that we are not aware of the significant amount of doubt in people's minds, both in Britain and internationally. That doubt is evident in the US and every European country, and in other countries too. We have to accept that. As to openness, we have lost count of the number of statements made and of the number of the debates held on the matter. The arguments have been given proper ventilation. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the matter will be determined not in the House, but in the UN. To my mind, and I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman agrees, Secretary Powell made a powerful and convincing case for the current position in Iraq, based on the inspectors' analysis. Another report will be made on 14 February. The strength and quality of the arguments in that report will be what convinces people in this country, across Europe and in the US. When that is explained, we have to ensure that we stand behind the UN when and if it determines through a second resolution that further action is required, if Saddam Hussein, at that stage, is still not complying with the will of the UN. It has to be determined at the bar of that house as well as at the Bar of this House.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Is it not the case that the Government have markedly failed to convince the British people, most centrally because people have lost trust in that Government? It was not the dossier that my constituents found dodgy but the Government's attempt to present it as exclusively the work of British intelligence agencies and as containing up-to-date material. My constituents are also concerned that the Prime Minister gave a clear commitment that a decision on whether to deploy British troops would be for our Government, our House of Commons and our people—a commitment that his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence completely overturned last Thursday, using the somewhat lame argument of security. Surely the Government must understand that, if the people of this country are to be convinced, far from setting themselves up against the proposals that have been made by France, Germany and, yes, plucky little Belgium, and if the Prime Minister is determined to go down—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I asked for brief questions, not three questions.

Mr. Ingram: In my earlier answer, I tried to deal with the way in which we are taking forward the debate on whether we had trust. We have to make the arguments and win them. That is clearly the case for any matter of

great importance. I recall, however, some of the lurid language that was used in the House—mainly by my hon. Friends—when we debated Afghanistan. They asked what would happen if there were bombing attacks on Afghanistan and said that if we put troops into the country the whole Islamic world would go up in flames and we would be faced with a cataclysmic response such as we had never seen before. They were wrong then and I ask them to reflect on that this time.

I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) spoke about trust in "that" Government. I remind her that the Government are her Government. She stood on that manifesto and I hope that she can find trust both in the Prime Minister and in the Ministers who are trying to take forward some difficult decisions on behalf of the party to which I am proud to belong and to which I hope she, too, remains proud to belong—

Glenda Jackson: I am not.

Hon. Members: Oh!

Mr. Ingram: On the question of commitment and the deployment of our troops and resources, that rests with the Government and with this country and, ultimately, with the House of Commons.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): I draw attention to a registered interest.

Does the Minister agree that the action that has been taken by France, Belgium and Germany is a severe blow to the alliance? Does he not recognise that that display of disunity within the alliance actually makes it less likely that this matter can be resolved peacefully? Will he confirm that in Kosovo and in Bosnia Europe was unable to settle matters and had to call upon NATO to do so? Does he, therefore, agree that the result of this action is more likely to damage Europe than the United States? Finally, is it not naïve of the Minister not to admit that a longstanding French objective has been to achieve defence arrangements for Europe that do not involve America?

Mr. Ingram: The right hon. Gentleman accuses me of being naïve, but I do not think that I was asked a question on that point, so it is not a matter of refusing to admit to anything. We can all have a view on the geopolitical stance of our allies and neighbours, and every country comes to its conclusion in a different way. That is what makes the strength of the alliance; we can hold and articulate different points of view and find a way forward. I think I have already replied on the way forward for the European Union, the European security and defence policy and NATO—they are complementary and NATO remains a cornerstone of our security policy.

I do not accept that this situation is a severe blow, because it depends on how one defines "severe"—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Well, Lord Robertson may use a different definition from the right hon. Gentleman's. Lord Robertson has said that, yes, there are difficulties. However, consultations are going on and there will be another discussion at 16.30 and there may be further discussions. What are those discussions about? Reaching consensus. Let us wait and see the end of the process and not jump in halfway through, as the right hon. Gentleman's party has done.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Would my right hon. Friend confirm that the fundamental purpose of NATO is to provide mutual self-defence for its members—one for all and all for one? To deny a loyal ally—Turkey—that defence when it is needed undermines the very purpose of the alliance. If that door is blocked by certain countries, will my right hon. Friend confirm that we will ensure, in co-operation with the United States and the Netherlands, that our ally, Turkey, receives that help in terms of Patriots, AWACS, aircraft and planning? Will my right hon. Friend also give the Government's position on Monday's proposed EU conference on Iraq? Is it not true that, at this stage, that can only further illustrate the disunity in the European Union and cast doubts on the possibility of a common foreign and security policy?

Mr. Ingram: With respect to my right hon. Friend, may I ask him to put some of those questions to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? They do not relate specifically to what is happening in NATO and the discussions that are taking place.

I accept that there are linkages, but the way forward will be progressive. There is potential for damage at the moment, but any breaches that arise will be healed. That is the history of NATO and the same will apply—if it does not already—in any ESDP or in the relationships between EU countries.

The role of NATO is about mutual self-defence. I have set out exactly what is happening. If Turkey comes under attack or is threatened by attack, the countries that are currently seeking a different approach—France, Germany and Belgium—have made it clear that they will stand 100 per cent. by their commitment to NATO. There is no question about that. Let us put the matter in its true context.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Is not the point that Turkey needs protection before it comes under immediate threat? I strongly support what the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson) said: Britain should be prepared to come Turkey's aid even before there is a NATO resolution.

On the dossier, which the Minister has accepted was unfortunately misrepresented, why cannot he just say sorry?

Mr. Ingram: Well, the right hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* I am a bit perplexed as to why we are talking about the dossier when the question was about NATO and the current situation that some people are calling a crisis. However, I understand that the linkages can be made, that the matter is for discussion and that as I am the first relevant Minister to come to the Dispatch Box, I am being asked all these questions about it. I answered in depth on the Government's approach to the dossier. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to look again at the facts in the dossier; if he then disagrees with the dossier, he can call it anything that he wishes.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about whether Turkey needed support now. Perhaps I have not been clear enough and he has not understood the

[Mr. Ingram]

Government's position. The answer is yes, but as I have said, 15 out of the 19 countries also support that decision. We are clear about what we want from the NAC.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): May I ask the Minister not to cease repeating the fact that 16 nation states in the NATO Assembly support the resolutions and upholding the constitution? Will he repeat that Turkey's request under article 4 is before NATO today? It is very important to use tact and diplomacy at this time. Is it not a fact that the 18th resolution will enable every nation state in the Security Council to decide whether it wishes to uphold resolution 1441 and the charter of the United Nations and to render a signal service to the international community in relation to Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Ingram: I agree entirely with the three points that my hon. Friend makes, and I repeat that 16 out of 19 states wish to comply with his request. That is a significant figure which all of us should remember.

On my hon. Friend's point about the need for diplomacy, my opening response and, I hope, all my answers have indicated that that process is currently under way in the North Atlantic Council. Of course our ambassador to NATO will be working with those allies who are on side and those with whom we may have a disagreement to find a resolution. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for picking up the fact that this is the 18th resolution, not the second resolution. We have got to ensure that Saddam Hussein and his regime comply wholeheartedly, without question, with the will of the international community. That way lies peace.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the Minister ask the wholly admirable Lord Robertson, who is doing such a splendid job, gently to remind the Germans, French and Belgians of just what they owe to the United States, this country and the collective security that NATO has provided?

Mr. Ingram: All the nations attended the Munich conference, and those points were made. There was no question at all in the minds of the three countries to which the hon. Gentleman refers but that they remember all too graphically what we went through in the middle of the last century and what spawned NATO, as well as the purpose of NATO and why it has to remain the cornerstone of our collective security; but I will certainly pass on his comments to my noble Friend Lord Robertson.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is hardly helpful to restoring NATO unity for US politicians and members of the US Administration to make insulting remarks about our close allies—the French and the Germans?

Mr. Ingram: I will certainly draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my US friends, some of whom are US politicians, but it is not surprising that people descend to name calling at a time of what some would call crisis. It is right to say that we have got to take the heat out of all this. Let us get into the meeting and find a resolution to the current difficulties.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Will the Minister tell the French that the way the French ambassador in Washington, who was president of the Security Council the day after the events of 11 September, explained the need for collective action in dealing with Saddam Hussein and the horrors that he has visited on his own people and his neighbours was very convincing? I hope that the meeting this afternoon will lead to an overcoming of the difficulties.

Does the Minister agree with me and, I hope, the British people in general that the best way to stand with the people of Iraq, their neighbours and Turkey is for us to go on standing with the United States?

Mr. Ingram: I do not know whether I will get the chance to say anything to the French President, but again, I am sure that those from that country who study the debates in this House will ensure that the hon. Gentleman's comments are reflected through their diplomatic channels to their Government. There is no question at all but that all the countries, including the one he mentions, are resolute in their determination to ensure that Saddam Hussein complies with the wish of the United Nations. The debate is about the route to that, wherein lie some of the differences.

On seeking the resolution to support Turkey, if there were an ultimate threat to or an attack on Turkey, the three countries to which reference has been made would not say, "No, we will not stand by NATO." They have consistently said that they will do so. So this is more about timing than substance. I am sure that diplomacy will prevail, and we have to await the outcome of that diplomacy.

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is wrong to over-dramatise this? Article 4 of the treaty imposes an obligation to consult. That has to be done in good faith. Certainly, since the 1950s, an obligation of solidarity has grown up in practice, but this is not an unprecedented crisis; it is nothing like a breach of the treaty and NATO is certainly not crumbling.

Mr. Ingram: In the interests of brevity, I agree entirely with everything that my hon. and learned Friend has said.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Does the Minister understand that some people in this country admire what the French are doing to hold us back from over-precipitate action? Some of the damage to NATO has been caused by our American friends, not at least in the disdainful way they treated the triggering of article 5 just after the events of 11 September and in the way that, over the past few days, Donald Rumsfeld has been virtually pre-empting Hans Blix's statement, which will come on Friday and which will in itself determine whether the United Nations believes that there should be war. I hope that he will convey that to President Bush, because we must reconcile the damaging threat to NATO's credibility, but that will not happen just by putting pressure on France.

Mr. Ingram: Of course the hon. Gentleman has a right to respect any country that he wishes and to criticise any

other country. That does not happen in Iraq, and I know that he would stand four square behind what we are seeking to do to disarm Saddam Hussein and to bring stability and, I hope, peace to that country and that troubled region. I do not accept what he says about the United States pre-empting the United Nations. The US is setting out its case. That is part of open diplomacy. We are asked for our views because we are a democracy. Does the hon. Gentleman expect Secretary Rumsfeld to say, "I have nothing to say until 14 February"? That would be a ridiculous position to adopt.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Having regard to the Prime Minister's repeated promises to treat war as a last resort and to the opinion poll in *The Times* today, showing that 86 per cent. of the British people believe that inspections should be given more time, may I ask my right hon. Friend whether serious consideration can be given to the proposals from our German, French and Russian allies or to any alternative option to allow more time to try to disarm Iraq peacefully?

Mr. Ingram: We have made it clear that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeatedly promised that that war must be the last resort. I hope that my hon. Friend takes that as a sincere and total commitment by the Prime Minister, the Government and every Minister who has responsibility in this area. I have said in response to earlier questions that peace, not the alternative, is a route that we want, but we cannot deliver that alone; only Saddam Hussein can do so. How can he do so? By complying with the wish of the UN.

My hon. Friend has consistently argued that we should recognise the will and wishes of the UN. We now have resolution 1441. I ask him to read it again and to realise that very clear commitments are laid down in that resolution. He now argues for more time and more inspectors, but how many more? How much more time does he want, and whom will that satisfy? It will satisfy Saddam Hussein, and it will continue his tyranny over the people of Iraq.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Does the Minister acknowledge the primacy of the House of Commons' right to be kept informed and to take decisions on such matters? Does he acknowledge that he has been unable or unwilling, perhaps for very good reasons, to intimate to the House in detail during the statement what the Secretary of State is doing and saying at this moment to resolve this crisis? Will he give an undertaking now that, when the Secretary of State returns, he will come to the House to make a full statement on his meeting?

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands what I said. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is not going to Brussels to involve himself in the NAC; he is going to meet senior—*[Interruption.]* Well, he will go a bit beyond that, but he will certainly meet Secretary Rumsfeld and others to consider—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the Minister answer.

Mr. Ingram: I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker. I am trying to get to the nub of the question, in case there is any doubt in the mind of the hon. Gentleman. I accept the primacy of the House of Commons, as do the Government, and that is why we have had so many statements. I remind the House that we had a substantive vote on 25 November, and we will have another if we have to come to the ultimate decision that we do not want to reach.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): May I associate myself with the comments by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)? I am one of the people who have put their trust in the Government, but I wish to address the question of the dossier. It must have been printed on rice paper and all been eaten, because no copies are available in the Vote Office. The Minister of State mentioned the facts, but part one of the dossier implies that Hans Blix and the other inspectors have been intimidated by the Iraqis. Where does that evidence come from? Surely if there was any sense of intimidation on the narrow issue of the inspections, Hans Blix would not be there. It must have been made up.

Mr. Ingram: That is a question of interpretation. I welcome the strong position that my hon. Friend has taken, and the resolute way in which he has continued to pursue what he believes to be right. He also constantly questions the basis on which he has come to his conclusions, while keeping in mind the centrality of what we seek to do. If he thinks that the inspectors have not been frustrated, I ask him to read again what Hans Blix reported to the United Nations. It is a central feature of what we seek that unrestricted access should be allowed to key people in Iraq, many of whom know where the dangerous weapons—and the means to build more—lie. The inspectors have had a difficult job to do, so let us wait to see what the report says on 14 February.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon): Will the Minister dissociate himself from the intemperate remarks on the "Today" programme by Washington-based hawks, in which they rubbished the efforts of France, Belgium and Germany in the attempts to disarm Iraq? Will he assure the House that the Government have given serious consideration to those countries' proposals?

Mr. Ingram: I speak for myself, not for those whom the hon. Gentleman calls hawks. I have set out the Government's position and I hope that the hon. Member agrees with us on the need to stand by the United Nations. I am glad to see that he nods at that, because that is progress. Will he also stand by the 18th resolution, if it means that Saddam Hussein has not complied with the will of the international community? If war is inevitable, will he support that position? I do not see him nodding to that.

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move on.

Points of Order

1.23 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. We have just had a debate for the best part of an hour on the need for the House of Commons to be kept informed. By way of written answer, the Government today made an important announcement on asylum centres, in which they said that they will not proceed with the asylum centre in Hemswell in my constituency. As a Member of Parliament, you will appreciate that such issues are of enormous importance locally. Would not it have been polite of the Minister to have rung me up or to have tried to keep me informed in some other way through my office here, instead of informing my local press and sending a fax to some distant constituency office? Can you encourage Ministers who have such an announcement to make to come and speak openly to the House, or at least ring up the Members of Parliament concerned?

Mr. Speaker: I hope that the Minister concerned will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has had to say.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The House is grateful to you for allowing questions on the urgent question for almost an hour. That is much appreciated. You will be aware that events are moving very fast, and the British Government are now apparently drafting a resolution to the UN in support of the United States. Next week we will be in recess, but we could be at war by then. In these difficult times, what arrangements can be made for the House to be recalled or for an urgent debate and vote to take place before the recess?

Mr. Speaker: The recall of Parliament during a recess is not a matter for me. It is for the Prime Minister, and the hon. Gentleman should approach him on the matter. I can understand the concern of the House, but I have been assured by the Government business managers that the Foreign Secretary will make a statement on Thursday, which will provide an opportunity for hon. Members to make their case. Those who did not catch my eye today will be top of the queue on Thursday.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful for that assurance, but—on a separate point of order—can you confirm that the Secretary of State for Defence has not requested leave to make a statement yesterday or today? We had an opportunity to put questions today only because my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) tabled a question that you deemed urgent. Was it not totally incorrect of the Minister of State to suggest that he came here willingly to answer questions today? He came here only because you rightly deemed that the question was urgent and forced him to come here.

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman should not draw me into the argument.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Amendment

1.27 pm

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend and extend certain enactments regulating the treatment of women undergoing IVF procedures and to extend the range of information and counselling provided by health authorities.

My constituent, Margaret Grant, is a highlander. She was born in Wick and moved to Inverness, in my constituency, to live and work. She married in 1984, but she was unable to have children naturally. In 1995, she started in vitro fertilisation treatment on the NHS in Aberdeen Royal hospital. Following a local press campaign, eggs were donated by another woman and fertilised by her husband. The five embryos were cryo-preserved and placed in storage.

Unfortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Grant separated at Christmas in 1998, and divorce proceedings were initiated. Shortly after that, Mr. Grant insisted that the embryos be destroyed, as was his right under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. The hospital contacted the appropriate authority, which confirmed that my constituent had no veto over the destruction of the embryos as they did not come from her eggs. Mr. Grant underwent counselling and insisted that his estranged wife should not be informed about the destruction of the embryos. IVF treatment is started as a partnership. Why should it be ended as a sole trader?

Almost a year later, in February 2001, Mrs. Grant found out that the five embryos had been destroyed. I shall quote her description of how she felt:

"When I heard the news I was absolutely devastated. I thought they were still there for me. It came totally out of the blue. I just went hysterical, absolutely hysterical. I could not speak about what he had done. It was my only chance of having a family, my one and only chance, snatched away from me in the blink of an eye—just like that, gone! I could not calm down. I just was not making sense of what happened. It's hard to describe what it was like. It was like losing a child and having real grief for a child that you could not have. Not a day goes by when I do not think about it. I still grieve for the child I cannot have. It is like a physical pain in the pit of your stomach.

It is too late for me but I will have some kind of peace of mind and closure if I know that I have helped other childless couples not having to go through this hell that I have been through."

In vitro fertilisation is a difficult issue that raises fundamental moral and religious issues. That is apparent in the *Hansard* reports of the debates on the 1990 Act. I understand the sensitivities surrounding the issue, and it is not my intention to reopen that debate today in a 10-minute speech. I want to ensure that no other woman in Britain undergoing IVF treatment suffers the same trauma, anxiety and depression as my constituent.

How can that be done? Relatively simply, I want to insert a new one-line clause in the 1990 Act, requiring that women undergoing IVF who have had eggs donated be informed prior to the destruction of embryos, so that guidance, counselling and advice can be afforded. I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting any change in the current law, whereby the two providers of the gametes involved—the woman who provided the eggs, and the man who provided the

fertilisation—will need to give effective consent for the embryos to remain in storage. There will, of course, be no extra cost to the Exchequer, as the number of women involved in IVF in these circumstances is low, and counselling will be provided from existing resources. I also understand that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority may be changing its code of practice to reflect this proposal later in the year.

I would like to thank the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears), for her positive and constructive meeting with me about these proposals. I know that she supports the changes in the code, but has genuine concerns about opening up the Act as a whole. Even at this late stage, however, perhaps a Pauline conversion on the road to Damascus would be welcome. I commend this Bill to the House. Let us ensure that no more women in this country suffer the devastation, loss and pain experienced by my constituent

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Stewart, Mr. Alistair Carmichael, Julia Drown, Mr. George Foulkes, Mr. James Gray, Lady Hermon, Glenda Jackson, Ms Oona King, Miss Julie Kirkbride, Mr. Andrew Mitchell, Mrs. Eleanor Laing and Dr. Rudi Vis.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Amendment Bill

Mr. David Stewart accordingly presented a Bill to amend and extend certain enactments regulating the treatment of women undergoing IVF procedures and to extend the range of information and counselling provided by health authorities: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 February, and to be printed [Bill 56].

Orders of the Day

National Minimum Wage (Enforcement Notices) Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

1.32 pm

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The minimum wage is now firmly established as a feature of the UK labour market and widely recognised as an outstanding success. Since its introduction in 1999, more than 1 million people have benefited from increased pay and we have tackled the appalling situation whereby poverty wages of £2 per hour or less were being paid. That has been achieved without a significant adverse impact on business, and the most recent Low Pay Commission report said that the vast majority of employers were complying with the minimum wage and that the enforcement system was working well.

When the Government introduced the national minimum wage in 1998, we had to create an enforcement system that was fair and effective, without putting unnecessary burdens on business. We did not want workers to have to take action on their own behalf against employers, although that remains an option for them if they wish. Low-paid workers are a vulnerable group and are sometimes unable or unwilling to take action on their own behalf. Fear and intimidation can also deter people from making a complaint.

For that reason, we created a network of 12 enforcement teams across the United Kingdom, operated by the Inland Revenue. Since April 1999, those teams have completed more than 21,000 case investigations and identified more than £12 million of minimum wage arrears. I should perhaps add at this point that the minimum wage legislation and this Bill cover both the national minimum wage and the agricultural minimum wage. Since 1999, minimum wage officers from both the Inland Revenue and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have been issuing enforcement notices to require employers either to pay the minimum wage in future or make good arrears of the minimum wage, or both.

For three years, therefore, our officers have issued those notices on behalf of current workers, who are still working for the employer in question, and former workers, who have left the employer. In August last year, however, the Employment Appeal Tribunal ruled in the case of Inland Revenue *v.* Bebb Travel plc that officers could only issue enforcement notices requiring the employer to pay the minimum wage in respect of current and future pay periods or in respect of current, future and past pay periods. That ruling means that enforcement officers cannot at present issue notices for past periods alone, and, therefore, that we cannot now issue notices to recover arrears due to former workers.

The Government are determined to restore the position to what we believed it to be before the Bebb decision, for two reasons. First, former workers are entitled to the minimum wage in the same way as current ones. If someone was not paid the minimum wage for

[Alan Johnson]

some work that they did, for example, over the Christmas period, we believe that the employer should be required to make good the shortfall, regardless of whether the person concerned is still in their employment.

While former workers can take independent action against their employer, that is not as satisfactory as action by our officers for several reasons. The worker may need a reference from their former employer, or may believe that their chances of success against the employer are limited. As I mentioned earlier, low-paid workers are vulnerable and sometimes unable or unwilling to take action on their own behalf.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): My hon. Friend may not be aware that I had a case, which was properly represented by my union, the Transport and General Workers Union, of a young girl who was not being paid the minimum wage. The tribunal upheld the case six months ago, and the girl is still waiting for compensation. What will the new measure do for her?

Alan Johnson: If she is a former employee who claimed arrears since August 2002, the enforcement officers would not be able to act on her behalf. Her trade union would be able to represent her at an employment tribunal—that is unaffected. The issue is whether enforcement officers can act for former employees to claim arrears. That is the focal point of this particular amendment to the legislation.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Minister will be aware that my noble Friend Baroness Miller of Hendon, on behalf of the Conservative Opposition, supported this thoroughly sensible Bill in the other place, and I am glad that the Opposition are doing so today. Will the Minister reflect on the point that I made in moving an amendment to the National Minimum Wage Bill in 1998 that, when employees are deprived by cowboy or skinflint employers of their legitimate entitlement to be paid the minimum wage, and are obliged subsequently to take steps to recover it, a powerful moral case exists for them to be paid interest on top of the wage that they should have received?

Alan Johnson: The hon. Gentleman was a veteran of the National Minimum Wage Bill. As I recall, his mum advised him to support it; he ignored her advice, but now wishes that he had not. He raises an interesting point, on which, although it is not the specific focus of this legislation, I will reflect.

I was explaining why the situation whereby enforcement officers are not entitled to claim in respect of former workers is unsatisfactory. I noted that the worker may need a reference from their former employer or believe that their chances of success against the employer are limited. That is why we believe that former workers should enjoy the protection of Revenue officers—or DEFRA officers, if the agricultural minimum wage is at issue—in the same way as current workers.

It could also be argued—this is a very important point—that if we do not amend the Bill in this way today, we would create an incentive for unscrupulous employers to dismiss workers as soon as they knew that they were being investigated to escape the arrears of minimum wage payments. That would obviously be undesirable.

The second reason for restoring the previous position is that former workers tend to be much more willing to complain to the minimum wage helplines, which then kick-start the enforcement system. Current workers tend not to complain, for obvious reasons. When our officers follow up the complaints of former workers, they often discover that the minimum wage is being withheld not only from former workers but from current workers. We must not fall into a position where former workers think that we can do nothing for them and therefore stop making complaints. Such complaints can lead to benefit for everyone.

I hope that I have explained clearly why the Bill is needed. This is not a party political Bill and—as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said—it enjoyed support from both sides in another place. It is a small but important Bill that deals with complex issues that I will briefly summarise.

The Bill proposes to insert a new subsection (2A) after section 19(2) of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. According to the decision of the Employment Appeal Tribunal, the existing subsections (1) and (2) of section 19 allow an enforcement officer to issue a notice only in respect of current and future pay periods or in respect of current, future and past pay periods together. The proposed subsection (2A) allows an enforcement officer to issue a notice on an employer to require him to pay minimum wage arrears to a worker or workers who have, at any time, qualified for the minimum wage. The notice will not have to cover future pay periods, so, if required, officers will be able to issue notices that cover minimum wage arrears for former workers. The proposed subsection will restore the position that the Government believed existed before the recent tribunal ruling.

Subsection (2A) has been drafted deliberately to allow enforcement officers to issue notices in respect of pay reference periods that ended before or after this Bill comes into force. I will say a few words about why that has been done. As matters stand, our officers have not been able to issue any notices on behalf of former workers since August 2002. That was a result of the Bebb Travel Employment Appeal Tribunal decision. Some workers may have taken independent action against their employers, but, although we do not have precise figures, I suspect that many will not have. Unless we allow officers to issue notices covering pay periods before the Bill comes into force, we will not be able to recover, on behalf of former workers, minimum wage arrears that might have arisen in the past.

The vital point to stress is that subsection (2A) will not change anyone's existing entitlement to the minimum wage but merely create a new means of enforcing existing rights to help former workers to recover their proper entitlement. We have approached the Attorney-General on this point and he has advised us that he is content for the subsection to apply in that way.

The proposed subsection (2B) will limit the period that an enforcement notice may cover. Any period that is

"more than 6 years before the date on which the notice is served"

will not be covered. We expect few cases to go back for more than three years. That is because the minimum wage regulations require employers to keep pay records for only three years. We therefore expect it to be difficult for the Inland Revenue to pursue cases that go back further, unless there is no dispute about the hours worked, or the worker holds clear evidence, such as payslips.

Mr. Bercow: I understand the rationale behind proposed subsection (2B), but may I again ask the Minister about underpayment? He offered a bird's-eye view of underpayment, but will he help us further by telling us what proportion of the total amount of underpayment, or of the total number of underpayment cases, is represented by existing employees—who may have been given reassurances about their current and future pay entitlements, but not yet have been reimbursed for their previous entitlement? In other words, what is the extent of past underpayment for existing employees?

Alan Johnson: If I understand the hon. Gentleman correctly, he is asking about employees who have not left their employer, and is wondering how many of them are claiming arrears, in relation to the number of previous employees who are claiming arrears.

Mr. Bercow *indicated assent.*

Alan Johnson: I do not have precise figures. Of cases that are reported to the Revenue and DEFRA for action by our enforcement officers, we understand that the majority, perhaps the vast majority, are from previous employees—that is, employees who have left the work place. For various reasons, previous employees feel safer and more relaxed in pursuing claims. As I said earlier, when such claims are pursued, we often find that existing employees are not being paid the minimum wage. That is an important reason for introducing this Bill.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): If the changes proposed in the Bill are accepted, enforcement officers will be able to pursue the past claims of individual employees. Would employees who had left employment still be able to pursue their claims through an industrial tribunal, or would the three-month period kick in, which would mean that they would have to use enforcement officers?

Alan Johnson: My hon. Friend asks an important question. Since August 2002, when the Bebb Travel Employment Appeal Tribunal decision prevented enforcement officers from acting on behalf of former employees, those former employees have still been able to pursue their cases themselves. The three-month rule is very interesting. The reason why most enforcement orders go through the county courts—where the six-year limit that I mentioned earlier already applies—is that they are not governed by the three-month rule. That is why the vast majority of enforcement cases and of individuals pursuing cases on their own behalf go to a county court rather than an employment tribunal. The number of cases going to employment tribunals is tiny compared with the thousands of cases that enforcement officers take through the county courts.

Mr. Donohoe: What will happen in Scotland, where we do not have county courts? Would cases go to the sheriff courts?

Alan Johnson: I am not an expert on the Scottish legal system, but cases would go to whatever the equivalent of the county court is.

Proposed subsection (2B) is very important. I was explaining that we expect few cases to go back further than three years, primarily because the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 requires employers to keep records for only three years. In addition, the average minimum wage case goes back less than a year, and the Limitation Act 1980 means that the vast majority of cases that go through the county courts can go back only six years. Enforcement officers can also take cases to employment tribunals. Although the tribunals could allow enforcement officers to claim for underpayments of the minimum wage going back more than six years, that jurisdiction is rarely used. That is because—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) suggested—claims in employment tribunals must be made three months from the date of the last underpayment of the national minimum wage.

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): Is the Minister aware that the Limitation Act 1980 does not apply in Scotland? Has the Minister had discussions with Scottish Executive Ministers about that potential inconsistency? Our general prescriptive period for civil recovery is five years.

Alan Johnson: I have indeed had discussions with Scottish Executive Ministers and I will come to that when I talk about agricultural wages. I did not have an answer to the question about county courts and their Scottish equivalents, but I will do by the time I reply to this debate.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a pleasure to see the nationalists turn up for a debate on the minimum wage? When the previous legislation went through the House, they could not be bothered to get out of their beds.

Alan Johnson: I shall skate gently over that intervention.

On the six-year limitation, let me stress that we do not propose to limit the existing rights held by individual workers, who can currently take cases that go back more than six years to tribunals. That point is at present irrelevant to the application of the national minimum wage, which was introduced only in April 1999, so six years of arrears have not been built up anywhere. We are not interfering with that individual right of employees. To do so would put workers claiming in respect of underpayments of the minimum wage in a worse position than workers claiming in respect of other contractual underpayments.

[Alan Johnson]

The Government believe that the proposed new subsection (2B) will bring clarity to the situation and ensure that the rights of both the worker and the employer are respected. The subsection was introduced following helpful debate in the other place.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): On the rights of workers, does my hon. Friend accept that one of the most difficult provisions of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 to enforce for workers in the service industry relates to the difficulty of obtaining a true valuation of the wage given them from the tips of customers who, like me and my hon. Friend, are generous tippers? Those tips are intended to go into the workers' pockets, but how much is considered to contribute to the minimum wage? How would an enforcement officer settle disputes about the rights of the worker and the rights of the employer?

Alan Johnson: I have never been a generous tipper, but I was generously tipped as a postman at Christmas. I give due thanks to my previous customers.

The Low Pay Commission has considered this point. The national minimum wage legislation says that tips that are paid in wages from a pool that is intended for all the employees and that go through the proper channels of insurance and so on should be taken into account for the national minimum wage. Individual tips given to a waiter, postman or postwoman are not to be taken into account. The commission keeps such important but esoteric and sensitive questions under constant review, and we expect to receive advice on whether the system is working.

As I was saying, we believe that proposed subsection (2B) will bring clarity to the situation. It was introduced following helpful debate in the other place and follows the thrust of an Opposition amendment that the Government were happy to accept.

Clause 2 provides for the Bill to extend to Northern Ireland as well as to the remainder of the United Kingdom. That is the same arrangement as for the 1998 Act. The clause also deals with the enforcement of the agricultural minimum wage in Scotland. Agriculture is a devolved matter in Scotland and Northern Ireland and the agricultural minimum wage has been in place throughout the United Kingdom for more than half a century. Schedule 2 of the 1998 Act made a number of amendments to the Agricultural Wages (Scotland) Act 1949 to incorporate some of the provisions of the national minimum wage into the agricultural minimum wage.

The Scottish Executive have decided that they intend to lay independent, parallel legislation in the Edinburgh Parliament that is similar to the Bill but that covers just Scottish agriculture. The relevant subsection ensures that the provisions of this Bill will not be carried across into the Agricultural Wages (Scotland) Act 1949. For the sake of total clarity, let me say that this does not affect the existing structure of the national minimum wage or agricultural wages legislation.

I shall say a few brief words about Northern Ireland. Although agriculture is also a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, the House will be aware that the Stormont Assembly is temporarily suspended. My Department has confirmed with the Northern Ireland Office that it is content for the Bill to cover agriculture in Northern Ireland.

The Bill will not concern or trouble the vast majority of employers who are already paying the minimum wage. The only people who will be affected by it are the minority of bad employers who do not pay the minimum wage. I feel that it is right and proper that all workers—whether they are current or former workers—should enjoy the protection of our enforcement officers. I commend the Bill to the House.

1.54 pm

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for that comprehensive and clear explanation of the Bill. Although it is a small Bill, parts of it are quite complicated. As he clearly explained, the Bill will effectively overturn the Employment Appeal Tribunal decision in the case of the Inland Revenue *v.* Bebb Travel plc. It will restore the position to what business, the unions and Parliament believed it to be. The Bill will allow employees or enforcement officers to claim for past wages. We obviously support the Bill, which has the backing of the CBI, the TUC and most business organisations.

I have a number of questions and points to put to the Minister. I refer to the retrospective nature of the Bill, about which there was much debate in the other place. As he explained, under the main 1998 Act, employers can take action on their own account or—this is the more likely route—action is taken on their behalf by departmental enforcement officers from the Inland Revenue or DEFRA. Civil legal action can be pursued in the county courts or in the employment tribunals, using the powers in the Employment Rights Act 1996.

In practice, virtually all the cases so far have been brought in the county courts, largely because cases in the employment tribunals must be brought within three months of the last underpayment. In the case of the former, the six-year statutory limitation applies but, in the case of the latter, cases could, in theory, have been taken in respect of underpayments going back more than six years. That was the position until my noble Friend Baroness Miller of Hendon tabled an amendment to introduce a six-year time limit for both categories of court. I am pleased that the Minister in the other place tabled a Government amendment restricting the work of Government enforcement officers to a six-year limit.

In the light of the Government's acceptance of the broad thrust of our amendment in the other place, my next remarks may sound a little churlish. However, as the Minister in the other place pointed out, companies are required to keep records for only three years. Bearing that in mind, should we not be thinking in terms of an overall three-year limit? After all, what would happen if a company does not keep records for more than three years—it has no legal obligation to do so—and, as a consequence, vital information is destroyed? For the sake of argument, let us suppose that the employee who is claiming underpaid wages has kept pay slips and other information. It is easy to envisage a situation in which the company—probably a small

business—is seriously disadvantaged and is brought to court. It might have a strong case, but might be unable to produce the documentary evidence because it has quite legally been thrown away.

Will the Minister comment on whether he thinks that there is a case for having an overall limit of three years? Perhaps we can return to this issue in Committee, especially in the light of the fact that—Lord Sainsbury made much of this in the other place—companies do not have to keep records for more than three years. That may surprise some Members; it certainly surprised me when I first took this particular brief.

Mr. Tynan: If the employee could produce documentary proof such as a wage slip that showed that he had been paid below the minimum wage, would the hon. Gentleman still consider having a limit of three years instead of allowing it to remain at six?

Mr. Bellingham: We should certainly discuss this point in detail in Committee. I think that I am right in saying—the Minister might clarify this—that the Government amendment tabled in the House of Lords does not restrict the right of the individual employee to go back as far as he likes for cases going to the Employment Appeal Tribunal. The six-year limit applies to Government enforcement officers. I merely flag that up as an anomaly that may lead to conflict, particularly in the small firms sector. We must keep an eye on that—the Opposition are very concerned in deed that we should not overregulate that sector. However, we obviously support the Bill and the minimum wage.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend accept that our wise support for the Bill will necessarily entail a future rise in employers' costs, for the simple reason that the logic of a minimum wage is that it will be periodically and affordably increased?

Mr. Bellingham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. We have made it clear that we support the minimum wage in principle, and shall go into the next election campaigning in favour of it. If we return to power, we will look carefully at the levels recommended by the Low Pay Commission and, above all, at the burdens on business. My hon. Friend is right, as our priority in government will be to look at the many other burdens that the present Government have put on business which need to be removed quickly.

Mr. Connarty: Could the hon. Gentleman turn his fine mind to the point about records that I made to the Minister? There is a dispute in the service sector about whether someone should give a tip to the person serving them or to the management. How do we reconcile the enforcement process with the constant barrage of complaints that money given to people who are serving ends up as part of their minimum wage, and does not go directly into their pocket?

Mr. Bellingham: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. When we give a tip to someone, whether a taxi driver or a helpful waiter in a restaurant, we expect it to go to the employee. Even if it does not go straight into that person's pocket, we expect it be pooled and given to them later, with no consequences whatever for the minimum wage. If employers are abusing that practice, the Inland Revenue or other enforcement officers may like to look into that. Perhaps the Minister could comment on the problem when he makes his winding-up speech at the end of this short debate.

Baroness Miller moved, then withdrew, an amendment in the other place that would have brought the Bill into effect immediately, not in two months' time. Lord McIntosh, like the Minister, confirmed that the Inland Revenue believes that well over 250 cases involving former employees are currently on hold. It is only fair that those cases are dealt with as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent. Two months may not seem long to wait, and Lord McIntosh made it clear that the two-month delay will not affect entitlement, but many low-paid employees have been deprived of their rightful wages. Their cases are outstanding, mainly in the county courts, but some in the Employment Appeal Tribunal. Surely, those cases should be heard immediately, not after a two-month wait.

We have had a look at what has happened to other measures. The Minister may or may not be aware that quite a few Bills are enforced immediately. The Northern Ireland (Elections) Act 1998 was enforced immediately, as was the Education Act 2002, the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, the Armed Forces Act 2000, and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Furthermore, an investigation was carried out in 1979—I know that that is some time ago and that Government practice has changed—by a working party from the Statute Law Society which looked at 105 Acts passed between 1 January 1978 and April 1979, a period of 14 months, to ascertain when they came into force. It found that 41 Acts came into effect on the exact date on which they were passed; 12 Acts came into force on a date specified in the Act; and 14 came into force on the expiry of a two-month period.

As I pointed out, that investigation was conducted a fair while ago, but I do not believe that there has been a recent appraisal of enforcement. I cannot understand the argument by the Department of Trade and Industry that there must be pressing reasons for a Bill to be passed and enforced immediately. The Attorney-General has apparently advised that there are no pressing reasons for the Bill to be enforced immediately, so two months can elapse. We are going to a lot of effort to pass this small Bill, and a lot of people are waiting for their due entitlement in wages. We should therefore get rid of that two-month delay—as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent, those cases should be dealt with. The less time that is lost, the better.

In an earlier intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made a point about underpayment. People have been underpaid and deprived of something that is their legal right. I agree with my hon. Friend—there is a strong case on the payment of interest, which the Government could consider. The Minister seemed to show approval when the suggestion was made. Surprisingly, at no stage in the debate on the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 was there any amendment about or discussion of interest being paid.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend's sense of equity and fairness never deserts him. On a point of fact, may I emphasise that such an amendment was tabled. I spoke to it shortly after 5 o'clock one morning.

Mr. Bellingham: I humbly accept my hon. Friend's correction. I read in detail the debate on the 1998 Act, but I must have missed that amendment. I apologise to my hon. Friend, who has just made a bid to serve as a Committee member. He will have ample opportunity in Committee to table another amendment, which I very much hope will succeed. Perhaps the Minister will comment on the payment of interest when he winds up.

The Government made an appeal against the Bebb decision. The Bill has been introduced to obviate the effect of the tribunal's decision, but will the Government pursue their appeal in any event? If so, what is the logic behind that? There was mention of such a course of action in another place, but no satisfactory explanation was given. The Bill will obviously cost a certain amount of public money. We hope that the Bebb case is a unique one-off. The parliamentary draftsman may have examined the 1998 Act with enormous expertise and in great deal, and the relevant parts of the measure were debated here and in another place. However, debate in the Commons was sometimes curtailed, although not as much as debate on Bills is now curtailed, by a timetable motion. I very much hope that the drafting mistake was not the result of lack of scrutiny.

The 1998 Act was controversial when it was first introduced, but far too often the Government impose a timetable motion on Bills that are not necessarily controversial. In the previous Session, I served on the Committee that considered the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which contains about 120 sections, the overwhelming majority of which are non-controversial. However, a timetable motion was imposed, so about 50 sections were not debated in the House. Much of the measure went to the other place undebated. That is an intolerable and wretched state of affairs. Perhaps a small lesson can be learned. Although the Bebb decision may not have been the result of poor scrutiny in either House but of unfortunate drafting, if more time had been spent going through the 1998 Act section by section and looking at every detail, perhaps such an omission would have come to light.

Perhaps we should examine the drafting in this and other Bills. For example, the Minister and I know what clause 2(4) means, and he has tried to explain it, but there may be other hon. Members who do not know what it means. It states:

"But, notwithstanding section 20(2) of the Interpretation Act 1978 (c. 30) (construction of references to other enactments), the reference in section 1 to section 19 of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 (c. 39) shall be taken not to include a reference to that section as applied by section 3A of the Agricultural Wages (Scotland) Act 1949 (c. 30)."

The Minister explained succinctly that the amendment made to the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 by clause 1 is not to have effect in the application of section 19 of that Act in relation to the agricultural minimum wage in Scotland. That is simple. Why must the drafting be so convoluted? Why is the clause so complicated, when the guidance in the explanatory notes makes the matter so simple? If we used common sense a little more, we might avoid some of the mistakes that were made in the 1998 Act.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that such drafting recalls the wisdom of Churchill's legendary and memorable statement:

"This is the sort of English up with which I will not put"?

Mr. Bellingham: I agree with my hon. Friend. Anyone who doubts that should get a copy of the Bill and read and re-read clause 2(4) until they understand it. It is extremely convoluted and long-winded.

In conclusion, we support the mini-Bill. We hope that Bebb was a one-off error, but if any Government have to introduce a Bill to correct a drafting error, that means, by definition, that there has been a failure. Such a Bill is not inexpensive. It costs public money, and any unnecessary expenditure of public money is painful, so let us hope that lessons have been learned. I hope that the Minister will respond to the few questions that I put to him.

2.12 pm

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): The Minister and the research paper have both described the purpose of the Bill: to close the loophole that exists. That is to be welcomed. If we do not do so, it will encourage abuse by bad employers. Most fair-minded people, both in and out of Parliament, would agree that the loophole must be closed.

I believe that the Employment Appeal Tribunal made the wrong decision. The National Minimum Wage Act 1998 never intended to give the tribunal the opportunity to make such a decision. In the case of Inland Revenue *v.* Bebb Travel plc, I believe that the decision of the EAT breaks the spirit and intention of the 1998 Act. It sticks in my throat to say so, having completed a tax return for the end of January, but on this occasion the Inland Revenue got it exactly right.

The Act authorises enforcement orders for employees who have left employment. There is no room for debate or discussion of that; it was the purpose and intention of the legislation. The Employment Appeal Tribunal confuses individuals with employers, and that confusion creates tremendous uncertainty in the labour market. The national minimum wage legislation was derided by many in the House, who predicted that it would wreck jobs all over the country and create economic havoc, but it has worked well, as the Minister said in his opening remarks. However, it demands compliance and protection 365 days a year and 24 hours a day. It cannot be used part-time, as the Employment Appeal Tribunal would lead one to conclude.

Employers who are using the loophole are breaching the minimum wage in a way that no one could have foreseen and no one would support. The Act was framed to assist employees, particularly through the use of enforcement officers. That was an important part of the legislation.

Employment law is littered with cases of retrospective payment in terms of wages, holidays and bonuses. People leave their employment and have a case for the payment of wages, bonus, holiday pay or even additional holidays. That is bread-and-butter fare for

personnel managers throughout the country. It happens daily and such cases are resolved retrospectively. Delays often occur because of failure to agree terms and conditions on a specific date—the anniversary date for employers and employees. That is not unusual, nationally or locally. The anniversary date drifts on for days, weeks and months. In that period, people might decide to leave their employment, but that does not deny them the right to make a claim for the pay increase that might be agreed after they have left, the holidays that might change after they have left, or holiday pay after they have left.

John Robertson: My hon. Friend is very knowledgeable on the subject, which we have looked into in the Scottish Affairs Committee. Does he agree that the case under discussion may be only the tip of the iceberg? It is not unusual for people to leave employment when they are not being paid what they should be paid, but they are too frightened to come forward and allow themselves to be used to test legislation or to help to change the law. The Bill is important for low-paid people and the protection that they need. It is up to us to make sure that it goes forward.

Mr. Lyons: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. He and other colleagues on the Scottish Affairs Committee have looked extensively at compliance, particularly for low-paid workers. I welcome that work and hope it continues.

As I said, delays beyond anniversary dates is normal fare for trade unions and employers, but it is resolved without difficulty in hundreds of agreements across the UK. Enforcement officers are important for the reason that my hon. Friend suggests. There is fear and intimidation, and enforcement officers are an alternative way of trying to resolve a grievance independently of the employee concerned. I would welcome an increase in enforcement officers.

As the Minister mentioned, the employee can take a minimum wage case to an employment tribunal or to the county court, and of course enforcement officers can do the same thing. The figures prove conclusively how important enforcement officers, the tribunals and the county courts are: since 1999, £9 million has been raised from failure to pay the minimum wage. That is a substantial sum, particularly for low-paid workers. It means an awful lot to them.

Tony Cunningham (Workington): Would you agree, however, that many low-paid workers are not in trade unions, and find it extremely difficult to put a case together and go to the tribunal? Would you not—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not the first this afternoon to transgress with regard to the form of address. He should remember by now that he should refer to his hon. Friend in the third person.

Tony Cunningham: My apologies, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Would not my hon. Friend tell people in that situation that the best way to protect themselves is to join a trade union?

Mr. Lyons: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I always argue that that is the best way for people to ensure the best terms and conditions for themselves and ensure compliance by their employers with the minimum wage.

I said earlier that the Employment Appeal Tribunal had made a poor decision. I still feel that, having read the decision a number of times. I think that the Government felt that the tribunal had not properly interpreted the legislation. In their evidence to the Low Pay Commission, the Government said:

"The Government believes that Ministers clearly intended, when introducing the Act, that compliance officers should be able to pursue cases involving workers who are no longer employed by the employer in question. We are determined to help low paid workers and intend to restore the position as soon as possible, so that the Revenue and Agricultural minimum wage compliance officers can once more pursue these cases fully."

That is an absolutely correct approach to compliance with the national minimum wage.

In another place my noble Friend Lord Sainsbury said:

"First, former workers are entitled to the minimum wage in just the same way as current ones. If someone was not paid the minimum wage for, say, some work they did in the summer, then we believe that the employer should be required to make good the shortfall, whether the person is still in their employment or not."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 December 2002; Vol. 642, c. 152.]

Other hon. Members have referred to the fact that in another place Lord Razzall, the Liberal Democrat, and Baroness Miller of Hendon fully supported the changes to the legislation that would guarantee much more protection to employees. That is very important.

Another point that has been raised is that some workers fear raising the issue of failure to pay the minimum wage, or seem to be in difficulty about how best to raise it. If they are not in a trade union or do not feel comfortable about going to an employment tribunal, they often finish up at a citizens advice bureau trying to explain their circumstances. I am sure that they always receive assistance on how to pursue the matter.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): My hon. Friend is on an extremely important point. He may have had the same experience with some of his constituents as I have had with some of mine, who may not wish to say anything about the national minimum wage and simply tend to look for another job where it is being paid. Not having been paid the appropriate going rate, they fall into the very category that the Bill is looking at, in that they become ex-employees.

Mr. Lyons: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The evidence proves quite clearly that people in that situation often feel that they are forced to leave a job rather than pursue the issue, as my hon. Friend described.

I should like to give the House four examples. The Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux has produced documentation on the question of the national minimum wage. It says:

"A North of Scotland CAB reports of female client who works as a cleaner. The manager is withholding the annual pay increases until October when the NMW increases. Her contract states that increases come in April of each year. The delay will mean that all employees will lose 6 months of increased pay."

[Mr. Lyons]

This is where there are problems related to the minimum wage: other actions are taken because of it as some very awkward employers try to find ways around the legislation. That is why all of us need to make sure that the legislation is tightened up in a way that makes it impossible for people—

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have been listening to his speech with interest and approval. What the hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) said was perfectly valid, but it is worth while also looking at the other side of the equation. If former employees cannot secure redress, even though of course they no longer have any reason to be anxious about the reaction of their former employer, there is obviously scant hope for existing employees seeking to secure redress for past underpayment. In that sense, there is a commonality of interest in supporting the Bill between current and past employees.

Mr. Lyons: That is a very valid point. The position clearly is that when people leave a job, the fact that they have highlighted a problem, either to the compliance people or the citizens advice bureau, may well bring in enforcement for people who are still employed by that employer. There is clear evidence that that has happened in the past. We return to a situation in which there may be a collective of workpeople unprepared or frightened to raise the issue, despite the fact that colleagues are leaving regularly, but the enforcement officers give that alternative, saying "We are here to find out what is happening on the minimum wage." No one knows who has reported the matter, and there is no pressure, hopefully, on employees for that reason. But this leads to an interesting area of work, which is—

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that there can be a problem with enforcement in that the minimum wage is not always enforced in the same way throughout the country? In some cases enforcement officers have gone to a firm for an employee and have looked only at the wages of that employee rather than of everybody in the firm. Unless it is done throughout the firm, it can have the effect of identifying the employee.

Mr. Lyons: That is an important issue that needs to be considered. Enforcement should be done across the whole range of people in the organisation concerned, rather than in specific cases. I commend the work of the citizens advice bureaux, because they are trying to assist people on a daily basis with problems related to the minimum wage and other associated difficulties.

I have another example from the Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux:

> "An East of Scotland CAB reports of a female client who received a 'new' contract of employment confirming entitlement to paid holiday leave. However, the contract also stated that her salary included 8 per cent. to cover the cost of paid leave."

So the minimum wage had a deduction of 8 per cent. to pay for paid holidays, which is nonsense and unlawful. We need to try to make sure that we cover this matter in any future legislation so that the loophole for employers to do that is closed and people are employed in a very fair way.

Here is another example:

> "A North of Scotland CAB reports of a female client employed as a cleaner paid 28p an hour above the NMW."

Hon. Members will probably think that it is good that that extra 28p is being paid, but

> "When she inquired with her employer about entitlement to holiday pay, she was told that the 28p over the NMW is paid to cover her holiday entitlement."

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have allowed the hon. Gentleman a certain amount of scope in making his speech, but the time has come to remind him of the content of the Bill. This is not a general debate about the minimum wage and other perceived defects or advantages. It is about this particular Bill, which seeks to correct a particular loophole.

Mr. Lyons: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance.

I return to the point that I started on. The loophole is there. We need to close it. Everyone will agree with that. I give my hon. Friend the Minister my full support.

2.2 pm

Mr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I wish to add to the general air of consensus and support for the Bill, which, as has already been noted, has the support of the Confederation of British Industry as well as the Trades Union Congress and all three parties in the House. Indeed, it was supported in the other place by my colleague, Lord Razzall.

Although you have just reminded us, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this is not a general debate on the minimum wage, it is probably fair to respond to the Minister's introductory comments, in which he rightly and fairly observed that the minimum wage legislation has been a success story. One of the reasons for that is that employers as well as employees have bought into it and accepted it. That is, at least in part, because of the way in which the system has operated. Effectively, we have had a relatively successful, growing economy and a tightening labour market. The minimum wage has increased the supply of workers because a lot of people at the bottom end of the pay scale now feel that it is more attractive to work than to remain on benefits. Employers have benefited from the system because there is more labour, workers have benefited because they are better paid and the Government have benefited because there are fewer benefit payments. Thus a triple gain has been made as a result of the way in which the minimum wage system has operated.

What has yet to be demonstrated is that that system works equally well when there is a downturn in the economy. There may be questions about the effect of such a downturn on the demand for labour. Whether the system works well in those circumstances will partly depend on whether the generally successful system of setting the minimum wage at an economically sensible level continues. The Low Pay Commission's determination of that level in accordance with economic conditions seems to be a key element in the formula.

The other element in the formula that has contributed to the system's success is the enforcement mechanism, which is what we are discussing today. It has not been emphasised enough that an important aspect of the current enforcement mechanism is that it functions to a very large extent on a voluntary basis. It is because employers have accepted the minimum wage and, by and large, enforced it without pressure and extensive form filling and bureaucracy that the system is working well. An admirable balance has been struck between an effective enforcement mechanism and one that is not as enormously intrusive and bureaucratic as those associated with other instruments, such as the working time directive. Employers are required, by and large, to enforce the system themselves, but that system gives individual workers the opportunity to take action, backed by enforcement officers. That strikes me as exactly the right balance.

The Conservative spokesman mentioned the question that I now want to ask: why are we back here with this legislation? I was not involved in discussion of the original legislation, but it seems obvious with hindsight that somebody should have asked about retrospective payment and questioned why it was not covered. I am not pointing fingers at anybody. Clearly, nobody in the House of Commons or the other place picked up on the problem, nor did Government draftsmen and administrators, but I am still baffled about why the provision slipped through. It may have done so because of a lack of scrutiny, as the Conservative spokesman suggested. There may also have been a particularly quirky ruling by a judge. If that is the case, it might have been more appropriate to have an appeal process than to introduce fresh legislation.

Mr. Bellingham: As I understand it, the old law covered future and present underpayment; it also covered past underpayment if it was combined with those two things. According to the tribunal, it was underpayment in the past only that was not included.

Dr. Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, but it seems odd that we are returning to the Chamber to debate the matter, whatever the reason.

Annabelle Ewing: As I understand it, an appeal is pending, as the Inland Revenue is appealing against the Employment Appeal Tribunal's decision.

Dr. Cable: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, which raises the question whether, if the Government win the appeal, the amendment introduced by the Bill will be superfluous or whether it introduces a new element into the process.

I want to speak only for a few minutes, so I shall return to the issue of substance and consider why the process of retrospective payment is important. Many of the arguments have already been covered. It is clearly unjust that people should not be able to claim back payment of the minimum wage if they have left the employer in question, and especially if they were dismissed. The threat of dismissal on pursuing rights to the minimum wage is especially important and it is right that people should have the entitlement in that regard. I want also to reinforce the other point that has been made: many people will be much bolder in pursuing a claim once they have left the employer and the threat of dismissal is no longer hanging over them. There are good reasons why the retrospective issue must be addressed.

It has not been mentioned that large sums may be involved. There is a lot of difference between a current minimum wage problem, which will involve a few pounds a week, and three years of underpayment, which may involve several thousand pounds. In those circumstances, it is much more likely that a bad employer will resist and force the process to a tribunal, and that an enforcement officer will have to be engaged. There are very good reasons why there should be proper protection with regard to retrospective payment.

My final point relates to limitations, which were raised in another place by Baroness Miller. The Government have said—I think that I understood the argument correctly—that the problem is to some extent academic, as after three years there is no longer a requirement to collect data. Why should there be a limit? Presumably, the legislation will still be here in 10 years. There may be some hard cases in which people were working in very malign circumstances with oppressive employers who systematically underpaid them for very long periods. There may be good records to demonstrate what has happened in such cases. Why should people who have suffered such enormous losses find that they have run out of time for arbitrary reasons? If they can demonstrate their case, it will not matter whether three, six, nine or 10 years are involved.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. Does he accept, however, that there is a powerful case for amending the Bill to provide for mandatory interest charges on underpayments, given that that would be widely regarded as right in itself and that many people who have been maltreated through illegal underpayment for long periods will thereby have fallen into indebtedness?

Dr. Cable: That is a very good point. I would have made it slightly differently, but I agree that, after long periods of underpayment, the real value of people's payment is lost because of inflation—assuming that inflation is present. In any event, there should be some compensation for such loss, and interest payments seem a sensible and fair way of dealing with the issue.

I want to question why there is a need for a formal limit on the period involved and why enforcement officers cannot come forward in the small number of cases that will arise and support a claimant in exceptional circumstances involving a significant backlog of arrears, perhaps in a decade's time. That is a small technical point that the Minister may not have considered.

In broad terms, I am glad to see that there is support for the Bill in all parts of the House. The fact that we all now support the principle of the minimum wage is remarkable in itself, given the controversy about it five or 10 years ago. Given that we all support the change that the Bill makes, perhaps the House can proceed to other business fairly speedily.

2.37 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Only a few hours ago, I received a phone call from the Low Pay Unit—an organisation for which I worked for 18 years—asking whether I would like to collect some of my personal possessions from it, as it is sadly having to wind up its operation this week. It is a sad irony that we are discussing a measure such as the Bill on the very day when the organisation that had kept such issues in the forefront of our attention for so many years is sadly no longer with us.

I also welcome the fact that we are discussing the Bill today. Like the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I was privileged to be involved in seeing the original minimum wage legislation through Parliament. We tried to anticipate and close every possible loophole, but we clearly failed to do so in respect of this Bill. I am pleased that Opposition Members are with us on the Bill, because I remember sitting long hours through the night while the minimum wage itself was being opposed.

The particular loophole in question is important because it can render enforcement of the national minimum wage almost completely ineffective. This small Bill will help to bring the minimum wage back to life. It is important because it gives back to enforcement officers the power to enforce payment of arrears of underpaid wages. As the Minister and other hon. Members have pointed out, trade unions may still be able to pursue payment of arrears on behalf of their members, but many of the lowest paid are not members of trade unions. They are often in a vulnerable position and work in small establishments in isolated circumstances.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): One of the loopholes that bad employers—small employers—exploit is that they are not required to recognise trade unions if they have only 12 employees. Does my hon. Friend agree that a change in that legislation could be helpful?

Mr. Pond: That is a major problem. I would not agree with bracketing bad employers and small employers together, however, because many small employers are very good employers. We must encourage as far as possible the employers—the firms—to be fully involved in the negotiation process at a collective level, and ensure that people working in small firms feel that it is worth their while to become members of trade unions. That is why people in those circumstances will rely on enforcement officers to make sure that they get their entitlements under the law. That is not necessarily something that they can pursue through trade unions, although I pay tribute to organisations such as the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux for advising people in those circumstances.

The Bill is also important because, as the Minister pointed out, claims for underpayment are often made only after employment has come to an end. Without the Bill, there would be a real incentive for employers to dismiss staff as soon as they became aware of an investigation.

It has been pleasing to hear Conservative Members supporting the Bill. I detected a certain anxiety on their part to ensure that people understood that they now really are in favour of a national minimum wage. Indeed, the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) said that they would campaign for it at the next election. I pay tribute to them for such a dramatic conversion on the Damascene bypass.

Mr. Bercow: I understand the hon. Gentleman's surprise at the change of heart that has taken place among Members on the Conservative Benches. I put it to him that I do not deny that I have changed my mind on the issue, as I have manifestly done so. I would simply argue, however, that there is no shame in having previously made a mistake, only in failing to acknowledge the possibility that one may have done so.

Mr. Pond: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's admission of a previous mistake. He has been very honest in his position—he has not pretended that there was not a period when he completely opposed the national minimum wage, nor that he did not support a previous Government who abolished a minimum wage system that had existed from 1909 until the mid-1990s. In responding to the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk, he referred to the words of Winston Churchill, so perhaps I may remind the House that Winston Churchill said that without the minimum wage

"the good employer is undercut by the bad, and the bad employer is undercut by the worst".—[*Official Report*, 28 April 1909; Vol. IV, c. 388.]

That is why it is important that the Bill is supported not only by Members on both sides of the House, but by the TUC and the CBI. Otherwise, we would have a situation whereby the good employer was also undercut by the Employment Appeal Tribunal. The Bill will ensure that we provide protection not only for the most vulnerable workers, but against undercutting and unfair competition for the great majority of firms, large and small, who pay the minimum wage and recognise that decent conditions of employment make good business sense and improve competitiveness and efficiency. I welcome and applaud this small Bill.

2.43 pm

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): I rise to add the support of the Scottish National party to this important Bill. Hon. Members will be aware of the SNP's long-standing commitment to the principle of a minimum wage as the mark of a civilised society. It is regrettable, however, that the Government have not taken this opportunity to end the age discrimination that is inherent in the minimum wage legislation. We in the SNP believe that there should be a rate for the job, regardless of age. I believe that that view is also expressed forcefully by the TUC and the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

We support the aim of the Bill, which is to deal with an anomaly that has arisen in respect of enforcement notices. That anomaly became clear following last summer's ruling by the Employment Appeal Tribunal, and I understand that the Inland Revenue is appealing the decision. Further to the decision, law enforcement notices may be issued in relation to past periods where the worker is no longer employed. I do not believe that that was the intention of the National Minimum Wage

Act 1998—indeed, it would have made a mockery of it had that been the case. It would have excluded affected workers from the support system of the enforcement officers, which is an innovative approach that has been much welcomed by many individuals who have found themselves in the invidious position of not having been paid a proper wage for their work.

On retrospection, I have already asked the Minister to clarify the position in Scotland. From my reading this morning, it seems to me that the Limitation Act 1980 does not apply in Scotland. If the retrospective approach, which we support, is based on a six-year period to reflect the position in English law, has account been taken of the position in Scots law whereby the general prescriptive period is five years for civil recovery? We do not want the Bill to create a further loophole by not reflecting the reality of the situation under Scots law.

On the exclusion of the agricultural minimum wage regime from the scope of the Bill, I am aware that the Scottish Executive decided against seeking a Sewel motion, which is unprecedented since the inception of the Scottish Parliament. That is a welcome move, if a bit late in the day. Instead, legislation is to be introduced in parallel in the Scottish Parliament. I welcome that development.

I shall keep my comments brief because hon. Members have said much today that we can all sign up to and support. The Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru support the Bill, which will enhance the protection available to workers and close a loophole that was never intended. We congratulate the Government on quickly introducing a Bill to deal with the matter and to close the loophole, but we regret that they have not taken this opportunity to end the age discrimination that is inherent in the minimum wage legislation.

2.47 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): This amendment to the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 is welcome. It is sad that any company could force the Government to introduce legislation by underpaying 25 workers to the tune of £37,000. That shows how mean people can be. We can talk about big employers as opposed to small employers, but in my view many employers like low-wage employees because they want to cut their wage bill, and if they can cut it below the national minimum wage, they will.

The Bill amends section 19 of the 1998 Act, which empowers the officer to serve a notice on any employer who has not paid a worker at a rate that is at least equal to the national minimum wage. The Bill will allow the officer to serve a notice in retrospect regarding people who have left employment. I have read that £9,412,513 has been gained in actions by persons under the tribunals established by the 1998 Act. Can the Minister tell me how many of them were in the category to which I have been referring for some time in questions and in debates in my parliamentary group? I refer to the 4 million people who work in the service industry and have to prove under the 1998 Act that they receive their tips personally and that those tips are not given to their employer. I conducted research and the Minister said that there were references to the Low Pay Commission. However, when people give a tip through a credit card, an enforcement officer would find it difficult to know whether they intended it to go to the individual who had served them or to the employer to distribute among all the employees, and thereby be included as part of the minimum wage.

Even if someone gives a tip in cash in a place that has a kitty—it has a special name in the 1998 Act—the money can be distributed among all the employees and taken into account as part of their minimum wage. If the people who gave the tip wanted it to go to the individual who served them, but it was taken into account as part of the minimum wage, how would the enforcement officer make a judgment? How does he judge, under section 20 onwards in the 1998 Act, whether the employer is compliant?

I believe that the Bill covers those who leave employment because they cannot get their employer to give them a proper wage. Perhaps the employer is giving them less than the cash sum of £4.20. I spoke in the Statutory Instrument Committee that upgraded the sum to £4.20, and I wanted it increased to £5. I have continually raised cases in which a substantial tip by the customer makes up the £4.20. Surely those employees are not being paid the national minimum wage. Tips intended for an individual should be in addition to the £4.20. An opportunity to deal with that vital point has been missed. How can we enforce the rights of the 4 million people in the service industry who get tips from customers?

I welcome the Bill because it can be applied retrospectively to take on bad employers such as Bebb Travel, which did not pay money that was clearly owed and not related to tips. However, I challenge the Minister to justify the fact that enforcement officers will continue to wade through a mire of accusation and counter-accusation if it appears that a large portion of the wages that people in the service industry receive is made up of tips that customers pay them directly.

2.53 pm

Alan Johnson: With the leave of the House, I shall reply to the debate. Many technical issues are probably best left to the Committee, but I shall try to pick up some of the main points that have been made in our short debate.

First, the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) applauded the minimum wage. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) said that he sensed a move by the Conservative party towards a campaigning mode on the national minimum wage. However, the two issues that the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk raised suggest that some contradiction remains. We do not know whether we face an Opposition of Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm or the Boston strangler on the minimum wage. On the one hand, they claim that they are so keen on it and on helping low-paid workers that there is no need to delay Royal Assent for two months, but on the other, they ask why we allow people to receive arrears of more than three years. We suggest six years.

[Alan Johnson]

Six years is consistent with the Limitation Act 1980. A six-year limit already applies in county courts for arrears in overtime payments and bonuses. I shall deal with Scotland and the sheriff courts shortly. The six-year limit is therefore well established and there is no reason to change it. There is probably a better argument for asking employers to keep records on the minimum wage for longer than three years than for reducing the arrears payment to three years. Perhaps we will deal with that in Committee.

I am advised that the normal conventions, which are cleared through the Cabinet Office and the Attorney-General, provide for legislation to be introduced immediately only in the most exceptional cases. There is no problem with keeping to normal conventions on the Bill because we have deliberately ensured that, since August 2002, we keep track of every employer who has had a case reported to enforcement officers. We shall also ensure that the Bill applies retrospectively. I am pleased about the extent of consensus on it. It is a fair point that even waiting two months can be a problem for low-paid workers. However, given our efforts to ensure that we can pick up the so-called Bebb cases so that people get their money, there is no need to breach the normal conventions.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made a point about interest. The majority of cases are pursued through the county courts, and interest is paid on the debt. We are considering thousands of cases that go through county courts and only 100 to 150 a year that go through employment tribunals. The hon. Gentleman's wishes at 5 o'clock in the morning many years ago have therefore been fulfilled to some extent.

The hon. Member for North-West Norfolk made a point about wording. He said that the drafting was convoluted. I have much sympathy with that point. We used to have a campaign, which involved eminent former parliamentarians and others, on clear language in Bills. I shall shortly deal with the reasons for introducing a Bill rather than conducting an appeal. I was asked whether that was a result of poor draftsmanship, whether an error had occurred or whether we should have spotted a lacuna. Before dealing with that, I simply draw hon. Members' attention to the original wording, which was approved despite intense scrutiny in the House and in another place. It stated in clear, unambiguous language:

"An enforcement notice may also require the employer to pay to the worker within such time as may be specified in the notice the sum due to the worker under section 17—

which simply points out the difference between what the minimum wage should be and actual wages—

"in respect of the employer's previous failure to remunerate the worker at a rate at least equal to the national minimum wage."

That is clear, unambiguous, plain English. However, we now have to include a wodge of words to ensure that lawyers do not overturn our precise meaning. That is a powerful argument for the need for the convoluted wording on Scottish agriculture. We want to ensure that we are not in such a position again.

Mr. Bercow: During proceedings on the Standing Committee that considered the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, on which I served with the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Tony Baldry), for Solihull (Mr. Taylor), for Ashford (Mr. Green), for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and I subjected the measure to close and rigorous scrutiny. None of us noticed the lacuna, if it existed. The Minister does not need to beat himself over the head about that.

Alan Johnson: I shall not beat myself over the head. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions was responsible for the 1998 Act. His head is much lower and is therefore easier to beat. However, I am sure that he will not beat himself over the head, either. We do not accept that there is a lacuna or a problem with the drafting. The point is that, given that there is a possibility that we could lose the appeal—for the reasons that I gave earlier, we cannot rule that out, no matter how confident we are about the wording—and that we are talking about low-paid workers, this is very important. Incidentally, we have concentrated on ex-employees being able to claim arrears, but the Bebb Travel judgment also means that current employees who have not been paid the minimum wage can get their money now and in the future but cannot claim arrears, so both groups of workers are disqualified.

We are not prepared to take the risk of losing the appeal, then having to see whether we can get a slot in the parliamentary timetable for a Bill, then—way down the track—having to exercise the Bill. People ask why we do not withdraw the appeal. I am advised that that is because we would have to pay the costs to Bebb Travel, and we have already put a fair amount of money into this case. When it arose in August last year, we could not guarantee that we would get a Bill, or that any Bill would get a slot, so we lodged the appeal. It would also be wrong for us to withdraw the appeal because we would be prejudging the decision of Parliament, and because we might have to give lots of public money to the company that we are challenging. Those are important reasons for not withdrawing it.

Mr. Tynan: Does my hon. Friend agree that another benefit of taking the amendment through Parliament is that it will send a clear signal to bad employers that, when situations such as this arise, we are willing to deal with them?

Alan Johnson: That is the most powerful point. It is the real reason. We took the decision, almost immediately after the Bebb Travel judgment, to give out the clear message that workers should never be put in this position again. My hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons), who has long experience of these issues, said that he was puzzled by the Employment Appeal Tribunal's decision. All I can say to that is, so are we. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) talked about the Liberal Democrats' support for the Bill, but also asked why we should come back with legislation rather than an appeal. I hope that I have now covered that point. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham gave us the bad news about the Low Pay Unit. I think that my right hon.

Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) was one of its founding fathers, and he will be as dismayed as I am to hear the news of its demise.

The hon. Member for Perth (Annabelle Ewing) raised the issue about Scotland. I would like to go into more detail about that in Committee. I am advised that the sheriff courts are the equivalent to the county courts in England and Wales. The hon. Lady is right to say that the limitation in Scotland is five years. We consulted the Scottish Executive through the Scotland Office, and decided to leave the provisions as they are, which means that the legislation will provide for a limitation of six years but in Scotland it will be only five years because of the different legislation and because of the horrendous complications of trying to draft the measures differently. We have acted on the advice that we received from the Scottish Executive and the Scotland Office; we will perhaps explore the matter in greater detail in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) has been extremely assiduous in pursuing the issue of tipping, in relation to how it affects the national minimum wage. An important point that I know he will appreciate is that carrying the Bill forward today will help us to enforce arrears payments for people in the service industry who have been underpaid. In relation to the issues that he has raised, I will undertake to talk to the enforcement officers—who do a splendid job for us all round the country—on the specific issue of tipping, and I shall write to my hon. Friend about how that is being dealt with. The basis of the original legislation, as hon. Members who served on the Bill will remember, is that if tips go through the payroll, they can be counted in terms of the national minimum wage. If they do not go through the payroll, they cannot. I understand that there are abuses of that system, many of which my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr. Connarty: I am grateful to my hon. and personal Friend. I know that he is assiduous in trying to follow this up, but why do not the Government just accept that, when people give a tip to someone in the industry, they are giving it as an addition to that person's wages? That is why they give it; they give it as an extra. In France, a tip is called a pourboire, meaning "for a drink". It is an extra. Why do we insist that anyone should take that into account when they are paying a wage for the hours worked? That is wrong, and the Government should change it.

Alan Johnson: If we can separate that issue from the Bill, which I know he appreciates is narrowly focused on arrears, we can look at it. It is a bit like the issue of young workers, which has been raised by other hon. Members. We can deal with that through secondary legislation, and we have got the Low Pay Commission to look into it for us. I want to ask our enforcement officers about the specific points that my hon. Friend has raised. He has raised them before and they are very important. The original decision on tipping, as it appears in the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, was based on the fact that, in some areas of employment—restaurants, in particular—pooled tips are often paid through the payroll as part of the contract of employment. That is my understanding of the argument, although I was not on the Committee that considered that Bill. Let us address that matter separately, however, because I want to look at the specific issues that my hon. Friend raised.

Mr. Bellingham: The Minister mentioned that he would like to separate the issue of tipping from this mini-Bill, but the Bill is about enforcement. Might there be an opportunity in Committee to go back to this issue, and perhaps to table an amendment to make it illegal for employers to pool tips in a way that means they become part of the minimum wage calculation? Would it not be reasonable to consider that in Committee?

Alan Johnson: Let us look at the issue in Committee in respect of enforcement. It would be a mistake to widen the scope of the Bill, but let us deal with that in Committee.

Annabelle Ewing: I would like to go back a few sentences to the Minister's reference to a point that I raised earlier about the inherent age discrimination against young workers in the present legislation. He mentioned that the matter could be dealt with through secondary legislation. What plans do the UK Government now have to deal with this problem?

Alan Johnson: I cannot let this matter lie. I am not talking about age discrimination; I am talking about a decision taken by the House. In the experience of many other countries, introducing a national minimum wage for 16 and 17-year-olds, in particular, takes the focus away from education and harms the ability of those who leave school at that age to get work. Further experience shows that 18 to 21-year-olds who have a minimum wage, albeit set at a different level, are in a similar position. This is a crucial issue.

The reason that the implementation of the minimum wage has been so successful is that we confounded all the critics. We have a minimum wage, and 1.4 million more people in work. Had we failed to achieve that, we might perhaps have made an argument that would have gone down well as oratory at union conferences, but which could well have destroyed the principle of the minimum wage in this country, which was very reluctant to adopt it in the first place. Labour Members will remember that it was not only Conservative Members who opposed it 20 or 30 years ago; the British trade union movement did so as well. We need to remember that the idea grew roots. To answer the question put by the hon. Member for Perth, the Low Pay Commission has been asked specifically to look again at the rates for 18 to 21-year-olds, and for 16 and 17-year-olds. The Low Pay Commission is a piece of social partnership in action, and I believe that it has done a tremendous job.

I have strayed off the subject slightly, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I was provoked into doing so. I would now like to commend to the House this very positive approach to these matters. The Bill is crucial to a very vulnerable group of workers. It might not be the most important piece of business that we conduct this week, and it might not attract the most attention, but it is crucial to that group of workers and I look forward to debating the issues again in Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE (ENFORCEMENT NOTICES) BILL [*LORDS*] [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with Bills),

That for the purposes of any Act resulting from the National Minimum Wage (Enforcement Notices) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—[*Mr. Jim Murphy.*]

Question agreed to.

Northern Ireland

3.9 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Jane Kennedy): I beg to move,

That the draft Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (Amnesty Period) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 23rd January, be approved.

The order appoints 26 February 2004 as the date before which the amnesty period identified in a non-statutory decommissioning scheme must end. The amnesty period is the time during which firearms, ammunition and explosives can be decommissioned in accordance with the scheme. The amnesty provides immunity from prosecution for the offences set out in the schedule to the 1997 Act—offences that might be committed during the decommissioning process. Most such offences are possessory in nature, but others concern offences that may stem from a person's participation in decommissioning, not necessarily centred on the weapons involved but centred on the behaviour that may accompany participation, such as the withholding of information or making arrangements with terrorists.

Section 2 of the 1997 Act, as amended by the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning (Amendment) Act 2002, requires that a scheme must identify the amnesty period, and that it must end before 27 February 2003 unless the Secretary of State, by order, appoints a later day. The purpose of the order is to extend that period until midnight on 25 February next year.

In April last year, shortly after we renewed these provisions, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning reported witnessing an event in which the IRA leadership had put a varied and substantial quantity of ammunition, arms and explosive material beyond use. The Government welcomed that news because it showed that the decommissioning act during October 2001 had not been an isolated event. However, over the last year most of the news has been less encouraging. The Colombian episode continued to unfold, and paramilitary violence on the streets, consisting of both assaults and shootings, has continued unabated. The break-in at Castlereagh and the intelligence-gathering operation at Stormont further contributed to the general loss of confidence among the parties.

Unionism needs to be confident that republicanism is fully committed to peaceful and democratic means, and nationalists need to know that Unionism is genuinely committed to making the institutions work. It was against that background, that, regrettably, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) decided to suspend the Assembly.

The Government remain totally committed to the full implementation of the Belfast agreement, but my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear in his speech in Belfast last October that we had come to the fork in the road. It is time for everyone in Northern Ireland to choose the peaceful and democratic path. It is time for acts of completion. There must be an end to all paramilitary activity. If that commitment is given we can implement the rest of the agreement, including normalisation, in its entirety, and not in stages but together.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been working tirelessly with all involved to try to find a way to restore devolved government as soon as possible. Tomorrow my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach will be engaged in bilateral discussions with the parties, with a view to moving the process forward. No one believes that that will be easy: the IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Red Hand Commando have suspended contact with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. We regret that. It is not the way in which to secure progress and I urge those organisations to re-engage with General de Chastelain at the earliest opportunity: it is essential that this vital aspect of the agreement be honoured in full.

We have said many times that it is time for violence and the threat of violence to be taken out of politics for ever and for all. It is time to demonstrate that they are totally committed to peaceful and democratic means. That process has begun and, although it is currently in a difficult phase, the Government must continue to provide the legal framework necessary to make full decommissioning a reality. We will do that through this order.

The House will know of the so-called 'loyalist' feud that has claimed eight lives over recent months, and of the misery and suffering that it has inflicted on the local community. That too only serves to underline the need to make real and substantial progress towards a peaceful society in Northern Ireland where weapons no longer circulate freely. We need to see the end of the mindset that says the retention of arms provides a useful lever in negotiations. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out, that simply makes it impossible for others to engage.

What stands in the way of the fulfilment of the Belfast agreement is the threat of violence. Remove that—end the activity of paramilitary organisations completely and for good—and we can begin to rebuild the trust and confidence necessary to restore stable and inclusive institutions, so that the democratic vision of Northern Ireland that we all share can become a reality. There are even signs from within the Democratic Unionist party that in such circumstances the party would feel able to do business with Sinn Fein. That is surely a measure of the potent appeal of devolved government.

As always at these times, I want to pay tribute to General John de Chastelain and his colleagues in the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, whose persistence and dedication have been instrumental in bringing us this far. Their commitment to this process has been extraordinary and we all owe them a considerable debt of thanks.

The Prime Minister has called for acts of completion. We in Government stand ready and we are holding the door open, as the order shows. I commend it to the House.

3.17 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Let me begin by endorsing what the Minister said about General de Chastelain. I have got to know him quite well over the past year and a half, along with his two deputies—one American, the other Finnish. I formed the highest regard for them. They are men of fine professional standing, who have been prepared to give up much of their lives to contributing to the attempts to solve the often apparently intractable problems of Northern Ireland. We are all very much in their debt.

Obviously, we will not oppose the order. I cannot imagine any sane or rational person wanting to do so. We support decommissioning. It is clear that in a decommissioning process there must be provision for people to take part in that process, and to hand over weapons without immediately suffering penal consequences. We want, above all, decommissioning: we want the achievement of the peace process. It would therefore be perverse to deter people from handing over weapons by allowing them to feel that they might immediately be subject to arrest and personal prosecution on some related matter.

Nevertheless, as the Minister says, it is very disappointing that we must renew the existing legislation. According to the Belfast agreement, the whole process of decommissioning should have been completed within two years—that is, by 2002. We are now in 2003: it is three years late. That is an extremely unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Of course the moral responsibility lies with the paramilitary organisations. On one side is the IRA. Sinn Fein-IRA is a party to the agreement. The Sinn Fein section of the Sinn Fein-IRA movement formally signed up to it, but the whole purpose of the agreement, and of treating Sinn Fein as a kind of proxy, was that it stood for the republican movement as a whole. So there is no doubt whatsoever that it has defaulted on this major, absolutely key undertaking in the agreement. Indeed, it continues to default on it, despite two acts of decommissioning that, as we all know, add up to only a small fraction—nobody knows quite how small—of the total armoury. On the other side, there has been only one, purely symbolic act of decommissioning by any of the loyalist paramilitary organisations. Those that signed up to the peace process have been in breach of it by not carrying out decommissioning. Frankly, those that did not sign up to it have betrayed the people of Northern Ireland by not contributing to what is clearly the best chance for a peaceful and normal future for Northern Ireland that any of us have seen, certainly in our lifetimes, since the troubles began.

The moral responsibility clearly rests on the shoulders of the paramilitary organisations, republican and loyalist. However, as I said yesterday—I hope that the Minister will recall it all too clearly—the Government bear a large burden of responsibility because of the many tactical errors that they have made. They simply have not used the leverage available to them. They gave away the prisoners without any decommissioning at all. Giving away such a major card without anything to show in return was extraordinary. It was an absolutely shameful act of negligence on their part.

As I said yesterday, what was equally extraordinary was giving concessions to people who had not fulfilled their obligations under the Belfast agreement. They were rewarded by being given more goodies and benefits. For example, special status was granted in this place for Sinn Fein MPs. There was the promise of an amnesty—even though we managed to prevent its being implemented—for on-the-run terrorists. As I said yesterday, thank God we succeeded in opposing that amnesty, because as a result that important card

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

remains in the Government's hands. However, we should give no credit to the Government for that. Indeed, they have made a whole series of mistakes, and they should acknowledge that fact. I hope that they will not continue to make them and, above all, that we will now see a greater degree of clarity and decisiveness on their part. There should be no more talk of inch-by-inch progress, as if one can somehow make progress in implementing Belfast in a partial way. The mechanism whereby it was deemed sufficient to secure partial acts of decommissioning or other partial acts, to which the Government respond with a concession of their own, has not worked at all. As I said yesterday, it is clear that we now need a global, comprehensive and definitive settlement.

In Belfast before Christmas, the Prime Minister apparently talked bravely about a fork in the road, but so far that fine rhetoric, which I welcomed at the time, has not been reflected in action. I was particularly concerned at the Minister's response when I asked her yesterday, across the Dispatch Box, whether she would define the "acts of completion" that the Government talk about. I asked her to call a spade a spade and say that those acts of completion have to be nothing less than the completion of decommissioning, as provided for in the Belfast agreement, and the disbandment of the IRA by Sinn Fein-IRA. She simply said that she could not offer a better definition than the Prime Minister did, when he used the phrase "acts of completion". Well, she could define it better than the Prime Minister—by speaking of decommissioning and disbandment.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart) *rose—*

Mr. Davies: No, I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman now.

The fact that the Minister will not use the phrase "decommissioning and disbandment", and prefers the vague euphemism "acts of completion", is very worrying. What is more, I have noticed that the Government have slipped from using the definite article to using the indefinite form. Instead of speaking of the "act of completion" that is required, they speak of "acts of completion". If she thinks about it, that is not entirely logical. There must be one act that completes everything—there cannot be several different acts of completion. By using such a vague term, she implies a certain flexibility as to what might ultimately be considered as falling within that category. So when she should be sending a signal of clarity to paramilitary organisations, and to Sinn Fein-IRA in particular, she is sending one of ambiguity.

There may or may not have been a place for ambiguity in the Belfast agreement itself. Without some degree of ambiguity and fudging at that stage, the agreement may well not have been secured in the first place. Nevertheless, it is the seeds of ambiguity and the lack of clarity in the Belfast agreement that have led to many of the disappointments of the past five years. What is absolutely clear to the Opposition is that if there ever was a time for ambiguity, it has now passed. Now is the time for complete clarity. Now is the time to carry out decommissioning and disbandment.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: No, I will not give way for the moment.

Now is the time for the Government to use the phrase "decommissioning and disbandment", and they should not be afraid to use it. As I said yesterday, if they want to use another word for "disbandment" I am perfectly happy with that, as long as it has the same degree of finality. The Government must now say what they mean. We do not want camouflage words, as I call them, which try to cover up the exact definition of the terms of the agreement. We must be absolutely clear about that.

Mr. Tom Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: No, I am sorry but I am not going to give way at the moment.

The second thing that we really need is a timetable. Indeed, we called for one some 18 months ago, when I first talked about a programmed process, leading to full decommissioning. It is clear that if we get the comprehensive and definitive settlement that we need in Northern Ireland in the next few weeks—in fact, we only have the next few weeks in which to achieve that—we will not be able to carry out everything in that package overnight. For example, it would not be possible to decommission entirely overnight. A reduction in the British military presence in Northern Ireland would be perfectly reasonable, provided there is a corresponding improvement in the security situation; however, that, too, cannot be carried out overnight.

It is in this regard that we will need a set timetable, and we will also need interlinkage. It must be made absolutely plain that if one party does not deliver what it is supposed to deliver under that timetable, other elements that that party might have been looking for will also not be delivered under that timetable. It must be made absolutely clear that such strict interlinkage will continue until the final and complete implementation of Belfast. We should not have any fudges about that, nor should we have any of the resistance that the Government have so far displayed towards the whole concept of a timetable. When the right hon. Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I used to use the word "timetable", the Government would often object and say that I was completely wrong. They said that we should not have timetables because they are inimical to progress in Northern Ireland. What nonsense! Of course, we would not have secured the Belfast agreement without a timetable, as I often told the right hon. Gentleman. I hope again that the question of the timetable will be clarified in the Government's mind. We need a timetable.

Thirdly, if the peace process is to be successful, what we do must be transparent. Nothing less will create the necessary confidence among other parties. People will not deliver their side of the bargain if they do not believe that others are going to deliver theirs. People need to feel

confident that there has been a qualitative change in the situation in Northern Ireland, and that the peace process has come to a successful conclusion.

In the context of decommissioning, transparency means that acts of decommissioning will be more transparent than hitherto. I have discussed that with General de Chastelain in private. I shall not say what shape that conversation took, but I am sure that many people in Northern Ireland agree with that principle. If the Government are to succeed in negotiating what I described as the necessary, comprehensive and definitive deal, that deal must provide sufficient transparency in implementation so that public confidence can be maintained. Indeed, there is a statement on the record from the IRA itself saying that that organisation wished to decommission in a way that maximised public confidence. We should hold it to that. The same thing applies to the necessary decommissioning that must take place on the loyalists' side.

The other word beginning with "d" that the Government do not like is disbandment. That should also be subject to some sort of monitoring. Given the suspicions and difficulties evident in Northern Ireland, and the lack of performance, perhaps especially by republicans, we need more than a statement. Of course, we want a statement that the armed struggle is over and that the IRA has been disbanded. That is essential, but we also need assurance and some independent verification. We need verification of more than the decommissioning provided for in the Belfast agreement. We also need verification of disbandment.

David Burnside (South Antrim): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the problem is verification? What does decommissioning or disbandment mean when there is no trust in the political atmosphere in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that a Privy Council committee made up of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the General Officer Commanding and the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland should be constituted to verify that decommissioning and disbandment had taken place? Would not that mean that hon. Members could then believe that it had taken place, and that we would not be misled by what is, at present, a con job?

Mr. Davies: I agree with the hon. Gentleman in the fundamental sense that there is a need for verification. I am glad that he used the word that I used just a few minutes earlier. We are at one, therefore. We accept the same concept, and use the same word to describe it. He should be very satisfied that we are in agreement. We need transparency and verification—the word that he and I both used. The necessary confidence will come only if we have transparency and verification. He has proposed a mechanism to provide that verification, and the House will listen with interest on that. I hope that we can discuss similar interesting new ideas in this afternoon's debate.

I was about to make another suggestion in respect of decommissioning. I do not for a moment want to change the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, the de Chastelain commission. As I have said, I have the greatest confidence in General de Chastelain, and I think that that is shared across the political spectrum. In addition, it is clear that we need professional military officers of considerable standing to undertake what is a professional military task. The IICD provides that, and politicians would not make good substitutes for soldiers in that role. Moreover, the de Chastelain commission gives us an objective mechanism for determining whether decommissioning has taken place. That is vital.

As the hon. Member for South Antrim (David Burnside) will be all too well aware, we could otherwise argue until the end of time about whether decommissioning had taken place. Without the IICD, people could always claim that weapons were being kept somewhere. They would not produce evidence, or say where the weapons were being kept. That could go on forever, and the position would be hopeless. However, thanks to the IICD, we now have an objective mechanism to determine such matters. If de Chastelain says that decommissioning has taken place, we can take it that there has been decommissioning. If he says that half an arsenal has been decommissioned, we can take it that only half has been decommissioned. If he says that decommissioning has been substantially and materially completed—that is what we want to hear, the end of the process—we can accept that.

I have that confidence in de Chastelain, and I believe that it is shared by people across the political divide in Northern Ireland. It is difficult to imagine that the views of anyone else would have the same weight in making such a determination. That is common ground, which is good. As I saw the Minister nodding a few moments ago, I hope that that common ground is shared with the Government.

My suggestion is made in a helpful spirit; no personal or political ego is invested in it, so if somebody came up with a better one I should be only too happy. Because, as the hon. Member for South Antrim said, we must all have the same confidence in the objective verification of disbandment as we require in decommissioning, we should use the same commission and extend its remit to verify disbandment. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that disbandment will certainly need verification.

Disbandment means winding up military structures. At present, those structures are not engaged in active military operations but, as we know, they are engaged in training and targeting. They have certainly been engaged in buying arms, in breach of the agreement and the ceasefire—that was what Florida was about, and there may have been other cases. They are engaged in logistics, personnel management and all the other functions associated with such organisations. Their disbandment will be a military procedure. Professional soldiers will be able to get to the bottom of things and verify that disbandment is actually occurring. They will be able to find out what is happening not only to weapon stocks but to logistics, procurement and training.

We should use the de Chastelain commission and expand its role. If someone has a better suggestion, that is fine, but we need some form of independent verification.

I hope that the effect of the debate will be to make the Government go the whole hog in frankness, clarity and decisiveness in the use of language. I shall be most disappointed if the Minister again shelters behind the acts of completion formula. We do not want a

[Mr. Davies]

theological formula; we need pragmatic facts. We need full disbandment and full decommissioning. Nothing less will do. I explained last night that we have only a few weeks to achieve it, so that we can reach a settlement on all the interlinked aspects, put the power-sharing Executive back, restore the momentum of the Belfast process and, indeed, save the Belfast process. Lord knows that we have only to look at what has been going on in Northern Ireland during the past few weeks—the bomb in Enniskillen and the disorder in west Belfast—to realise what the stark consequences of that highly volatile situation could be if we miss this vital opportunity.

3.38 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): If we were not so short of time, I might be tempted to reflect on the history of decommissioning as it is more than nine years since the Government introduced the concept. I shall restrain myself from going back over the whole period, but it is worth making some reference to the past couple of years.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) referred to the fact that the agreement sets out a two-year period for the achievement of complete disarmament. Members will recall that, before the agreement was made, the Government gave us their authoritative interpretation of that part of the agreement. Their view was that the meaning of that part of the agreement was that decommissioning should begin immediately. That was the intention as far as the Government were concerned. Indeed, that was also the case for us and for those people who followed our lead in voting for the agreement in the referendum. We did so in the belief that decommissioning would begin that summer and be completed in 2000. But it was not.

I find it very strange that, over the past three years, the Government have sat and allowed themselves to be lectured about the need for full implementation by republicans when the people who have been most guilty of default are republicans. Instead of getting down to examine each jot and tittle of alleged default by the Government, the republicans should contemplate their comparative complete failure to fulfil their part of the bargain.

The Government should never have tolerated a situation where the people who were so grievously at fault themselves lectured them about full implementation. Equally, of course, the Government should never have tolerated that situation developing. There was linkage in the agreement, but, unfortunately, although the then Secretary of State talked about the linkage, she failed to ensure that linkage was, in fact, occurring, so, consequently, we saw the situation deteriorating.

The Government's approach was seriously flawed in the aftermath of the agreement, and I wonder whether they would ever have exerted themselves to try to bring about decommissioning if we had not insisted on it. It was wrong in a sense that it was left to me and my colleagues in the Ulster Unionist party to insist on that, but we did. Of course, as the House knows, that led to the suspension of devolution, and then to a promise by the republican movement itself in 2000.

Whatever play of words they might have had about the agreement being endorsed only by Sinn Fein, on 7 May 2000, those in the republican movement unequivocally promised to put their weapons completely beyond use in such a way as to maximise public confidence. It is important to hold on to the fact that a clear promise was made that has not been kept. That promise was made in the form of a statement by the IRA's alleged army council. It is important to bear it in mind that the very clear promise that it made has not been kept. Of course, as a result of that, I and my colleagues resigned office in 2001, which led to the beginning of decommissioning in the autumn of that year.

The Minister has already said how that beginning was not followed through, but there is also the very drawback to which my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (David Burnside) referred: the way in which the form of decommissioning was self-defeating. It should have been visible and it should have spoken for itself, but instead we simply had the rather opaque statement from the independent commission. I understand why those on the commission adopted that course. I advised them against doing so, but I know the reasons that they had on their minds. I am sure that they were well meaning, but they were wrong. The mistake that they made has had a significant impact on the credibility of the IICD. That is a simple fact. They made a mistake—a well-intentioned, honest mistake, but it was a mistake, and we live with the consequences of that mistake. That is significant for the future, too.

The question is what is needed in terms of the current situation. Clearly, we want to see all the paramilitaries decommission. I emphasise the word "all". We have had a small act of decommissioning from a loyalist paramilitary organisation—indeed, the first act of decommissioning came from a loyalist paramilitary organisation—but we want to see all the paramilitaries decommission. No doubt, many of the calls made this evening will focus on republicans, but I want the House to understand the fact that we are just as anxious to see decommissioning by loyalist paramilitaries as well.

We cannot make any reference to loyalist paramilitaries without recording again our horror at their behaviour in recent weeks. There is some hope that the situation in Belfast will quieten down, but I wonder whether that it not just because the slightly more intelligent elements in loyalism are realising that there is a need to clean up their act, rather than through any genuine change of heart. Although there might be a slight improvement on the ground, it does not cure the underlying problem that loyalist paramilitaries have behaved very badly over the past four years, and the calls that are made for paramilitaries to decommission and go away—for them not to be there any more—apply to them just as much.

I return to the question of verification in relation to decommissioning. My hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim mentioned an idea that he has mentioned a number of times before, although I would have quibbled slightly with the composition of the committee that he mentioned, but that is a minor detail. He was making the serious point that the present arrangements for verification will not be sufficient. There is a clear need for the Government to consider how the IICD can have its credibility reinforced.

We need more than just the verification of acts of decommissioning. Even if, for the sake of argument, we had a situation in which the paramilitaries announced that they were disbanding—perhaps they will decide to adopt the word on which the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford is so keen—and made a statement to that effect, would that statement have any credibility? I doubt it. How could we prove whether a secret army had disbanded?

The Government have focused on the need to see a complete cessation of all forms of paramilitary activity—no more shooting, beating, recruiting, targeting or gathering of intelligence. However, the absence of those activities can be judged only on a daily basis. Just because we have had a week, a month or two months of complete absence of paramilitary activity, can we be assured that the paramilitaries have genuinely disbanded and gone away?

Mr. Tom Harris: While both sides of the House want complete implementation of the Belfast agreement and, ultimately, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that—contrary to what the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) said earlier—such disbandment of the paramilitary organisations, especially the IRA, does not feature in the Belfast agreement?

Mr. Trimble: The focus of the agreement was placed on decommissioning, because if a private army had completely and genuinely disarmed—with no element of rearming taking place—the question is to what extent it still exists as a private army. We are in the territory of euphemism, and decommissioning was a euphemism for disbandment at one stage.

Even if someone from an organisation said that it had disbanded and we saw a complete cessation of all forms of paramilitary activity day by day, I still wonder how we could be sure. We need verification not only of acts of decommissioning, but of the absence of paramilitary activity and the status of those who had hitherto been part of a paramilitary organisation. Of course, that would involve more than just people who could give the public authoritative information about what was going on.

I refer the House to the comments by Lord Kilclooney last night. He said that we need

"not only decommissioning but real sanctions if those who decommission break the peace."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 February 2003; Vol. 644, c. 544.]

To have any form of verification with no sanctions linked to it would not be worth while. We have lacked sanctions throughout the process, and we have made that criticism time and again in the past four years. The Government's approach, since the agreement, has been all carrot and no stick, and that has not worked.

My hon. Friends and I, and those whom we represent, see the contrast between the vigour with which the Government pursue the disarmament of Saddam Hussein and the sanctions that are being brought to bear to achieve that. The Government are making a focused attempt to achieve his disarmament, by means that are primarily sanction-led, with any inducements coming a long way behind, which is a considerable contrast with the situation in Northern Ireland. Added to that contrast is the fact that between 1,200 and 1,500 servicemen who are natives of Northern Ireland are deployed in, or are on their way to, the Gulf. They will be asked to risk, and possibly sacrifice, their lives to achieve the disarmament of Saddam Hussein. The Government expect them to do that willingly while, at the same time, looking over their shoulders at their homeland, where the Government are adopting a radically different approach. While the character of those paramilitary organisations is different in quantity and perhaps different to some small extent in degree, is it really such a different situation? Are the terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland radically different in nature from the state-sponsored terrorism on which the Government are focusing? They will not think so.

Until the Government have more coherence in their approach on these two matters, they will be exposed to the charge of hypocrisy. As we have said to the Government over the years, there is a clear need for them to rethink their approach, to move away from a policy that focuses purely on carrots and to consider the sanctions that they will bring to bear now and in the future on paramilitary organisations to ensure that the agreement that they say that they endorsed is implemented fully by them.

3.51 pm

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): It is with some regret that we all see this debate running from year to year. I listened with interest to the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), although I differ on the importance of the Government's use of the definite or indefinite article. I do not accept that that is at the core of this discussion. It is perfectly obvious what is the important word in the statement; it is not important whether it is one act or a number of acts of completion. It is also pretty obvious that whether one reckons that there is more than one act or a single one is simply a semantic difference of definition.

I sought to intervene on the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford, although he would not accept my intervention, to ask him, as he is so full of criticism of the Government's current policy, what he would do differently if he were Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In fact, it could not be substantively different because we must remember that the order before us today is the consequence of a Conservative Government policy that was passed on 27 February 1997, before the Labour party had taken over the Government Benches.

Mr. Quentin Davies *rose—*

Lembit Öpik: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, who refused to give way to me, I am happy to give way to him.

Mr. Davies: That is very gracious of the hon. Gentleman, but he did refer to me. Simply, were I Secretary of State, I would not have released the prisoners without decommissioning. I would not have given Sinn Fein additional bonuses, special status here or an offer of amnesty. I would have responded to breaches, starting from Florida, which the Government

[Mr. Davies]

did not do, and I would have excluded it from Stormont rather than suspend the whole of Stormont after Stormontgate, as I explained to the House in advance last July. As Secretary of State, I would now be talking about decommissioning, and the need for complete decommissioning and disbandment. I would not be using mealy-mouthed, indirect terms.

Lembit Öpik: In terms of the hon. Gentleman's comment that I am gracious, I simply say that I am happy to give way. As we have heard before, the fact that someone has a past does not mean that they cannot have a future, and I would apply that to him this afternoon.

In terms of the hon. Gentleman's list of action steps—the things that the Conservatives would have done differently—I would surmise from that that they would have had a different policy: tough talking, quick to react to apparent breaches and probably wrong. One judges the future behaviour of a political party or a Secretary of State on the basis of past performance. I recall that, on a number of occasions, the Conservative party has predicted the collapse of the process, the reinstigation of violence in Northern Ireland and various failures and obstacles that would be insuperable to the process before us. On each successive occasion, its predictions have turned out to be unfounded. I make that point because it is important that we do not play party politics with Northern Ireland. I would love the Liberal Democrats to be on the Government Benches, but not so much that I am willing to try to score opportunistic points against the Minister. She has pursued a policy that few could deny has taken Northern Ireland closer to a sustained peace and a normalised situation than anything in the past three decades.

Let me remind the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford that what we are discussing today is not a radical departure from anything that his party did when in government. On 27 February 1997, the Conservatives instigated the Act that we are discussing. The hon. Gentleman said that, if he were Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a core element of his programme would be to set a timetable. However, the Conservatives already gave us a timetable of 10 years. I do not think that things had to be renewed over the first five years, but every year thereafter, up to 2007, they had to be renewed. We are therefore following the spirit of what John Major instigated.

We should acknowledge that much of the progress has been as a result of pragmatic decisions by John Major. He was a tremendous instrument for peace and, in the histories of Northern Ireland politics, he deserves always to be given credit for what he did. The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford criticised the Government for being mealy-mouthed and for lacking frankness and clarity, but John Major did not tell anybody that he was talking to the terrorists. It just slipped out. It was a leak. At the time, people across the parties said that they understood the importance of what was happening and therefore supported it. The Liberal Democrats have been consistent on that.

The Liberal Democrats support this order and, by and large, its implications. We have not finished work yet and the kind of negotiations that have gone on before—in public and behind the scenes—will be necessary to make progress. I respect the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford for holding different views, but I do not feel able to accept views that do not accord with my non-party political analysis of decommissioning.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) was right to say that he and his party have exerted considerable influence in the achievement of some of the decommissioning that has taken place. That decommissioning may have been symbolic but we all know how important symbolism is in Northern Ireland politics. He was also right to highlight the dissatisfaction that we all feel about how little has been done. We are a long way from total decommissioning. The right hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for South Antrim (David Burnside), spoke about the difficulty of verification. Just as the Inland Revenue has trouble in verifying the details of some self-employed people's tax returns, the Decommissioning Commission will have difficulty in verifying what arms have been handed in by individuals and organisations who were outside the rule of law in the first place.

I do not get hung up on the issue of verification because what we want is decommissioning that will materially weaken the ability of the paramilitary organisations to restart trouble. However, I agree with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford that we have not seen a great deal of decommissioning. I may share some of the frustrations in his soothsaying, but I will not repeat them other than to say that I agree with what he said about the signal lack of progress of the IRA and some of the key loyalist organisations.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The hon. Gentleman accepted that a person with a past must have a future; but, surely, performing symbolic acts of decommissioning at the same time as commissioning new weapons in Florida gives the lie to any intention of going down the road of peace.

Lembit Öpik: It depends on how far one wants to go with the analogy. For example, I have met people who want to give up smoking. They keep saying that they want to give up smoking, but they still go out and buy a packet of fags for weeks after they have made their new year resolution. There is probably a similar tendency towards the use of violence and towards holding on to the means of violence. Decommissioning is such a big step for people who have become used to using violent methods to achieve their objectives that I am not surprised that there are probably significant internal arguments and divisions within such organisations. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, but I hope that he will also accept that it is in the nature of the human condition to take time to move away from things that were closely cherished as weapons, tools or modus operandi in the past.

The other interesting point that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann made was to highlight the contradiction between the Government's approach to disarming Iraq and their approach to disarming the IRA and loyalist organisations. He drew the conclusion that this inconsistency meant that perhaps there needs to be a tougher policy in Northern Ireland. I suppose that I would take another view. I suggest that the great irony

in this situation is not the approach taken in Northern Ireland, but the approach to Iraq that has apparently been foisted on us in the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister and others.

We have learned in Northern Ireland that negotiation and shouting is a more effective means of progress than threats and shooting. It is a terrible tragedy that, despite the laudable achievements of this Government and, to some extent, the previous Conservative Government in achieving peace through peaceful means and through the threat of violence but not its application, we may be thrust into a war that is based on the exact opposite principles. It is a terrible inconsistency and it might be worth the Prime Minister looking at the recent history of Northern Ireland and learning that one does not make progress in reducing terrorism or international threats by waging war oneself. If I say any more about that, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, may rule me out of order. However, I ask the Minister to consider whether she can act as a useful conduit between the wise sages from Northern Ireland in this Chamber, those who take an interest in the subject and the Prime Minister, who seems to forget the lessons of history.

I also want to highlight the importance of the International Independent Commission on Decommissioning. We have already heard praise of General de Chastelain, who has the unenviable job of trying to make sense of the subject in a practical way and—this may sound familiar—of issuing reports to Government about the degree of decommissioning that has taken place. I am interested in some of the suggestions that we have heard in the debate about how things might be done better. The Government need to remain flexible, because improvements could be suggested by any side. They could come from the Conservatives, Ulster Unionists, the Democratic Unionist party or others.

At present, however, we have the least worst way of approaching the matter. It has delivered some progress and, although there is a depressing underlying level of violence in Northern Ireland, there has been a measurable decrease in violence overall and in the numbers of bombings and shootings that have been carried out in the name of the causes that the paramilitaries claim to hold. I am optimistic that we have made progress, and I would be loth for a dramatic shift to take place that led to the hardening of policy or to the withdrawal of opportunities. We are making slow progress.

The Liberal Democrats will support the order. However, as I said last year, I hope that we will not be here again next year doing the same thing. However idealistic it may be to believe that decommissioning will happen in the next 12 months, we have to assume that even most of those involved in the paramilitary organisations have realised that their representatives have made far more progress in the interests of their respective causes and the people whom they purport to represent through peaceful means than they ever will by using the arms that they seem so loth to give in.

4.4 pm

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): Madam Deputy Speaker, you are most fortunate to be presiding over your second Northern Ireland debate in a short period. You must be the Speaker's favourite to be appointed again.

There are some common strands between this debate and last night's debate, because the issues have a common source—the Belfast agreement. I feel the same exasperation as the Liberal Democrat spokesman, who referred to the ritual of coming to the House to debate these issues. It could be described as a Westminster farce that runs and runs. It is a timely and periodic reminder of the failure of the Government's policy and the process in which they have invested so much. It is right that periodically we see the embarrassment not just of the Government but of the leader of the Ulster Unionist party. Although he may be trying revisionism today, having told us about all the mistakes and errors that everybody else has committed, he failed to tell us that it was he who accepted them all the time, did not point them out at the time, and tried to sell them to the people of Northern Ireland. That suggests that he was suckered at the time. Having dismissed the advice of other Unionists in Northern Ireland, including some members of his own party, he now finds out that they were right and he was wrong, and is seeking to retrieve from the ashes a semblance of dignity. However, the Northern Ireland electorate have caught on to him, both on that and on many other issues.

While I have some respect for the Decommissioning Commission—those of us who have met its members recognise that they are genuine and want to do their job—I question the Government for handing out money week after week for it to do absolutely nothing. It must be frustrating for people to hang around the not very salubrious building in which they are housed, hoping that someone just might give them a phone call one day and tell them that they can come along and spot something for themselves. I agree with the shadow Secretary of State that we are witnessing the result of sloppy negotiations. There was no direct tie between decommissioning and the important issue of prison releases. There was a clear comparison, as both were to take place over a two-year period, but there was no requirement that one should be linked to the other.

If that was the result of incompetent negotiations, it was also the result of ensuing incompetent action by the Executive. The Government had it within their power to ensure that the two were linked, and that action on prison releases was linked to a requirement that the republican movement hand over its illegal weapons, which it is still using in Northern Ireland. There has not been enough recognition in this debate that the Provisional IRA is still an active organisation and is still shooting. One has only to look at the statistics in the Chief Constable's report to see just how active those guns are, even in current circumstances. We had better remember that those are not symbolic items, as the Liberal Democrat spokesman told us; they are lethal weapons, used to kill and threaten and to extract concessions from the Government.

Mr. Tom Harris: Does the hon. Gentleman set any store by, or place any value on, IRA and other paramilitary ceasefires that have been in effect both before and since 1997? Does he accept that, internecine warfare in those paramilitary groups notwithstanding, the quality of life of the people whom he represents is materially better and more secure as a direct result of the Government's policies and the Belfast agreement?

Mr. Robinson: I wish the hon. Gentleman would come to Northern Ireland with my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds) or me. I would take him to Cluan Place in my constituency and my colleague would take him to a number of spots in north Belfast so that he could ask the people there whether life has improved for them.

We are speaking of an illegal organisation that should never be rewarded for stopping, slowing down or pausing from doing that which it should never have been doing in the first place. The number of acts of terrorism has been steadily increasing since the signing of the Belfast agreement. The statistics are there for the hon. Gentleman to see. Although the propaganda might suggest that he is right, the facts on the ground tell a very different story.

The propaganda exists because of how much is invested by political leaders in the process—by the Prime Minister, who made pledges. He came to Northern Ireland at the most critical period of the referendum and personally signed large billboards pledging that certain things would not happen until decommissioning occurred. Those pledges were broken. He came to the Dispatch Box in the House and made it clear to the then Leader of the Opposition that decommissioning was a requirement before various things would happen in terms of Sinn Fein being rewarded. Again, that undertaking was broken. Those undertakings were passed on to the people of Northern Ireland, and on that basis many of them may have supported the Government's policy.

The Leader of the Ulster Unionist party, although he did not exactly use the words, admitted that he had been suckered as well, and that he had taken the commitments made by Sinn Fein and retailed them to the community in Northern Ireland. Many of us will recognise now—I shall come to the Minister of State's remarks about the DUP's position in relation to Sinn Fein—that there is one certainty: no one should ever take the word of Sinn Fein-IRA about anything that they might do. They have promised much and delivered very little; some say nothing.

There is no requirement whatever on Unionists to say what they might do for Sinn Fein until Sinn Fein has done it. It is up to them to take the actions necessary to meet the Government's criteria, set down not just by the United Kingdom Government, but by the Government of the Irish Republic, even before the Belfast agreement, when they said that for anybody to be involved in the political process in Northern Ireland, there was a requirement for them to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. That is a requirement placed on Sinn Fein, not on others. The pledges of the Prime Minister and the promises of the leader of the Ulster Unionist party were broken.

As regards decommissioning, all we have had from the beginning of the process are two acts—of quite what, nobody knows, because nobody has been specific about it. The first event, on 23 October 2001, was described by the decommissioning body in the following terms:

"We have witnessed an event we regard as significant."

Following that statement, my colleagues and I went to meet General de Chastelain and his team and asked them whether they regarded their meeting with us as significant. He said that he did, so that might give the House an indication of the significance of the event that he had witnessed involving any weapons being put beyond use. But it was enough for the leader of the Ulster Unionist party who, with the broadest smile that any of us have seen from him in many years, came out to say:

"This is the day some people said would never happen."

He heralded it as a great day and a great beginning. Now—*[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, North is right. The leader of the Ulster Unionist party at least recognises now that that and the further act that occurred on 8 April 2002 were simply stunts and gestures by the Provisional IRA.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) put his finger on the key issue. If decommissioning is a matter of confidence—if it is to give people confidence that the IRA and Sinn Fein have put violence behind them and want to walk a democratic path—the key issue is whether their stockpile of weapons has reduced since the beginning of the process. Although in October 2001 and April 2002 something occurred—quite what we do not know, because it has never been specified by the decommissioning body—the reality that we are all certain of is that the IRA and Sinn Fein have brought more weapons in. A body that on the one hand says "We have got rid of some of our weapons", but that on the other hand is bringing them in, not just from Florida but from elsewhere, and ends up with more guns than it had at the beginning, is hardly likely to bring confidence to the Unionist community.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that even the Florida escapade came to light as a result of an envelope breaking in a post office sorting room? From that we gained much information, and, thankfully, the authorities have managed to do a great deal to protect us.

Mr. Robinson: The hon. Gentleman is right. He and I are both on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. We have looked at this matter, and the disturbing factor for us and for others is that it was discovered accidentally. For how long before it was discovered had this been going on? How many guns got in before the accidental finding at the post office sorting room? We know that some 150 weapons were discovered at that time. How many previous occasions were there? Would the decommissioning body consider that to be a substantial amount of weapons? If so, is it more substantial than the number of weapons that it saw being put beyond use?

As the shadow Secretary of State said, it is not simply a matter of decommissioning; it is about the organisation disbanding and dismantling, putting a line behind all its violent past and making it very clear that it will not pick it up in the future. It has to be a total end to the paramilitary organisation.

Those of us who read in today's issue of *The Times* accounts by leading members of the Provisional movement will see that there is no intention on the part of that organisation to put violence behind it. Its members want to keep their organisation in place. They want to hold on to their weapons. Whatever verbiage the Prime Minister might use in any statement over the next number of days, the reality on the ground is that their organisation will remain intact and their guns will remain in their bunkers.

Against that reality, for the Minister of State to indicate in the House that the Democratic Unionists might in some way view differently how they deal with Sinn Fein is absolute folly. Why would any party want to change its attitude to Sinn Fein, when Sinn Fein has not changed its attitude to violence? It is clear that nothing in Sinn Fein's behaviour in the past or in the present, or indeed as far as we know in its future intentions, suggests that it is an organisation about to change. The Government are deluding themselves if they believe that the Provisional IRA will divvy up and become full-blown Democrats in the near future.

Lembit Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman think that not a single member of Sinn Fein genuinely believes that a peaceful solution would be a better approach?

Mr. Robinson: All members of Sinn Fein might fall into that category, but a peaceful outcome for them is everybody else surrendering, and that will not happen. The people in Northern Ireland will not surrender to terrorists now, even though they may use the pinstripe suit more than their balaclavas at present. The reality is that the only kind of peace they want is peace on their terms.

What annoys the Unionist community most is the fact that the whole political process has to be held back because of Sinn Fein, the fact that the Government do not have the courage to say "Here are the rules of entry into the democratic club. If you do not abide by these rules, you are not part of that club, and the club will continue in existence." The Government instead tell them "If Sinn Fein do not meet the criteria, we shall not have any democracy in Northern Ireland." That is the Government's response—everybody in Northern Ireland must suffer if the IRA does not divvy up. That is not the way forward. If there are no acts of completion, even though they are poorly defined—if they are defined at all—by the Government, it is clearly their intention that the democrats should suffer along with the terrorists.

I should like to say one word about loyalist paramilitaries. We are inclined to spend a lot of time discussing the decommissioning of the Provisional IRA because there is a direct relationship between it and the Executive in Northern Ireland, of which its representatives are a part. Of course, that is not the case with regard to loyalist paramilitaries, but they fall into exactly the same category in every other respect. There is no case to be made for allowing loyalist paramilitaries to hold on to illegal weapons. That needs to be clearly stated and they must give up their weapons in precisely the same way as the Provisional IRA and other republicans. If there is any evidence of the need for that to happen, it has been seen in Northern Ireland in the past few weeks and months, when the paramilitaries have turned their weapons on themselves. We have seen areas of north and west Belfast, as well as areas further afield and even in my constituency, being turned into a battleground where bodies have been found on the street, people have been forced from their homes and the general community has been left in terror. Decommissioning must therefore begin with loyalist paramilitaries, just as it must take place in the republican movement and among those on its fringes.

I sit down giving one word of notice to the Government. They have committed themselves to following a course in which acts of completion are necessary. By their very nature, acts of completion must take place over a relatively short period. It would not be tenable for the Government to come to the House in a year's time to extend the legislation. They should be making it very clear that acts of completion are required now, that the opportunity to carry them out with an amnesty will end with the order and that if those involved do not complete within the specified period, the full rigour of the law will be brought against those who represent them and the organisation itself. Unless the Government get tough, there will be no action from Sinn Fein-IRA. Sinn Fein-IRA have managed to lead the Government by the nose year upon year. Every time they misbehave and bring institutions into suspension, the answer for the Government is to make more concessions to them. That is not the way forward. Unless there is a punishment for Sinn Fein-IRA, they will never meet the requirements that the Government would have for them.

4.23 pm

David Burnside (South Antrim): In the next two or three weeks, I hope and expect that this House will meet to authorise the sanction against the international threat from Saddam Hussein. From all parts of the House, with very few exceptions, we will support and follow the Prime Minister in the strong stand that he has taken.

The Minister will understand why we do not understand how the Prime Minister's strong stand against international terrorism—the good from the evil of 11 September—is translated into Northern Ireland. When Gerry and Martin, the two members of the army council, come to Downing street, sit on the other side of the table and stare the Prime Minister in the eye, they say "We are committed to the peace process" and he believes them. They then go home, authorise spying in the heart of government, steal the documents and write on the margin, referring to the Prime Minister as a naïve idiot. I do not believe that the Prime Minister is a naïve idiot, but his eyes seem closed in his negotiations with the terrorist leadership in Northern Ireland. Why does he not invite Saddam Hussein to Downing street, look him straight in the eye and say "Saddam, are you coming into the peace process?" I know that Saddam would say, "I am committed to the peace process, and I've got arms inspectors all over Iraq inspecting this, that and the other while representatives are at the United Nations. We're trying to get a peaceful solution." Would the Prime Minister do that with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness?

The key to decommissioning is verification and sanction. At a much earlier stage of the peace process, I suggested—this went through the Ulster Unionist party to Downing street—helpful and constructive methods to try to restore confidence in a political process in which the Ulster Unionist people no longer have confidence. I suggested a Privy Council committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the leader of the Ulster Unionist party, the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland and the Chief Constable, which, adhering to the Mitchell principles of non-violence, could produce a report. We know how many weapons

[David Burnside]

and explosives are there, so why do we fudge the issue? Decommissioning means the handing over and destruction—the non-use and non-availability—of thousands of guns and tonnes of explosives. If the Minister speaks to the Chief Constable and the GOC, they will verify that that is the volume of armaments within the provisional IRA. They will also give an evaluation of the armaments that are held by the Ulster Defence Association, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Red Hand Commando, the Loyalist Volunteer Force, or whatever name one wants to give to the loyalist paramilitary organisations. The international commission knows the amounts.

If that committee was set up, it could restore the confidence of the Unionist and law-abiding community in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister could come to this House to tell us that he has had a report from the Chief Constable and the GOC saying that the armaments have been handed over, that there is no evidence of the importing of arms, that there are no punishment beatings, and that there was no cover-up on Castlereagh or Stormontgate—that we were wrong about that, it was all mist in our eyes and it did not take place. If he could convince us that the terrorists have moved along the road from terrorism to democracy, that would restore confidence in the process.

Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I propose an addition to my hon. Friend's committee—someone who would command respect right across the community in Northern Ireland. He is a Privy Councillor and my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Lagan Valley, and he now sits in the other place. I am referring to Lord Molyneaux.

David Burnside: The message has been passed to the Front Bench. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

Such an organisation for the purpose of verification would restore confidence, but we also need sanction. The sanction of war is about to be carried out against Saddam Hussein. What sanction will be carried out against Sinn Fein if it does not decommission? It wants to be at Stormont; it wants to use the institution that it once hated; it wants to be in the forum of local government. There are elements within Sinn Fein who want to take the democratic route, but they are being allowed to get away with playing as terrorists and democrats at the same time. We should take away the democratic benefits from Sinn Fein—that will really exercise sanction and pressure against it—and reward the democratic parties in Northern Ireland with a forum of local government at Stormont that is answerable and accountable to the people. If that means that Sinn Fein has to be marginalised and isolated from the process for a period of time, so be it. I do not believe that Sinn Fein-IRA, with their terrorist organisation, want to go back to a full-scale war, but they want to play it both ways, and have suckered the Government into allowing them to do so.

The Government are the sovereign power in the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister has the power, the authority and the majority in this House to make his international stand against terrorism a domestic stand against terrorism, and he would receive widespread support in the House for doing so. Decommissioning has become a farce because the Government have let the provisional IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries off the hook by not verifying the decommissioning and not exerting sanctions against the terrorist organisations. It is time that the Government acted, in the way that they act internationally, against the domestic threat of terrorism.

4.29 pm

Jane Kennedy: We have held a serious and constructive debate about a serious and sobering matter. I agree with all hon. Members who said that it is a disappointing day. It is disappointing to have to move such an order in such circumstances.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) for his constructive approach to the order and for saying that he would not divide the House. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) for similar indications.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford and several other hon. Members questioned our definition of acts of completion. There has been no lack of clarity. We may debate the terms that we use but there is no lack of clarity about what is necessary to restore the confidence that has been lost. We are discussing giving up violence completely and in a way that satisfies everyone. I refer specifically to the IRA because of Sinn Fein's association with it, and Sinn Fein's responsibility in its partnership role in government in Northern Ireland.

We want a move of such significance that it satisfies not only me as Minister with responsibility for security, but hon. Members and the public in Northern Ireland, that the IRA has ceased its campaign. That will enable us to move the democratic process forward, with every party that wants to be in government abiding by the same democratic rules.

The IRA needs to disappear as a terrorist organisation. I leave the exact detail to that organisation to determine. However, it must be done in a way that gives confidence to the public in Northern Ireland and to hon. Members.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The Minister said that the IRA needs to disappear as a military organisation. That is the best formulation that the Government have made. Although we all agree with a phrase such as "everyone must abandon violence", it is such a general aspiration that it cannot be defined or verified as a specific act. We need verifiable, specific acts if we are to say that the Belfast agreement has been implemented. That is why I set such store by the word "decommissioning".

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. That was rather lengthy for an intervention.

Jane Kennedy: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention because it leads to my next point. The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Members for South Antrim (David Burnside) and for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) also alluded to the visibility of the process and the ability of all sides to say confidently that they believe that the move has been

made. In that context, we are not simply considering the IRA, but all the organisations that need to put violence behind them.

I listened with interest to the suggestion that the hon. Member for South Antrim made for the Committee and to other contributions about its membership. We shall reflect on that. I shall not respond definitively today, but it will form part of the discussion that we shall all hold. I cannot emphasise too strongly that transparency is required to restore confidence among political parties that are engaged in the great project in Northern Ireland.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann rightly drew our attention again to the aspirations that people had when they voted in favour of the Belfast agreement. I agreed with a large part of what he had to say. He talked about what is needed, and, although we are talking today within the narrow confines of renewing the provisions that will allow decommissioning to take place, I hope that I have given the House a clear indication that decommissioning on its own is not now enough to restore the confidence that we are seeking to rebuild.

Lembit Öpik: The Minister could say exactly the same thing about the debates that we are having about Saddam Hussein, so before she finishes, I hope that she will address this serious question: why are the Government taking such a totally different approach in Northern Ireland from the one that they are taking on Iraq? I suspect that a number of hon. Members might think that we should take an approach to this question more like the one that is being taken on Iraq. There is definitely a contradiction.

Jane Kennedy: I shall resist any encouragement to go down that route, not out of any lack of willingness to debate the point but because the issue that we are discussing today is a narrow one, and the Government's position on Iraq is a matter for debate on another day. I do not accept the proposition that the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and other hon. Members have made that the situations are comparable. We are dealing here with a process in which, for a significant period of time, we have been engaged in a partnership with political organisations that have been undergoing a political process—however limited it may be, and however critical people might be of it. We must consider that if we are serious about returning to a situation in which we can restore devolved government.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East talked about the failure of the Belfast agreement, but devolution is the real prize that we are striving to achieve. It was about local people making those decisions, and it worked. It resulted in energetic, cross-community government bringing solid benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. We saw a degree of co-operation being delivered that was unthinkable until a few years ago, and in Northern Ireland there is a strong wish, which we share, to return to that.

A number of hon. Members talked about sanctions, but I do not believe that this is the time to be talking about sanctions in Northern Ireland, given the engagement that we are seeking with all the parties. For there to be a return to devolution—with the sustained effort on economic and social problems that we saw developing under the Executive, and the everyday issues being dealt with by local politicians in a way that matters to ordinary people—there must be an end to violence. What we need now is the definitive step that we have been talking about here today. It is clear that we have reached a crunch point at which Sinn Fein and the IRA—I am not talking about them exclusively—must commit themselves exclusively to a peaceful and democratic path.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the hon. Lady agree that Sinn Fein-IRA must be well aware of the malcontents within their organisation who have gone to the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA? It would demonstrate a commitment to a peaceful future on the part of Sinn Fein-IRA if they did more to ensure that those criminals were behind bars.

Jane Kennedy: I have no disagreement with the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. It is a very valid point indeed.

We cannot now carry on with the IRA being half in and half out of the process towards peaceful and normal society in Northern Ireland. If there is real movement, however, we can move quickly to implement the outstanding parts of the Belfast agreement, including the provisions on normalisation. We can implement the provisions in their entirety—not in stages, but together. If we can do that, it is my fervent hope that I shall not be standing here at the Dispatch Box this time next year speaking to the same motion.

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16.*

The House divided: Ayes 404, Noes 8.

Division No. 87] **[4:39 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Ancram, rh Michael
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Austin, John
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, rh Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cabom, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*

Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flook, Adrian
Follett, Barbara
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, rh Oliver
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackay, rh Andrew
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Selous, Andrew
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*

Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watkinson, Angela
Watts, David
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Charlotte Atkins and
Mr. Ivor Caplin

NOES

Burnside, David
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Hermon, Lady
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Trimble, rh David
Wilkinson, John

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Iris Robinson and
Mr. Roy Beggs

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (Amnesty Period) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 20th January, be approved.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Continuance of Part VII) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 23rd January, be approved.

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 7th January, be approved.

Question agreed to.

Direct Rail Services

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Derek Twigg.]*

4.55 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise in Parliament an issue of urgent concern to the people whom I represent in Wilmslow and the surrounding area. Owing to the way our business has panned out today, I could speak for—

Bob Russell (Colchester): Two and a half hours.

Mr. Osborne: Indeed. In fact, that is about the time it takes to travel from Wilmslow to London by train. However, despite a request from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), that we make this debate lengthy and that as many people should take part as possible, I intend to keep my remarks relatively brief.

As I am sure that many Members know, Wilmslow used to be a major station on the west coast main line. Trains between London and Manchester used to stop there regularly during the day. Sadly, over time, the service has shrunk and shrunk, until currently only three trains a day from Manchester call at Wilmslow on their way to London, and only four call there on their way back in the afternoon. The services remain hugely popular with passengers, however, and are very important to the town that I represent.

I asked for the debate because it has emerged that the Strategic Rail Authority is on the brink of scrapping these important services. As far as I can tell, it will do so with no consultation with local people or local businesses and without—apparently—paying any attention to the views of Virgin Trains, the operator which actually runs the service. Indeed, one has to be something of a Sherlock Holmes even to work out that the SRA is about to end the Wilmslow to London service. No press release has ever been issued. No statement has been made. There is nothing on the SRA website.

On Friday, I visited Wilmslow station to see if there were any clues there, but even Sherlock would have found nothing. There is nothing on the notice board to warn passengers that the service to London could be axed. There is nothing in the train timetables. When I asked staff behind the ticket counter, they knew nothing about the plans either.

As the local MP, I first knew of the proposal only last month when I read the "Mid Cheshire Rail Report", which I am sure is a popular journal. It is produced by a dedicated voluntary group of rail users who had spotted a clue in the SRA's west coast strategy consultation document, published last year on 9 October. I have a copy before me.

The document sets out the Government's plans for completing the modernisation of the west coast main line and explains how services will run when that modernisation is complete. The document begins with admirable honesty by admitting:

"The West Coast project is a mess, and it is time for bold action."

[Mr. Osborne]

The chairman of the SRA, Richard Bowker, states that the draft strategy

"reflects a need to get a grip on the project, to secure a way forward which is deliverable, addresses the needs of all the route's users and represents value for money".

I understand that the SRA will produce a final strategy once it has received and analysed the responses to the consultation document.

The west coast strategy document is obviously familiar to the Government, as a debate was held about it in Westminster Hall on 23 October. At that time I asked the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. Member for Warley (Mr. Spellar), for an assurance that the west coast upgrade would not lead to a worse service for my constituents and that the same number of direct trains would continue to stop at Wilmslow. It was a reasonable question. After all, during the modernisation of the west coast service my constituents have borne a heavy burden. They have already suffered many delays due to the updating of the line. Indeed, for the first part of next year, the entire line through Wilmslow will be closed, as part of that modernisation. So I did not think it unreasonable to ask the Minister of State for an assurance that, having paid a heavy price for modernisation, the people whom I represent would receive the same service at the end of the process, but he did not respond to my specific request. I do not particularly blame him for that, and I did not think much about it at the time because I assumed that, if there had been threat to the Wilmslow service, it would have been flagged up in the strategic document.

What I had not appreciated was that the SRA is planning that no trains should stop at Wilmslow. I had not appreciated that fact because those plans are not mentioned in the strategy document. In fact, Wilmslow is not mentioned in the entire document. Only when we look very carefully and do a bit of detective work, as the mid-Cheshire rail users group has done, do we see what is really planned.

The table on page 12 is entitled, "Typical journey times in minutes, number of stops and daytime service levels (Monday to Friday) for long distance passenger services from London", and it tells us that from September next—from winter 2004, as it puts it—there will be 29 trains a day between Manchester and London and that those trains will go via Stoke-on-Trent, which is on a different line from Wilmslow. That is fine, because that service is very similar to the one that currently operates. It stops at Stoke and Macclesfield, and it will be familiar to hon. Members who use it—indeed, I do so every week.

A further service is mentioned, called the Manchester peak fast service, which is the new crown jewel in the west coast main line modernisation strategy, and the document says that there will be three fast trains a day on that service. I understand that those trains will use the Crewe line, which goes through Wilmslow. That would be fine as well, because, as I say, a couple of services use that line and stop at Wilmslow every day. However, the detail of the table shows that only one stop is planned for that service. That stop could be Wilmslow, Stockport or elsewhere, but everyone now assumes that it will not be Wilmslow and that it will probably be Stockport. So if we look hard at that rather innocuous table—for example, at the asterisk at the bottom, which indicates that three trains currently routed via Crewe will instead go via Stoke—and we add it all together, we reach the conclusion that the current service from Wilmslow to London will be scrapped, but that is not spelled out in the document at all.

What the document does not say, of course, is that this is being done because the journey time from Manchester to London would be two hours and four minutes if those trains stopped at Wilmslow when the new fast service starts. If the trains do not stop at Wilmslow, the journey time will be one hour and 59 minutes—miraculously, one minute less than two hours. Of course that is a huge selling point. At the end of the west coast main line modernisation, the SRA will be able to say that journey times from Manchester to London are under two hours, even if only by a couple of minutes.

Those who will have to pay the price and who will suffer because those minutes will be shaved off the journey time are the people whom I represent in Wilmslow who use that service. Of course, that is not stated anywhere in the consultation document. Indeed, it could be argued that the document deliberately sets out to obscure that truth from people, and it has not been noticed by any business, local community leader or any stakeholder in Wilmslow, until recently.

All my attempts to get the truth out of the SRA or just to get a straight answer about what it is planning to do with that service, which is important to my constituents, had failed until about two hours ago. On 24 January, I wrote to Richard Bowker, the chairman of the SRA, asking him what was planned for the Wilmslow to London service. I thought that, as the Member of Parliament who represents Wilmslow, it would be only reasonable for me to know. For three weeks, I have not had an answer. For the past week, I have been calling his office every day to try to get one, but by some miracle, a reply was faxed to me two hours ago. It is amazing what an Adjournment debate will do to concentrate the minds of those in Departments, non-governmental agencies and bodies such as the SRA. Unfortunately, the response was not worth waiting for, because Mr. Bowker still does not come clean about what exactly he plans to do with the Wilmslow service. His letter contains the Orwellian line:

"We are currently considering in depth what services need to be provided for Wilmslow to ensure a joined-up network for all rail users."

What on earth does that mean? He says that most trains between London and Manchester will not use the line that goes through Wilmslow so it will not be possible to insert additional stops at Wilmslow. But most trains currently do not use the line that goes through Wilmslow. A few trains every day do, and will continue to do so after the new strategy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): Exactly.

Mr. Osborne: I am glad that the Minister's comment will appear on the record. I know that he is keen on rail services in the north-west of England and I look forward to hearing from him. I hope that those trains will

continue to stop at Wilmslow—that is the whole point of this Adjournment debate. I am not asking for additional stops at Wilmslow, much as I would like them. I am simply asking for the service to remain the same in the future as it is today.

Richard Bowker then says that he has consulted

"passenger representatives, local authorities and other interested stakeholders."

Well, I have consulted passengers, local authorities and stakeholders in the Wilmslow area and not one of them had any idea, until I told them, that the SRA was planning to scrap the Wilmslow service. It is not surprising that they did not have a clue because, I repeat, the word "Wilmslow" does not even appear in any of the consultation documents. The letter makes no attempt to explain the SRA's plans or the rationale behind them. Mr. Bowker helpfully ends the letter by saying:

"I understand that you have previously discussed this issue with Stuart Baker, our West Coast Main Line Director."

However, I have never met Stuart Baker or discussed anything with him, although I am happy to do so in the future.

If the SRA is supposed to be the body that restores public confidence in the Government's rail programme, it needs to learn some lessons about being straight with the public and straight with the people who represent them in this House. Thankfully, I have discovered someone who does seem willing to tell me the truth about the future of the Wilmslow-London service, and that is Chris Green, the chief executive of Virgin Trains. Three weeks ago, he came to Chester to speak at an excellent rail conference that was organised by John Richards, the current high sheriff of Cheshire. He used his office to organise that conference to talk about rail services in Cheshire, and he persuaded several key players in the industry to come to Chester to take part.

I was a member of the audience and I asked Mr. Green what he knew of the SRA's plans to cut the Wilmslow service, and for the first time I got a straight answer. I took notes of what he said, and they are as accurate as I could make them without the use of shorthand. He said:

"Wilmslow is obviously a very important rail head, but the SRA feels that the London to Manchester service can only stop once, probably at Stockport, because of the publicity merits of having a 1 hour 59 minute service journey time to Manchester. We don't care whether the journey time is 1 hour 59 minutes or 2 hours 4 minutes, we want to stop at both Stockport and Wilmslow".

I am not surprised that Virgin wants to go on stopping at Wilmslow, because it is good business for them. Many people use the service, and pay top fares for doing so. According to figures provided to me today—miraculously—by Virgin Trains, 78,000 passenger journeys are made every year between Wilmslow and London, which is more than a couple of hundred passengers a day. We should also remember that only three trains stop at Wilmslow on the way from Manchester to London. Together, those journeys generate an annual revenue of around £3.1 million for the company. It is not surprising that the chief executive wants to keep the service and the lucrative business. I am not talking about trying to save a train line that no one uses or that the train company wants to stop operating. It is a popular service that the train company wants to continue to operate.

Mr. Green thinks that the disadvantage in publicity terms of just missing the two-hour London-Manchester journey time target is more than outweighed by the advantage of stopping at Wilmslow to pick up lots of passengers. If that is the commercial judgment of the chief executive of Virgin Trains, which actually runs the service, I want to know on what grounds the SRA feels that it can second-guess him. What are its grounds for overruling the judgment of the train operator? Where is the evidence? What does it think the impact will be on those passengers who rely on the service? What assessment has it made of the effect on businesses in the Wilmslow area? What consultation has taken place with local people? We have seen nothing from the SRA, because it has told us nothing about its plans, or even that it had plans in the first place. If the SRA will not ask local people what they think, I will have to tell it, as, obviously, I have received loads of letters from constituents who use the service.

My constituent John Hillmer says that he is "dismayed" about the decision. Another constituent, Mrs. Yotty, who is a regular user of the service, thinks that the plan is "utterly ludicrous". She says:

"I am seriously thinking of going back to my car".

So much for the targets in the 10-year transport plan to get people to use trains. Mrs. Knight, a pensioner in my constituency, says that she is "disgusted" and "angry" about what is being planned. Jim Crockatt, an excellent local councillor, says that he objects

"in the strongest possible terms".

Mr. Colin Jones says that he is "very angry", and that he "cannot believe" what is being planned.

If the SRA wants to dismiss the views of individual passengers, let me tell it what other groups are saying. The chief executive of Macclesfield borough council, David Parr, wrote to Mr. Bowker on 28 January and copied the letter to me. He wrote that

"the Wilmslow-Euston connection is a critical service to the local community and is well supported locally. At a time when public rail transport is critical to an integrated transport strategy, it is surprising that the SRA is proposing such a short-sighted approach".

He went on to ask Mr. Bowker whether he could share with the council the full rationale for the proposals.

Another huge employer in my constituency, AstraZeneca, the world's fourth largest pharmaceutical company, which employs more than 5,000 people in my constituency, last year, according to its figures, spent £750,000 on 6,500 train tickets to London. It is therefore a big user of the train service. Its site manager at Alderley Park, the big research centre in my constituency, has said:

"As a major global employer based in the North West and Cheshire, we would urge you"—

the Strategic Rail Authority—

"to at least consult on the future of the Wilmslow West Coast Main Line stop. It would be in the interests of the communities served by the station, including major business users, to see a measured and considered approach to the provision of rail services. As a significant business stakeholder and a user of the service, we would be happy to provide further information and participate in taking the matter forward".

[Mr. Osborne]

Surely the SRA is not so arrogant as to ignore a request such as that from one of Britain's leading companies? I repeat that it all it wants to do is

"provide further information and participate in taking the matter forward."

Before I give the Minister a chance to respond—perhaps he will respond at length, given the time available—let me say that I realise that the plans to end the Wilmslow service are not the Government's plans. They are not dreamt up by the Minister or the Department for Transport, but they are the plans of the Strategic Rail Authority. That authority acts under the directions and guidance of the Secretary of State, and the Government are ultimately responsible for its decisions.

I would therefore ask the Minister the following questions. First, is he prepared to ask the Strategic Rail Authority to look again at the plans to end the Wilmslow-London direct service? Secondly, will he ask the Strategic Rail Authority to be open with the public about what its plans are, and about why it feels able to second-guess the commercial judgment of Virgin Trains? Thirdly, will he require the SRA to conduct a proper consultation with the passengers, businesses and other organisations affected, of the kind proposed by AstraZeneca, before proceeding with plans to end the Wilmslow service?

What we are talking about today is a popular, lucrative train service used by 78,000 passengers a year. It is a service that passengers want, businesses want and the train operating company, Virgin, wants. The Strategic Rail Authority plans to ignore that and scrap the route to shave a couple of minutes off the Manchester-London journey time, and bring it to within a whisker below two hours. The chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority claims that he has consulted on the plans, but he issued a consultation document that did not mention them at all. He says that he is reviewing the responses, but no one who will be affected had a chance to respond. By the time we all woke up to what was happening, the date for responses to the consultation had passed. It was the worst kind of high-handed, arrogant and secretive decision making. It will hit the people whom I represent very hard. It is a textbook example of how Government agencies should not behave. I ask the Minister to use his power and influence to intervene and save this vital train service.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) on securing this debate and providing us with a welcome opportunity to discuss important matters. He has spoken with clarity and enormous charm, as he always does. I hope that he will not need Holmesian powers of deduction to understand my explanation of the current status of Wilmslow station. I hope that I can be clear.

I do not have Holmesian powers of deduction. However, paragraph A13.20 on page 38 of the Strategic Rail Authority's consultative document refers to the Crewe-Sandbach-Cheadle Hulme line. That is the line on which Wilmslow lies, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It is true that not every station is mentioned in the document, but I assure him that the station in his constituency has not been left out. If he looks at the document again he will see that.

Mr. Osborne: From memory, the Minister is referring to the appendix to the consultation document, where he will see that the word "Wilmslow" is mentioned only twice, on two maps. The appendix does not make it clear that the Wilmslow service is under any threat at all.

Mr. Jamieson: I thought that the hon. Gentleman had said that the document contained no reference to Wilmslow, but now he tells us that there are two references. I assure him that Wilmslow is there, contained on the line. I am sure that many other stations are not mentioned explicitly but are on lines that are discussed in the document.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, Wilmslow is on the west coast main line, on the branch between Crewe and Stockport. The west coast main line has been the subject of much debate over the years in this House, and rightly so. It is the most important trunk route on Britain's rail network, linking London to the midlands, the north-west and Scotland, and carrying local and long-distance high-speed passenger traffic. The line is also the core national freight route and has significant commuting flows around London, Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham. The route is undergoing a much-publicised programme of modernisation and upgrading.

It may help if I briefly explain the history of the works to give some context to the debate over future service levels. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will realise that that history underpins much of the SRA's thinking on the important matters that he has raised.

The works represent the first major investment on the line since it was electrified in the 1960s and 1970s. The route was extensively renewed and upgraded at that time, but work carried out since has been very limited. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became apparent that significant expenditure was required if the line was to be kept up to modern standards and allow capacity for growth. British Rail contemplated upgrades but no investment plans emerged until the passenger upgrade 1 and passenger upgrade 2 agreements between the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising and Railtrack, and Virgin Trains and Railtrack, signed in 1996 and 1998 respectively. Those planned upgrades have been fraught with difficulties. We all know now that Railtrack massively underestimated and undervalued the scale of the work required. As costs rocketed, the time scales for completion were put back again and again. For months, Railtrack struggled to keep a grip on the project. Eventually, it became apparent that the original outputs could not be delivered.

The users of the route were left in limbo, unsure of what would be provided, how many train paths would be allocated, and when. As Railtrack spiralled into administration, it became apparent that someone else would have to pick up the pieces.

That task was taken on by the Strategic Rail Authority, the body that we established in 2001 to bring the effective leadership and direction to the industry that had been lacking under the previous privatisation. The authority decided that it was time to develop realistic

strategies for completing the project and allocating capacity on a fair basis to meet, as far as possible, the needs of the different users of the line: freight, local passenger services and high-speed, long-distance services.

On 29 August last year, the authority announced a new master plan to accelerate the west coast works. This was agreed in conjunction with Railtrack and the passenger train and freight operating companies. It changed the programme from a prolonged series of weekend works to dedicated line possessions. The new programme is based around a series of strategic projects, including two 17-week total line possessions. The first will take place later this year between Colwich in Staffordshire and Cheadle Hulme, the section of line that carries the trains from Manchester to London via Stoke. The second is scheduled for the beginning of 2004 on the route from Crewe to Cheadle Hulme on which Wilmslow is situated.

In both closure periods, direct north-to-south services will be maintained. They will go through Crewe when the Stoke branch is closed and vice versa. When rail services cannot operate, an alternative road service will be provided linking those stations that are closed with those that are not. By adopting such an approach, more than 60 miles of new railway will be delivered in a little over four months. Under the previous delivery programme, that could have taken up to two years.

Coupled with a series of additional work programmes on the route south of Crewe, the new railway will provide the much-needed extra capacity and increased line speeds of up to 125 mph by 2004. I am sure that that is enormously good news to the people of Tatton, not least those in Wilmslow. I know that closing sections of the line will cause disruption, but the work has to be done sooner or later and this method will ensure disruption is kept to a minimum. The authority and the train operators have worked extremely hard on planning alternative rail services and, where necessary, road services to mitigate the disruption. As the west coast main line has faced decades of neglect, it is hardly surprising that such tough decisions have had to be taken.

Having agreed a strategy for delivering the upgrade, in October last year, the authority turned its attention to the allocation of capacity on the line. Recognising that demand would outstrip availability, and keen to ensure a solution that addressed the needs of all the different users of the route so far as it is possible, the authority launched a draft strategy and consultation process. In producing the draft strategy, the authority sought input from the entire railway industry, including Network Rail and the affected operators, both passenger and freight. On publication of the draft strategy, a vast array of interested parties were invited to comment. They included industry bodies, the rail passengers committees, local authorities and the regional development agencies.

The process is a positive example of consultative, co-operative working by the industry and stakeholders. A large number of responses were received from all levels of interest, including from many members of the public and possibly the hon. Gentleman's constituents. The SRA has therefore established a detailed picture of the aspirations of the industry and passengers alike. The consultation closed on 16 October and the authority is currently working up final proposals. At this stage, no final decisions have been taken.

What does the draft strategy say? The authority explicitly states that the overriding aim is to ensure that the project delivers value for taxpayers' money and that the passenger and freight operators receive early improvements. Nobody will argue with that. Furthermore, the strategy has to be affordable. The days of Railtrack's back-of-an-envelope calculations are well and truly over. Of course, to do that, hard choices have to be made. The authority has reconsidered capacity requirements for each type of traffic—passenger and freight—to maximise the opportunities to fit in with other types. Choices have to be made between fast and stopping services, and between passenger and freight services. Those choices seek to ensure the best consensus, given that there is not infinite capacity to meet all demands.

In discussions between the authority and Virgin Trains, the company has made it apparent that its favoured route between Manchester and London would be via Stoke, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. That is the shorter of the two possible routes, the alternative being via Wilmslow and Crewe. The SRA and Network Rail support that view, so the Stoke line will be the key route for Virgin Trains services. I do not think that he will be surprised to hear that. However, there may still be scope for running some direct services through Wilmslow, and it is even possible that the current service of three trains a day will be maintained if it is demonstrated that it offers value for money and is workable within the overall service pattern. The Strategic Rail Authority is considering those matters in the light of the responses to its consultation.

Whatever the outcome of those deliberations, passengers travelling from Wilmslow to the north or south will be able to take advantage of enhanced west coast services by connecting at Crewe, Stockport or Manchester, about 25 minutes away by local train services, as many passengers do at present. The draft strategy envisages that the service from Crewe can be increased from 32 trains daily at present to 42 trains in 2004. The journey time from Crewe to London could be reduced from about two hours and eight minutes to about one hour and 43 minutes. Similarly, there will be capacity to increase the service from Manchester from 20 trains a day at present to 29 from 2004, with a journey time reduction to London of half an hour through the provision of 125 mph trains. New Pendolino trains will be provided, the first of which is already in service between Manchester and London. A substantial proportion of the fleet is due to be in service for the winter 2004 timetable.

Mr. Osborne: The Minister correctly said that the west coast main line modernisation will increase capacity and add a number of additional train services. Does he therefore accept that the people whom I represent will find it particularly difficult to understand why their three services a day may be lost? There is more room for those services, not less.

Mr. Jamieson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman now accepts the value of the Government's enormous investment in the west coast main line and the way in

[Mr. Jamieson]

which it will improve capacity in his area. Those of us who represent other parts of the country would very much like some of that investment in our areas.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke): Hear, hear.

Mr. Jamieson: The Whip agrees. I have made it clear to the hon. Member for Tatton that, because that work has been carried out, there is an opportunity for the services that currently stop at Wilmslow to be considered. Had we not carried out that work and pursued the route taken in the 1990s, I assure him that, in the unhappy event of his party forming a Government, there would be no service at all on that line. He is nodding sagely as if to agree.

Mr. Osborne: I certainly am not.

Mr. Jamieson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on that development, and that his constituents will give it careful consideration.

The modernisation of the line will provide better punctuality and reliability. The SRA is targeting 90 per cent. of trains to arrive on time by 2008. All this, as I have said, represents substantial expenditure. While the total project cost is about £9.8 billion, the bulk of that is to be spent on renewals, returning the west coast main line to acceptable modern standards. The upgrade work itself has a cost of about £2.3 billion. That is a huge commitment from the Government, but one that we are clear that we must make. The west coast main line is a flagship project. After a series of knocks and setbacks, a deliverable and affordable plan has now emerged. The project is fully under control. The SRA and its industry partners are striving to achieve the best overall balance for the users of the line. I understand that its final strategy is due to be published within weeks and will contain full details of the services to be provided.

If the hon. Gentleman has further queries, I am sure that he will enter into a dialogue with the SRA, which I assure him will be happy to speak to him about his concerns. I hope that my remarks this evening in the short time available will prevent him from fretting needlessly. I am grateful to him for raising the matter and giving us an opportunity to air it, and I hope that my comments will bring him and his constituents some comfort.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Five o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 12 February 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

TRANSAS GROUP BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Wednesday 26 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Economic Development (South-west Wales)

1. **Mr. Martin Caton** (Gower): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister in the National Assembly about economic development potential in south-west Wales. [96343]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Peter Hain): I have regular discussions with the First Minister about economic development, which is particularly helped by objective 1 funding, under which 187 projects in south-west Wales have been approved so far, attracting £66 million of grants.

Mr. Caton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Will he join me in welcoming the formation of the Gorseinon community development trust, a local vehicle for creating jobs in a community that has recently been hard hit by works closures? Will he use his best endeavours to effect the trust's proposals for an enterprise village on the old Corus Bryngwyn works in Gorseinon?

Peter Hain: I welcome both proposals. There is a genuine prospect of creating world-class facilities throughout south-west Wales. They include the excellent and exciting tourist facility of Bluestone in Pembrokeshire. I hope that Pembrokeshire coast national park and Pembrokeshire county council will speed through the application as quickly as possible.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The Secretary of State knows that the KTH plant in Llanidloes is threatened with closure. If it closed and 250 jobs went, the economic impact on a town of only a couple of thousand residents would be as serious as the difficulties in south-west Wales. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore be willing to accept a representation from the town taskforce, which is trying to ensure that we do not lose the jobs or that they are replaced if we encounter problems with KTH?

Peter Hain: I will certainly be happy to meet a delegation, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be in attendance. I am worried about the development because I appreciate that KTH is a vital local employer in Llanidloes. The First Minister has asked Team Wales to investigate the possibility of saving jobs and maintaining that vital facility.

Denzil Davies (Llanelli): My right hon. Friend will be well aware of the proposals to develop further the motor racing circuit at Pembrey and the adjoining airport. When he meets the First Minister, will he press him to ensure that the necessary infrastructure funds are available for two projects that will give the economy of south-west Wales an enormous boost?

Peter Hain: My right hon. Friend is right. I have had the privilege of racing—not very quickly—on Pembrey motor racing circuit in a car sponsored by the Welsh Development Agency. The projects for the circuit and the airfield constitute an exciting prospect and they need support. I shall do everything possible to help. I have already discussed the matter with the Minister for Economic Development, who is also keen on the projects.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The manufacturing sector is hardest hit in south-west Wales. To name only one company, Dewhirst closed three factories with the loss of 900 jobs and moved production to Morocco. Why does the Secretary of State believe that manufacturing confidence is so low and declining in Wales? Is it because of the climate change levy, the landfill tax increases, the fuel tax rises, the working time directive, the business rate rises, the huge increase in red tape, massive extra costs to business to operate the benefits system through the payroll or the extra jobs tax that will hit industry in April and siphon millions of pounds into Government coffers that should be invested in business?

Peter Hain: I find the hon. Gentleman's concern for manufacturing in Wales very touching given that the Tories massacred the sector in the 1980s and early 1990s. As I understand it, most Dewhirst workers have been able to get new jobs or are in the process of finding them. Yes, manufacturers have had a tough time, principally because of the high pound, but we are doing all that we can to support them. There is much good news about new investment by manufacturers in Wales and employment in Wales. Unemployment fell to 5.2 per cent. in December. That is great news because it brings Wales to the same level as the rest of the United Kingdom. Instead of lagging behind, we have lower unemployment than the United States of America, Canada, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

Mr. Evans: The Secretary of State took his eye off the ball at the Convention on the Future of Europe and was

clearly outflanked. I do not want him to do that for manufacturing jobs in south-west Wales. He knows that the Confederation of British Industry in Wales has already said that there are problems with the dualling of roads, congestion on the M4 and the trains between Cardiff and west Wales. Time and again, I have mentioned the potential to boost investment in Swansea and west Wales that Swansea airport offers. Will the Secretary of State hold talks with his colleagues and business leaders in Wales to ascertain what can be done to remove the barriers to economic growth in south-west Wales to attract more jobs there?

Peter Hain: Not only will I meet business leaders in Wales; I met the director of CBI Wales on Monday, and the director general of the Institute of Directors yesterday. They fully support our strategy to develop a world-class economy in Wales. Rather than continually kicking Welsh businesses in the teeth, as the hon. Gentleman does, and continually running Wales down, they remember that the Tories massacred about 1 million manufacturing jobs when they were in power. We are supporting manufacturing. The Welsh economy is on the up. The hon. Gentleman should be praising it, not kicking it.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): My right hon. Friend will know of two major developments of national importance in west Wales that affect my constituency. He just mentioned one, the Bluestone project; the other is the Petroplus plan for a liquefied natural gas importation terminal, for which Pembrokeshire county council granted consent yesterday. Will my right hon. Friend also support that project, and do everything possible to ensure that the high-pressure gas pipeline is extended down to Pembrokeshire so that the project is not put at risk?

Peter Hain: I have met Petroplus representatives, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State did so yesterday. The project in Milford Haven is very exciting: it will put Pembrokeshire at the forefront of energy supply. We will do all that we can to support it, and given my hon. Friend's additional support the future looks very bright.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the Secretary of State agree that Government policy—and indeed, the efforts of the Welsh Development Agency—contribute to the success of economic development in Wales? Might it not be of benefit for regional development agencies to come together to share experience and expertise, and avoid unnecessary competition?

Peter Hain: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Air Transport

2. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): What assessment he has made of the future of air transport in Wales. [96344]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Peter Hain): Air transport is important to the economy of Wales and has a good future. The Department for Transport and the National Assembly are currently consulting on an air transport strategy for Wales.

Mr. Smith: My right hon. Friend will know of the excellent document produced by the Welsh Affairs Committee under the guidance and leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones). It demonstrates that air transport depends on the continued success of Cardiff international airport. It also points out that if the success created by the involvement of bmibaby is to be built on, road access must be improved, and the existing road to the airport must be upgraded immediately. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will meet his counterpart in the National Assembly, and get the road upgraded as a matter of urgency?

Peter Hain: I agree that the report is excellent. The Welsh Affairs Committee does produce excellent reports—provided that it does not criticise the Secretary of State, of course!

Cardiff airport is now the fastest-growing regional airport in Britain. It was used by 1.5 million passengers last year, and the number is forecast to rise to 3.5 million over the coming years. Yes, the road link is crucial. When I was the Minister responsible for transport in Wales between 1997 and 1999, I tried to do something about it. I will now do all that I can to support my hon. Friend's enthusiasm, and I will receive any representations he wishes to make and any delegations he wishes to bring.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The right hon. Gentleman will know of the threat to 160 jobs at the airfield in Llanbedwr, in my constituency. An American aeronautical company is interested in taking the airfield over lock, stock and barrel. Will the right hon. Gentleman please liaise with the First Minister and other Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the company is given all possible assistance, so that jobs can be saved and the area rejuvenated?

Peter Hain: I should be delighted to do that. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will do all that I can. If he wishes to make any further representations to me, we can work together in achieving that objective.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn): My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) referred to the Welsh Affairs Committee's report, "Transport in Wales", which recommends that a north-south link be established as soon as possible. Does my right hon. Friend agree that RAF Valley, which is in my constituency, is well placed to be the principal link, considering its existing infrastructure and technology, thereby linking the mother of Wales with the capital of Wales? Will he press his Cabinet colleagues and his colleagues in Cardiff to ensure that subsidies are discussed, and that the issue is included in the White Paper that my right hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for transport will produce?

Peter Hain: Yes, I will certainly do all of those things. I had the advantage of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency with him a few months ago. I became very

aware of the excellent facility provided by RAF Valley, which could be a springboard for vital north-south air links. I hope that the Welsh Assembly Government will take this forward, and I shall certainly support it in every way that I can. We need speedy and efficient air links between north and south Wales, and, indeed, between other regions of Wales. Swansea airport, which the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) mentioned—I know that he has been a big supporter of it—should be included in that.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his comments, and I should like to add my support to RAF Valley and its commercial use. However, British Airways has treated the people of Cardiff and Wales rather shabbily through its recent announcement that it is about to withdraw. Frankly, its announcement that the people of Wales can still fly BA as long as they travel from Bristol or Birmingham is a disgrace, and an insult to them. Will the Secretary of State congratulate Air Wales and bmibaby, which has announced that it will increase the number routes that it flies, and apparently is considering several other routes as well? Will he meet Tony Davies of bmibaby and Roy Thomas of Air Wales to establish the potential for those companies' providing the routes that BA has withdrawn from, and to establish whether other possibilities exist to ensure that Cardiff airport—for goodness sake, it is the regional airport of Wales—gets the support that it desperately needs?

Peter Hain: I agree with all of the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, and I should be happy to receive any such delegations. I had the advantage of visiting Cardiff heliport, which is an excellent facility and is probably the best heliport in Europe. I learned of its plan, in discussion with British Airways, to provide a shuttle service to Heathrow and to Gatwick. If we can get that off the ground, so that passengers can check in at Cardiff heliport and go straight through to Heathrow or Gatwick, that will be a marvellous facility. BA's withdrawal from Cardiff was very sad; however, bmibaby is doing a great job in filling the gap.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Given the plan to open a passenger service from Bridgend to Barry and Cardiff through the Vale of Glamorgan, which will pass within spitting distance of Cardiff international airport, will my right hon. Friend meet the Strategic Rail Authority to persuade it to invest in extra track to enable an excellent rail link to the airport?

Peter Hain: I should be happy to do that. As my hon. Friend knows, a start will be made later this year through a new link between Cardiff central station and Rhoose airport, which will serve Cardiff airport. If we can link it with Bridgend, that would be even better.

CAP Reform

3. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the impact of reforms of the common agricultural policy on Wales. [96345]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend and I have regular meetings with the First Secretary, the Assembly's Agriculture Secretary and Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss a variety of issues, including reform of the common agricultural policy.

Miss McIntosh: With Welsh farmers still reeling from the effects of the foot and mouth crisis, what assurance can the hon. Gentleman give that their interests will be looked after in the mid-term review of the CAP, as opposed to those of part-time French and German farmers in particular, with whom they are competing?

Mr. Touhig: It is recognised that we need reform of the CAP in order to obtain a better balance between agricultural support and rural development. That will mean more money for environmental and rural development, and less direct subsidies. Currently, the CAP costs €40 billion. The Government are working in partnership with our colleagues in the Assembly actively to ensure that the interests of Welsh farmers are protected. It is also important to get the message out to Welsh farmers—the Farmers Union of Wales was here recently, and I attended one of its events—that a range of measures exists to give them support in coping with changes to environmental, food safety and animal welfare matters. I am certainly happy to work with them in any way to make sure that they get all the help and support that they need.

Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Is my hon. Friend aware of the serious problems caused in the farming community due to late payments under the integrated administration and control scheme? What progress is being made to sort out those problems, which cause real hardship?

Mr. Touhig: I am aware of the point that my hon. Friend makes; there have been some problems with the payment scheme. They resulted from the introduction of a new computer system, which had difficulty in coping with the volume of payments. It would of course be inappropriate to make payments unless the necessary controls were in place. Despite those short-term difficulties, however, I am given to understand, through discussions with Assembly colleagues who are responsible for the matter, that that major change will benefit farmers in the long term.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire): The proposed modulation system in the mid-term review will have an unfair impact on British farmers, because of the reluctance of Governments in the past to claim funds for pillar 2. Welsh farmers in the less favoured areas will be particularly badly affected. Will the Minister hold discussions with the Liberal Democrat Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Assembly to ensure that Welsh farmers are not treated so badly?

Mr. Touhig: I am happy to discuss anything with Ministers in the Labour-led Assembly—*[Interruption.]*—that will be in place after 1 May.

Modulation and digression will not affect all farmers evenly, as the hon. Gentleman may be aware. Farmers receiving a single payment of less than €5,000 will be exempt. Initial estimates suggest that about 40 per cent. of farmers in Wales would be exempt from modulation.

Miners' Compensation

4. **Mr. Martyn Jones** (Clwyd, South): What progress has been made on miners' compensation payments in Wales. [96346]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): On the most recent figures I have available, in Wales we have paid £185 million under the respiratory disease scheme and £82 million under the vibration white finger scheme. Full and final payments have been made to 12,786 and 8,343 claimants respectively. That is significant and welcome progress, but the Government recognise that much more remains to be done. We intend to keep up the pressure to ensure that justice is delivered to our miners, their widows and their families. As chair of the monitoring group in Wales, I shall certainly play my part in that process.

Mr. Jones: I thank the Minister for that reply, which shows a sharp contrast to the lack of progress under 18 years of Tory government. However, a couple of cases are still outstanding, mainly due to the fact that the handling agreement between various employers of miners—British Coal, Wimpey and so on—does not work. Will my hon. Friend speak to the Department of Trade and Industry to move things along for the few people who are still experiencing problems with the agreement? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will the House come to order? It is unfair to hon. Members.

Mr. Touhig: Since January 2002, the number of full and final offers has increased from 2,800 to 18,700, and the number of full and final payments made has increased from 2,400 to 12,800. That is significant progress. I shall take on board, however, the point that my hon. Friend made. If he brings the details of those cases to my attention, I shall, as chair of the monitoring group, undertake to investigate the matter and get back to him.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my hon. Friend knows, miners in all our constituencies are still dying before they receive their compensation. I have to keep explaining to my constituents that the reason for that is the fact that the Conservatives fought the NUM in the courts and refused miners the compensation to which they were entitled. It was only when Labour Government came to power that the compensation was paid. We cannot make that point too often.

Mr. Touhig: I take my hon. Friend's point. There is no doubt that many miners who are no longer alive would have received their compensation had not the Conservative Government collaborated with British Coal to resist their justified claims. What is important is that last year we more than surpassed our target of 15,000 full and final offers. The monitoring group has decided to press IRISC—the Government's claims handlers—to make sure that the oldest miners, those most ill and widows are given top priority in receiving the next batch of payments. We will concentrate on that over the next six months, which I am sure right hon. and hon. Members welcome.

Research Establishments

5. **Adam Price** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): What proportion of Government research establishments are located in Wales. [96347]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): There are no figures available on the number of establishments. I recognise that, historically, Wales's share of research spend has been low—3 per cent. or about £65 million. The Government are taking steps to seek to redress that situation.

Adam Price: I am a little surprised at the Minister's answer. A figure is available for the number of Government research establishments in Wales—one. South-east England has a hugely disproportionate share. Why is not taxpayers' money used to counteract the existing concentration of the science base in the south-east?

Mr. Touhig: The Government, working in partnership with the National Assembly, are taking steps to improve the situation. The spending review announced the largest sustained increase in the science budget for more than a decade. The Government have announced a new tax credit aimed at boosting research and development. The National Assembly is about to launch its innovation action plan and has already established the economic research advisory panel to identify Wales's future research needs. We should contrast those developments with the policies of the hon. Gentleman's party, which, were it to come to power, would separate Wales from the United Kingdom, so there would be no investment from the UK. He will get that message on 1 May.

Firefighters' Dispute

6. **Julie Morgan** (Cardiff, North): What discussions he has had with the First Minister about the impact of the firefighters' dispute in Wales. [96348]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Peter Hain): I have regular discussions with the First Minister. I know that he shares my desire to see a just and affordable pay settlement for the firefighters to bring to an end to the current dispute.

Julie Morgan: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in the last five months of 2002, firefighters from Whitchurch fire station in my constituency made 648 home visits to vulnerable and elderly people to fit smoke alarms or replace batteries? Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating them and looking forward to a fair and just settlement?

Peter Hain: I will certainly do that. Firefighters do a marvellous job on behalf of us all, risking their lives to save ours. We want a settlement that is fair to them, other public service employees and the public whom firefighters serve.

Local Government Finance

7. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will meet the First Secretary to discuss the effects of proposed council tax rises in Monmouthshire and Torfaen. [96349]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend and I regularly meet the First Secretary to discuss matters affecting Wales.

Mr. Edwards: The Government have made a generous settlement for the Welsh Assembly, but there is concern in Monmouthshire and Torfaen about the distribution of funds from the Assembly to local authorities. Given that the vast bulk of local authority money goes to education and social services, what consideration has my hon. Friend given to the prospect of a 20 per cent. cut in public spending, which is the policy of the Conservative party?

Mr. Touhig: All sides recognise that the generous local authority settlement made by my colleague in the Assembly is most welcome. It underpins our commitment to investment in and reform of pubic services. As someone who spent 20 years as a councillor trying to defend my community from the cuts imposed by the then Tory Government, I know that the prospect of a 20 per cent. cut in public expenditure would devastate public services in Wales.

Public Ownership (Industry)

8. **Llew Smith** (Blaenau Gwent): If he will make it his policy to take a public ownership stake in each of the leading 25 sectors of industries in Wales measured by annual turnover. [96350]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Peter Hain): No.

Llew Smith: Prior to the election of the Labour Government in 1997, my right hon. Friend, while recognising the need to elect that Government, still believed that it would be impossible to regenerate the economy without taking a public stake in 25 of the top sectors of industry. I thought that was an eminently sensible suggestion. Does he still think so?

Peter Hain: My hon. Friend refers to something that I wrote 20 years ago. One of his predecessors, the great Nye Bevan, said that socialists must move with the times. I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that, just like company shares, the value of some policies can go down as well as up.

Trunk Roads

9. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport concerning improvements to trunk road links between mid-Wales and the west midlands. [96351]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend and I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and Assembly Ministers about issues affecting Wales. More than 2 million visitors come to mid-Wales each year, and 20 per cent. of them travel from the west midlands. Good-quality roads are vital to increasing the number of tourists coming to Wales.

Michael Fabricant: I am glad that the Minister recognises that, but 2 million is not enough—we should have 4 million. Does the Minister realise that we might get 4 million if only the link road—the A460, which links the new M6 toll road with the existing M54—were improved? What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that that happens?

Mr. Touhig: I have great affection for the hon. Gentleman, who is a passionate supporter of all things Welsh, which we welcome. However, it is amazing that he should demand extra spending when his party is committed to a 20 per cent. cut in public expenditure. He had better have a word with his Front Bench colleagues, because, as usual, the Tory party is at odds over those issues.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [97052] **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Boswell: It is a time of great anxiety at home and abroad, and we have an absolute need for frankness and accountability. In the light of today's revelations of ministerial pressure on the independent Audit Commission, which comes on top of last week's revelations about a questionable security dossier on Iraq, will the Prime Minister issue a simple and binding instruction that the spinning has to stop?

The Prime Minister: On the document, I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the part of the document that dealt with intelligence was indeed from intelligence sources, as the document stated. It is important that that

is underlined. Of course, especially at the moment, it is important that we give accurate information to people, and the information given was accurate.

Q2. [97053] **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend is aware that the good constituents of Chorley wonder whether, if the report from Dr. Blix on Friday states that more time is needed or more inspectors are needed, the Prime Minister will support that view and try to ensure that a peaceful solution is reached.

The Prime Minister: Of course we will take full account of anything that Dr. Blix says. I point out that he has said that the issue is not the need for more inspectors but the failure of Iraq to co-operate. I wish to make the point to my hon. Friend and, through him, to his constituents, that the issue of time for the inspectors is an issue of the time to make a judgment about whether Iraq is co-operating. If Iraq is co-operating, the inspectors can have as much time as they need and want to do their work. If Iraq is not co-operating, we have to be careful that we do not get sucked back into the situation we had in the 1990s, when the inspectors were in Iraq for years but, for example, the Iraqis denied the existence of their biological weapons programme, refused to co-operate with the inspectors, and said that it was all an invention of the CIA and the British security services. It was only when Saddam's son-in-law defected—he was later murdered by Saddam—that we discovered the existence of the programme. I agree that we have to take full account of what the inspectors say, but the issue that we come back to time and again, in order to avoid a conflict, is whether Iraq will co-operate fully or not.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): NATO has been the cornerstone of British security and ensured peace in Europe for decades. Now that France, Germany and Belgium have plunged NATO into one of its greatest crises, will the Prime Minister join me in condemning the action of those Governments, and will he tell the House what he intends to do to ensure that the Turks receive the protection to which they are entitled?

The Prime Minister: Of course we were one of the 16 members of NATO who wanted Turkey to be given that protection fully. Negotiations and discussions are going on in NATO at the moment and I hope that they are successful. I hope that we are able to fulfil our obligations to Turkey, because that is important for Turkey and for the NATO alliance.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The French and German actions have clearly undermined NATO but, when it comes to the UN and Iraq, it is absolutely right to work for a second resolution. Given that the Labour Party chairman has today described the threat to Heathrow as being on the same scale as 11 September, will the Prime Minister agree with me that our security and the disarmament of Saddam Hussein cannot be held to ransom by a French veto in the Security Council?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely for that reason that I think that it is important that we make sure that the will of the UN is upheld. On each occasion, we should go back to resolution 1441, which says that Iraq should have a final opportunity to disarm itself through the weapons inspectors, and that it has to co-operate fully. If Iraq is in breach of that resolution, I believe that action should follow. However, I still believe that it is possible that we shall attain a second resolution in the UN. I believe that the matter should be resolved through the UN. After all, the original instruction given to Saddam was an instruction from the UN.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Given the events of the past couple of weeks, and the different world views of France and Germany, what more would it take for the Prime Minister to reconsider his deep commitment to a single European foreign policy and army?

The Prime Minister: I thought that we would get to that sooner or later. I think that it would be immensely damaging to allow the debate about European defence to go on without British input. The most disastrous policy that this country could adopt is the empty-chair, opt-out policy in Europe that is the policy of the Opposition. As a result of the measures that we secured in negotiating European defence, there can be no European defence initiative in any field without the unanimous consent of all countries. That, therefore, gives us a veto over any initiative. It is important that we play our full part in European defence. Otherwise, the consequence would be, not that there was no European defence policy, but that it would exist without British input. That would be bad for Britain, NATO and Europe.

Q3. [97054] **Mr. Tony Lloyd** (Manchester, Central): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the British public remains largely sceptical about the case for military action against Iraq, but that they believe that the Americans will take military action almost come what may? Will he tell the House and the country why we should believe that a war now will make peace in the middle east more likely and in the end make Britain less of a target for terrorists?

The Prime Minister: I think that the best answer is to go back to first principles again. We decided to go through the UN to deal with this matter—and this is the absolute answer to those who say that we were hell bent on war, come what may—so that we could get a UN resolution in order to avoid war. If Saddam had complied fully with the resolution passed last November, conflict would not even be an issue today. The choice, in the end, is for Saddam. However, if we fail to implement resolution 1441, and if we lack the determination and resolution to make sure that that mandate is carried, the consequence will be that Saddam is free to develop weapons of mass destruction. Also, there will be an increasing risk that the threat of those weapons of mass destruction and the existing terrorist threat will join together. This country will then be less secure and safe. It is best to deal with this through the UN but, as I have said from the outset, the UN has to be the way to deal the matter, not the way to avoid dealing with it.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): As the questions from the hon. Members for

Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) and for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) made clear, every measure of public opinion shows that people are not persuaded of the case for the course of action being followed, despite all the persuasive efforts of the Prime Minister and the Government. Why does the Prime Minister think that that remains the case?

The Prime Minister: First, I think that those surveys of public opinion will be different if there is a second UN resolution, and I point out also that we are not yet in conflict. Secondly, however, I think that people do believe that Saddam is an evil man and a dictator, and that there is a threat to this country from his accumulated weapons of mass destruction, but that they ask, reasonably and rightly, whether there is not an alternative to war. The answer to that question is that there is an alternative to war and it is set out in the UN resolution. That alternative is full and complete co-operation with the UN inspectors. However, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept that, if that full and complete co-operation is not there, we have to find other means of enforcing the will of the UN. Otherwise, the threat to this country that people do accept is present will carry on in existence.

Mr. Kennedy: On the latter point, could the Prime Minister therefore be more explicit than he was to the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) a few minutes ago? If Dr. Blix requests more time on Friday, will the Prime Minister actively and publicly speak out in favour of that?

The Prime Minister: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) a moment or two ago, of course what Dr. Blix says is important and we will take full account of it, but the judgment that has to be made in the end is one by the Security Council as to whether there is full and complete co-operation by Iraq with the United Nations inspectors. I believe that those inspectors, if they were given that co-operation, could do their work very easily; but if they are not given that co-operation, surely, the right hon. Gentleman must see the danger that we get sucked back into delays of months and then years, with the inspectors playing a game of hide and seek with Saddam, and we are unable then to shut down the weapons of mass destruction programme that he accepts, that I accept and that everyone accepts is a threat and a danger to the world.

Q4. [97055] **Peter Bradley** (The Wrekin): Does my right hon. Friend not agree that differential student fees will help to create differential universities, awarding differential degrees to differential graduates with differential job prospects? If he does, can he tell me how that will fulfil our pledge to ensure equality of opportunity through our education system?

The Prime Minister: There are two separate issues. First, I would simply say to my hon. Friend that, of course, there is differential funding now for different universities. So, for example, Oxford or Cambridge will receive four times the amount of public funding as, let us say, Wolverhampton university. What is important is that, if those universities want even more money, it should not come simply from the taxpayer. The second thing I would say to him is that, since we know that 90 per cent. of young people in sixth forms go on to university, the absolute keys to access are the measures to improve standards in our secondary schools that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills is taking.

Q5. [97056] **Mr. Jonathan Sayeed** (Mid-Bedfordshire): There is no doubt about the danger posed by Saddam Hussein or about the deceit that he is prepared to practise, but is the Prime Minister certain that we are not allowing frustration and impatience to cloud our judgment, for what new threat, proven threat or imminent threat is there to justify war?

The Prime Minister: There is the threat that we have identified in the resolution last year and, indeed, for the past 12 years, and there are two ways of dealing with it. *[Interruption.]* Someone shouts out the word "containment". When we look at the issue and the moral background to the decisions that have to be taken, I agree that, before we take the decision to go to war, the morality of that should weigh heavily on our conscience because innocent people die as well as the guilty in a war, but let us look at the morality of the present policy that we have towards Iraq and the policy that we have had for the past 12 years—a policy of sanctions that, because of the way that Saddam has implemented those sanctions, leaves Iraq in this state: with 130 deaths per 1,000 children under the age of five, with 60 per cent. of the population on food aid, with half the Iraqis in rural areas having no access to safe water and with thousands of people imprisoned or killed every year as a result of Saddam's regime. The fact is that the only— *[Interruption.]* I am sorry; the only alternative to disarmament by the United Nations is that we keep sanctions in place year on year, and I am simply saying that that is also a moral choice with bad and devastating consequences for the Iraqi people.

Q6. [97057] **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): I apologise to the Prime Minister for distracting him from international matters, but he is aware of the campaign that has been run by the all-party group for haemophilia and the Haemophilia Society to get recombinant treatment for all haemophiliacs in the United Kingdom. Can he inform the House whether the Government have reached a decision and, if so, what it is?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, and he will be aware that the Government have now allocated just under £90 million for synthetic clotting factors to help those with the condition of haemophilia. That will be rolled out across the country in the months to come, and it will make a considerable difference to the treatment of that condition throughout the country.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): When the Prime Minister said that he would cut by half the number of people seeking asylum in this country by September, was that an aspiration or a firm pledge?

The Prime Minister: It was a firm commitment, of course.

Mr. Duncan Smith: On Friday, the Prime Minister said that his new asylum target was a pledge, although I see that he has now changed that; on Saturday, the Home Office said that it was undeliverable; and on Monday, his own spokesman from Downing street called it an aspiration—and all because this was another policy given to the Prime Minister by Alastair Campbell as he walked into the television studio. Why does the Government's asylum policy change every time the Prime Minister goes into a television studio to do an interview?

The Prime Minister: As I have no doubt that the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, having said that we will cut it by half by September, whatever it is called, we will be held to account for it—and so we should be. However, let me point out to him that what he is saying now is exactly the ridicule that he heaped on the street crime initiative. We remember at the time that that was described by the shadow Home Secretary as not having a prospect of being achieved. I might remind him today that street crime is 20 per cent. down on last year, and 33 per cent. down in London. The right hon. Gentleman will be eating his words on asylum too.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Violent crime up, burglaries up and gun crime doubled since this Government took over—that is not much of a record. The Prime Minister's asylum policy is in a complete shambles. We all know that. He scrapped the white list, then reintroduced it. He introduced vouchers, then scrapped them. He scrapped benefit changes, then reintroduced them. The last time the Prime Minister went on television, he said that he would renegotiate the convention on human rights, but his Home Secretary turned round and said that he could not. All the while, the number of asylum seekers is rising. It has reached 100,000 a year. We are now taking more than any other country in Europe. Instead of getting on television, why does the Prime Minister not just get on with his job?

The Prime Minister: We shall have to see. We can have this conversation again in June when the figures for the first quarter come out, and we can have it again in November when the September figures come out. The measures that we introduced last year, which toughen up the asylum procedures and which were opposed by the Conservative party every step of the way, are already making a difference. However, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman entirely: the question will be whether the commitment is met or not. We shall wait and see.

Q7. [97058] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff, West): What does the Prime Minister think of a system that encouraged, and in many cases compelled, hundreds of former workers from Allied Steel and Wire Ltd. in Cardiff and Sheerness to contribute to their occupational pension scheme, and that now leaves them facing the prospect of receiving little or nothing in return? Will he promise the House that he will consider early-day motion 710, which is in my name and which contains proposals to help those workers? Instead of security and fairness in retirement, they face insecurity and injustice.

The Prime Minister: I will certainly study carefully the early-day motion to which my hon. Friend refers. He will know that this is a serious situation for his constituents. I understand that he has had a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Minister about it. There is a proposal in the Green Paper to increase to 100 per cent. the compensation given in circumstances where there has been dishonesty in relation to a pension fund. We are also looking at discontinuance payments as well, as part of a series of measures to protect people in the situation in which my hon. Friend's constituents find themselves. We will do our best to help him resolve the particular case that he raises.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent): In a parliamentary written answer this week, the Ministry of Defence stated that 10,400 of our service men and women who are deploying to the Gulf receive local overseas allowance in addition to their salary. In a separate answer, it was said that single and married unaccompanied personnel lose 20 per cent. of their living overseas allowance rate after the first 17 days, and married personnel lose 35 per cent. if their families go home for more than 17 days. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is wholly wrong that members of our armed forces should be penalised financially for service in the Gulf? Will he make a firm commitment to the House to stop that penalisation?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that commitment, because we have to apply the rules that have applied for many years in relation to this issue. I simply say to him that we will, of course, look at whatever we can do to give our armed forces the protection that they need, but that has to be done within the overall financial settlement of the Ministry of Defence.

Q8. [97059] **Mr. Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North): At a time when gun crime continues to rise across London, what lessons does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister believe—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the hon. Gentleman be heard.

Mr. Gardiner: What lessons does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister believe should be learned from the successful Operation Trident and the "not another drop" campaign in Brent, which have seen deaths from gun crime not happen for a year and a half in that borough? Will he ensure that the use of automatic number plate registration piloted in Brent to target known gangsters is adopted throughout the capital and, in particular, will he ensure that the Mayor's cameras—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there has been a very successful operation in Brent, but it is obviously an operational

matter for the Metropolitan Police Commissioner as to whether it is extended throughout the capital. My hon. Friend will also know that we have a proposal, which I hope will be supported by the whole House, for anyone found in illegal possession of a firearm to be given a mandatory five-year sentence.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): On 3 February 2003 at column 22, the Prime Minister took personal responsibility for placing the dodgy document on Iraq in the Library of the House. Yesterday, the Minister of State at the Ministry of Defence told the House that it was only the middle part of the document that was the subject of a postgraduate thesis. The middle part of the document—part 2—is the part on Iraq's network of intelligence and security, so will the Prime Minister now tell the House who actually wrote part 2 of the document? Did he know who wrote it before he placed it in the House of Commons? Will he now apologise to the House for putting something of such questionable genesis before the House?

The Prime Minister: As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), the part of the document dealing with intelligence was, indeed, taken from intelligence services information. Secondly, the whole document, as has been accepted by everyone, is accurate.

Q9. [97060] **Mr. Stephen Pound** (Ealing, North): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be aware that my constituency of Ealing, North is extremely close to Heathrow airport and that the airport is the major employer of my constituents. May I tell him that the current security operation at Heathrow airport has had a sobering effect on many of us in west London and has brought home to us the imminence of the threat? Will he publicly record his appreciation of the police, military and emergency services who have done an excellent job at Heathrow airport and continue to do so?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we send our thanks and congratulations to the police, to our armed forces, to the security services and to everyone who works on our behalf to protect us against the security threat that does not affect just this country but, obviously, affects countries right across the world at the moment. It is worth pointing out that terrorist arrests are not just happening in this country, but in virtually every European country and in many other countries right across the globe. The result of that is that we occasionally have to take measures that we prefer not to take, but that are necessary to give people the security and protection that they need.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): May I return to the dossier—the one that Colin Powell said was a fine document and the one that the Prime Minister tells us is accurate? Does the Prime Minister accept that it is not just a question of plagiarism but of changing key phrases? The phrase "Iraqi aid for opposition groups" in the original becomes "Iraqi support for terrorist organisations" in the Government's Downing street document. What possible motivation is there for making these changes apart from propagandising to war? If the Prime Minister cannot be trusted on that, how can he be trusted on anything?

The Prime Minister: First of all, let me just tell the hon. Gentleman, as I said a moment or two ago, that the part of the document that Colin Powell referred to about intelligence is, indeed, taken from intelligence sources and is entirely accurate, as is the document as a whole. Secondly, in relation to Iraq's support for terrorist groups, he may not believe that Iraq supports terrorist groups, but its support for such groups is well known and well documented quite apart from any intelligence information that we put out. I am only sorry that he does not recognise that.

Q10. [97061] **Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): Following the crash at Chancery Lane on the underground, what assurances can my right hon. Friend give my constituents and the travelling public in London? When will the Central line service resume?

The Prime Minister: When it fully resumes is obviously a matter for the underground and the Health and Safety Executive. I hope that it will resume as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend will recognise that the work of the underground and the Health and Safety Executive is extremely important in providing protection for people. Accidents will occur from time to time, but after what happened the Underground and the Health and Safety Executive have been able to make sure that they have identified the cause and are now putting the matter right.

Q11. [97062] **Tony Baldry** (Banbury): Last week the Prime Minister said that there needed to be a humanitarian plan for Iraq every bit as viable and as worked out as a military plan. How will aid for the Iraqi people be provided if the oil for food programme is suspended? What preparations are in place for refugees in Iraq, bearing in mind that after the Gulf war 1.8 million Iraqis went on the move, which was 18 times the number of people who fled Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: These are precisely the issues that we are working on now with the United Nations and with our allies. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, there is already a humanitarian situation in Iraq. Indeed, there has been for many years, which is why 60 per cent. of the population are dependent on the oil for food programme. We would have to make sure—and this is what we are working to do now—that in the event of any conflict we continue that programme and that aid reaches the people whom it needs to reach.

There are literally thousands of Iraqi refugees streaming across Europe even now. There are programmes in place, which we have to make sure we keep in place. The whole purpose of the planning that we are doing, with our allies and the United Nations, is to make sure that whatever the humanitarian consequences of any potential conflict they are dealt with properly.

Q12. [97063] **Mr. John MacDougall** (Central Fife): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 has proved to be

a success? There is an increasing threat of terrorism, and I know that arrests have been made in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Without the Act, I think the public would have felt less secure.

The Prime Minister: That is right. As a result of the measures that the security services have taken and as a result of the new powers under the anti-terrorism and crime legislation, we have been able to arrest people and to detain without trial those suspected of being engaged in conspiring to commit terrorist acts here. I would repeat the point I made a few moments ago, that this is not simply happening in this country, but is happening right across Europe. There are trials and arrests of suspected terrorists and arrests. We are working very closely with other European countries to make sure that we achieve the maximum co-operation, since many of the cells in different European countries work together.

Q13. [97064] **Richard Younger-Ross** (Teignbridge): Will the Prime Minister– *[Interruption.]* The Tory Benches are so predictable.

Will the Prime Minister ensure that, when considering the increase in pensions this year, the Chancellor will take full account of the rise that is occurring in council tax? Will he ensure that pensioners are not worse off?

The Prime Minister: Of course, pensioners will pay council tax as other people do, subject to the help that is given, but the Government are giving an enormous amount of additional help to pensioners, not just in the winter allowance and the free TV licences, not just in the minimum income guarantee, but in the pension credit that is coming in April, which will mean that large numbers of pensioners are substantially better off if they have small amounts of savings. That will help them considerably.

As for whatever the hon. Gentleman has done to offend the Conservative party, I should very much like to know, and I suspect that I might support him on that.

Q14. [97065] **Phil Sawford** (Kettering): On Saturday I shall be taking part in a rally here in London with thousands of other people who are deeply concerned about the prospect of war with Iraq. Does my right hon. Friend have a message for the people on that rally, bearing in mind that many of them are his friends, not his enemies?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do have a message for people on that rally who I am sure are motivated by the best intentions and motives and believe sincerely in their views. My message is twofold: first, that we should be glad that we live in this country and not in Iraq because people can come together and demonstrate their position on political issues of the day; and secondly, as I said a moment or two ago, that the moral choice, which is the way that it is put by many of those who intend to go on the march, has to weigh up the moral consequences of war. The alternative is to carry on with the sanctions regime, which has resulted, because of how Saddam implements it, in thousands of people dying needlessly in Iraq every year. In addition, of course, many thousands of people are political detainees or are executed as a result of their political views. I hope that when people go on that march they at least recognise that those of us who take a different view hold that view with as much conviction and sincerity as they hold their view.

Points of Order

12.30 pm

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, during the urgent question, the Minister of State for the armed forces imputed to me opinions that I do not hold and actions that I have not executed. He used the word "Friends" to imply that I had opposed military action in Afghanistan whereas, in fact, I had supported it. He then impertinently reminded me that I supported the Government and had stood on that manifesto. Neither I nor any Labour candidate stood on a manifesto that committed this country to a pre-emptive strike against Iraq with or without a mandate from the United Nations.

I raise those issues out of respect for you, Mr. Speaker, and the House and, indeed, as a duty to my constituents to set the record straight. Equally, the *Official Report* implies that from a sedentary position I said that I was not proud of my party. I am very proud of my party; it is my Government of whom I am ashamed—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is not a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Lady has been able to put the record straight.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In the light—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is making a point of order. Hon. Members should be quiet when they leave the Chamber.

Mr. Letwin: In the light of the remarks made in the past hour by the chairman of the Labour party that the current terrorist threat is the most serious to have affected this country, will you, Mr. Speaker, consider granting some form of parliamentary occasion to enable us to receive a statement from the Government on the assessment that they make, on a considered basis, of that very serious threat? We wholly agree that it is a serious threat. The House of Commons must surely be the place in which such statements should be made, rather than on the airwaves.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Would it not be appropriate for an hon. Member to move a Standing Order No. 24? The matter is urgent and specific, and it requires parliamentary debate. If you would be kind enough, I would be glad to move that exceptionally briefly so that you could grant it.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I fully support the request made by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). May we have an opportunity to debate that national issue separate from the international issues in an extensive half-day or whole-day debate, ideally in Government time, within the next week in the context of security in the United Kingdom at the moment?

Mr. Speaker: What I would say to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) is that a Standing Order No. 24 cannot be moved. It must go before the Speaker prior to the House sitting and therefore cannot be done today. I say to the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) that I understand that a briefing on security was recently given on a very private basis. Both are privy to information—

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle): What about the rest of us?

Mr. Speaker: I merely state the fact that briefings have been given just in case someone does not know about them. I am concerned to ensure that the rest of the House is informed of that.

I do not have the necessary powers for today, but the usual channels are available to hon. Members. It should be possible to pursue the matter to see whether a statement can be made to the House. It is for Ministers to make that statement and to approach me on the matter.

Animals (Electric Shock Collars)

12.35 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to ban the manufacture, sale or use of collars which administer electric shocks to animals

In 1996, I presented a Bill to the House with the aim of banning the manufacture, sale and use of electric shock dog collars. It was identical to the present Bill save for the fact that it referred only to dogs, whereas the new Bill refers to collars used on any animal. The reason for the change is simply that there was a loophole in my original Bill. Banning the manufacture or sale of equipment for use on dogs alone is pointless, because it would be virtually impossible to prove that the equipment had not been intended for use on, say, cats or animals of a similar size. That may be why, sadly, my original Bill was never passed. Having removed the loophole, however, I hope that the House will now see fit to give me leave to introduce the new Bill.

Electric shock collars were first drawn to my attention by one of my constituents, who was horrified to see them advertised in a local magazine. There are two basic types, both of which depend on the animal wearing a collar to which a battery is attached. When the battery is switched on, the animal is given an electric shock. In one type, the battery is switched on by remote control, and is intended to be used when the animal is being trained. When it does something that the user of the equipment wishes to discourage, the user activates the remote control and the pain experienced by the animal is expected to persuade it not to repeat the unwanted behaviour—in other words, it is a basic form of aversion therapy.In the other type, a wire is laid in the ground around an area within which the animal is to be restrained, such as the owner's garden. A current in the wire activates the shock collar whenever the animal goes too close to the edge of the area. The idea is that the animal learns, again by a basic form of aversion therapy, to stay well within the constraining area without the need for erecting tall fences around the property.

The equipment should be banned because there is obviously inherent cruelty in using pain to discourage unwanted behaviour when one could and should be using rewards to encourage good behaviour. All the animal agencies agree that all dogs can be trained by using positive encouragement if training is correctly carried out from the beginning. Moreover, even if a dog has been poorly trained, and has learnt bad habits that prove difficult to eradicate, alternative equipment is on the market, for example citronella spray collars, which can be used to break bad habits without causing the animal physical pain. Such collars work by emitting a lemon-flavoured spray instead of an electric shock when the unwanted behaviour is exhibited.

The fact of the matter is that electric shock equipment is used mainly by those who simply cannot be bothered, or do not have the patience, to train a dog properly with the use of rewards, and are prepared to inflict pain in the hope that it will prove a short cut to good behaviour. Let me make it clear that I have no doubt that the equipment can be at least superficially effective. There is, however, considerable evidence that the electric shock collars, even when used as intended, can have unfortunate side effects. In the magazine *PetDogs*, the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors said:

"A dog experiencing an unpleasant shock to the neck 'out of the blue' will associate the sensation with whatever the dog happens to be focusing on at the time . . . It could, for example, become afraid of, and as a result potentially aggressive towards, owners, children, other dogs or strangers."

There is a recorded example of one dog, which, when its collar was first activated, panicked and ran for home across a number of dangerous roads. After a further visit to the same spot on Wimbledon common, the dog again bolted and was missing for a week. A Dutch study by Dr. Joanna Van Der Borg compared dogs trained using electric shock collars with dogs trained using more conventional methods. The shocked dogs showed persistent and long-term behaviour differences that indicated that they were under stress and in fear.

It is not just a case of those collars being unnecessarily cruel and potentially damaging when used as intended. The case for a ban is far stronger, because the greatest danger for the animals arises when the equipment is either misused or malfunctions in some way. Misuse can be unintentional or the result of a fit of anger at a dog's refusal to comply with the owner's attempt to train it, or it can even happen, perish the thought, at the hands of sadists. In one case, for example, a dog developed an irrational fear of returning home after dark. It was eventually found that the dog had been shut up overnight in a room, half of which was sufficiently close to the electric wire surrounding the property to activate its electric collar. Perhaps, come to think of it, that is not such an irrational fear.

Other cases include those of dogs that have been brought to vets with severe neck burns. Of course, it is always claimed that such injuries are the result of a malfunction of the collar rather than deliberate mistreatment. One inevitable cause of malfunction is that the electrical properties of an animal's neck are affected by how wet it is. An animal that suddenly runs off through long grass that is wet, or is simply out on a rainy day, may experience from its collar a level of pain different from that which would be felt by a dry animal.

Those who support the use of shock collars often challenge opponents to feel a collar when it is activated so that they can experience how slight the shock is, but a study by Ewan Ferguson, a specialist in veterinary dermatology on behalf of the National Canine Defence League, has shown that an animal's coat of fur provides a significant degree of physical protection. As a result, the epidermis of normal canine skin is significantly thinner than that of human skin—a fact that I certainly would not have known until I did some research on the matter. Indeed, I do not suppose that most hon. Members were aware of it. Moreover, an animal's sweat glands work in an entirely different way, so that the level of humidity of its skin, even when it has not been near an external source of water, is very unpredictable. For all those reasons, there is considerable danger that an animal may suffer a great deal more pain from its collar than the owner intends or even realises because of circumstances over which the owner may have little or no control.

So what can we do about the problem? When the matter was first brought to my attention, it was immediately clear that no Government would be

prepared to ban such equipment if they were using it themselves. I therefore asked some parliamentary questions about the use of shock collars in the public services. To my horror, I discovered that, although most public services were not using such equipment and had no intention of ever doing so, the Prison Service owned such a collar and had used it, as had several of our police forces.

Happily, my investigations rapidly led the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the then Home Office Minister with responsibility for such matters—I am happy to see her in her place today; if I may say so, she is well known for her support for animal welfare—to ensure that the equipment was never used again by the Prison Service. Moreover, after the Labour Government took office, to their credit, they ensured that prison regulations were changed to ban the use of electric collars. Meanwhile, further pressure from me and a number of animal charities and welfare organisations soon led the Association of Chief Police Officers to decide to end the use of the collars by the police.

I therefore believe that no public bodies still make any use of that horrible equipment. Perhaps as a result, a Bill to ban the manufacture, sale and use of electric collars now has very widespread support. For example, as hon. Members will see if the House gives me leave to bring in the Bill, it already has supporters from five political parties represented in the House, including the three major national parties. It is also supported by the all-party group on animal welfare and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which both alerted the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to their views in their submissions to the recent consultation on a potential new animal welfare Bill. The dog legislation advisory group, which includes representatives not only from the RSPCA, but from the Kennel Club, the National Canine Defence League and the Blue Cross, is also very supportive, as are a number of animal welfare charities, such as the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals and a large number of specialist pet care magazines.

I do not pretend that the Bill is of earth-shattering proportions or that it will change the fate of nations, but it is simple and straightforward and has the potential to improve animal welfare and prevent much suffering. Given the level of support that it has received from all those who know and care about animals, I trust and hope that I can count on the support of all hon. Members this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Rendel, Mr. Roger Williams, Bob Russell, Mr. Ian Cawsey, Dr. Nick Palmer, Mr. Andrew Rosindell, Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, Lady Hermon, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Roger Gale, Mr. Keith Bradley and Miss Ann Widdecombe.

ANIMALS (ELECTRIC SHOCK COLLARS)

Mr. David Rendel accordingly presented a Bill to ban the manufacture, sale or use of collars which administer electric shocks to animals: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 March, and to be printed [Bill 57].

Opposition Day

[FOURTH ALLOTTED DAY] [SECOND PART]

Economy and Public Services

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment tabled in the name of the Prime Minister.

12.46 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I beg to move,

That this House acknowledges the serious concern about the current state of the UK economy, including economic imbalances, the failure of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to meet his economic forecasts, the ever higher taxes, the disproportionate fall in the UK stock market, the decline in productivity growth, and the crisis in funded pensions; recognises the harm done to business and the enterprise culture as a result of increases in red tape and business tax since 1997, now estimated to cost up to £15 billion a year; is shocked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's complacency on these matters; is concerned that the forthcoming rise in National Insurance contributions will have further adverse effects on jobs, incomes and economic confidence; notes that tax revenues have already risen by £36 a week for every man, woman and child since 1997; deplores the fact that, despite substantial increases in taxes and Government expenditure, the lack of real reform means that the promised improvements in public services have not materialized, with a recent rise of 22 per cent. in NHS funding leading to a rise of just 1.6 per cent. in the number of patients treated, with one in four children leaving primary school unable to read, write and count properly, with a crumbling transport system, and with only one crime in every 40 resulting in a conviction; and calls on the Government to end its cycle of tax and spend and fail.

For the avoidance of doubt, I draw the attention of the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests.

This debate is taking place just before Valentine's day, and it is appropriately timed. It is being held at a time when the British people's love affair with new Labour is coming to an end, when the unblinking loyalty of Labour Back Benchers is reaching breaking point, and when the sham marriage of the Chancellor and the Prime Minister—a marriage in which one partner thought that the pre-nuptial agreement would lead to No. 10 Downing street rather than the Back Benches—is falling apart. It did not have to be this way. If we had a Government who delivered, we would not be having this debate today. But they have not delivered; they have repeatedly broken their promises to those who have seen their personal pensions halve since Labour took office, to mortgage payers whose endowments will not match their liabilities, and to investors who have seen the stock market fall to a level far below what it was in 1997. Labour told all those people that things could only get better. What of the promises to those who rely on our hospitals and schools? They, too, have been failed by this Government.

Anyone listening to the Chancellor of the Exchequer could be forgiven for thinking that none of this mattered. He found time last week to deliver an Olympian address to the Social Market Foundation. In it, there was barely a word about the chronic failure of all too many of our public services, and barely a word

[Mr. Michael Howard]

about the serious imbalances in the British economy. Instead, he told the foundation that his policies were taking the country

"along the road towards a Britain of opportunity and security for all".

As the economics editor of *The Guardian* pointed out this week, either

"he has started to believe his own rhetoric, or he is living in a parallel universe".

The very week of the Chancellor's speech was another black week for the British economy. On Monday, BDO Stoy Hayward said that its optimism index of British business had fallen for four quarters in a row. On Tuesday, a Confederation of British Industry survey showed the highest proportion of firms operating below capacity for 20 years, and found that manufacturers' confidence had fallen in every region of the United Kingdom. On Wednesday, there were figures showing the weakest new business activity for a year. On Thursday, an interest rate cut was seen as such a sign of concern about the economy that share prices actually fell, and Friday saw the sharpest fall in manufacturing output and the highest number of insolvencies for a decade. If the Chancellor had not been living in his parallel universe, none of this would have come as a surprise.

Phil Hope (Corby): Speaking of parallel universes, will the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that, if his party were in government, it would introduce a 20 per cent. cut across the board in public spending? Yes or no?

Mr. Howard: Of course we are not going to do anything like that—we never said we would. We said that we would look to save money from the money that is wasted by the present Government, and they do waste far too much.

I want to return to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's parallel universe. After all, if one imposes burdens on business through taxes and red tape that the CBI estimates as costing up to £15 billion a year, why should anyone be surprised that corporate profitability is at its lowest level for nine years, that business investment has fallen more sharply than it has since records were first kept more than three decades ago, or that the rate of productivity growth has halved?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Howard: I shall not give way for the moment.

If those burdens on business include a £5 billion a year tax imposed on pension funds, why should anyone be surprised when funds offload UK equities in favour of overseas equities and the UK stock market falls further and faster than those in the United States and France?

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): The shadow Chancellor said that he had said nothing of the sort, referring to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). Does he agree that the Leader of the Opposition, in referring to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, said, "He is looking to see if he can get to that figure. He believes it is a rational target to look at."? Either the shadow Chancellor agrees with the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs or he believes that he, too, is living in a parallel universe. Which is it, and if the hon. Gentleman is in a parallel universe why does not the Shadow Chancellor get rid of him from the Front Bench?

Mr. Howard: Let me try to explain the matter to the hon. Gentleman in words of one syllable. We believe that a great deal of money is being wasted by this Government, and every day more evidence becomes available that that is so. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) intervened on the shadow Chancellor. He should have the courtesy to allow him to reply. That goes for all hon. Members—it is far too noisy.

Mr. Howard: We believe, to complete my answer to the hon. Gentleman in words of one syllable, that we have a duty to the British taxpayer to examine and to remove the waste that has come from the policies of the present Government. The more that the hon. Gentleman and other Labour Members bleat about that, the less credit they will be given by the electorate.

Now I want to talk about what the Government are doing. I remind the House that as the Chancellor was delivering his Olympian address to the Social Market Foundation last week, 15 new regulations were being introduced, as they have been on every working day, on average, since the Government took office. That is the real world. That is the world in which British business has to live. That is the world in which 95 per cent. of company leaders say that regulation has increased over the past five years. That is the world in which Britain has fallen out of the top 10, down to 16th, in the world competitiveness league. It is a world in which the Government have steadily, relentlessly and remorselessly undermined the ability of British business to win orders and to create jobs.

What is the result of all that? In the real world, Britain has recorded a trade deficit in every month since January 1998, and this week the deficit in goods in 2002 was shown to be the largest since records were first kept—in 1697. In the real world, as the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce said this week,

"The UK economy is obviously losing its competitive edge in the international marketplace."

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I do not want to remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman of the cuts that were made and the many jobs that were lost when his party were in government, but, on the balance of trade, would it not be reasonable to compare the balance of trade of this nation with that of all other nations? If he looks at the records, they will show that the balance of trade here is exactly equal to that of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Union as a whole.

Mr. Howard: It is reasonable to look at our record today compared with our record in the past. The fact that we have the biggest deficit since 1697 indicates that

not everything in the world is as wonderful as the Chancellor of the Exchequer suggests that it is in his parallel universe.

In the real world, pensions are in crisis. The value of personal pensions has halved in the past five years. Fewer than four in 10 final salary schemes are open to new members, and half of those are contemplating closure. Of course, for those living in a parallel universe the Chancellor's decision in 1997 to tax the dividend income from pensions savings at £5 billion a year—equivalent to £400 per contributor per year—had absolutely nothing to do with that lamentable performance.

According to the Chancellor, none of this matters. He says that what he refers to as "the fundamentals" are all doing fine. Of course, we are all pleased that unemployment overall continues to fall, but does the Chancellor recognise that manufacturing employment also continues to fall, that it has fallen by 600,000 since Labour took office, that manufacturing output fell by 4 per cent. last year, and that both manufacturing output and manufacturing investment are at lower levels than they were in 1997, when this Government took office? Is it the sign of a fundamentally sound economy when manufacturing has been teetering on the brink of recession, while consumers are saving less and have built up higher debts than ever before? Indeed, the Labour-dominated Select Committee on the Treasury highlights the imbalances in our economy, which it describes as "potentially serious and increasing".

Not only is the economy unbalanced, but the Chancellor's forecasts for growth, which he said were cautious and prudent, had to be downgraded. He boasted at the weekend that growth in 2002 was 1.7 per cent., but he had forecast 1.6 per cent. He somehow forgot to mention that in his Budget he had forecast growth of between 2 and 2.5 per cent. The 1.6 per cent. was his downgraded forecast made on 27 November. If the Chancellor is reduced to boasting that he got right a forecast that he made on 27 November for the calendar year 2002, that shows just how far his reputation has fallen.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that even if the Chancellor's growth forecasts are correct, he will still have to borrow more than he currently plans. By 2005–06, it expects a £4 billion deficit on the current Budget, compared with the Chancellor's forecast of a £5 billion surplus. Yet, over five years, his own figures on borrowing have already leaped from £30 billion in the 2001 Budget to £66 billion later that year, to £72 billion in last year's Budget, and to more than £100 billion in the latest pre-Budget report.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart) *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I am afraid that Labour Members will have to listen to this for a while longer.

The IFS does not think that the Chancellor is on course to meet his so-called golden rule in the next economic cycle. It says that he will have to raise taxes from April 2005 by another £11 billion if he wants to meet his rule with his—allegedly—planned level of caution. That was the golden rule that was meant to be rock solid—the lynchpin of his entire approach. What would he say to the Labour-dominated Select Committee, which now does not even trust him to determine the economic cycle on which his rules depend? It says:

"There is a danger that decisions by the Treasury and the determination of the economic cycle could be seen to be taken simply in order to comply with the golden rule."

It wants an external body, such as the National Audit Office, to "validate the decisions." Does not that speak volumes about the Chancellor's downgraded reputation and fiscal rules?

Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is a fair man. Will he give credit where it is due? Is not it true that, in a difficult global climate, the British economy continues to grow faster than that of any other G7 country?

Mr. Howard: No, it is not. The Chancellor has had stewardship of the economy for nearly six years. In that time, it has grown more slowly than that of the United States. It has also grown more slowly than in the last five years of the Conservative Government. The hon. Gentleman should bear that in mind before asking such a question.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Howard: No, I want to deal with the Chancellor's rules. I have spoken about his golden rule and I want to move on to his sustainable investment rule.

The Treasury Committee also called for all the Government's contingent liabilities to be recorded in the Red Book. If the Chancellor had not put more than £100 billion of his potential liabilities off balance sheet, Enron-style, public sector debt would already have reached his rule's 40 per cent. limit.

The further tax rises that the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted would be on top of those that are already on course for April. The Chancellor's response to the anxieties of business and investors about the burdens that he has imposed on them is to add to them. There have been 53 tax rises since 1997. In 53 days, on 6 April, national insurance rates will increase for employees and employers. That is a tax on pay and on jobs.

The Chancellor imposes a tax on pay at a time when people are feeling nervous about the future, exposed and under pressure. For example, the nurse consultant on £34,000 a year will be £26 a month worse off. The police inspector on £37,000 a year will be £30 a month worse off. The Chancellor imposes a tax on jobs at a time of growing economic uncertainty. Does he recall that after the 2000 Budget he issued a press release that said that lower national insurance contributions would "promote employment opportunities"? What does he believe that higher contributions will do?

The increase in national insurance contributions is a damaging tax that is imposed in the wrong way for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. For many people, it will be the ultimate injustice. People already have to pay out of their own pockets, on top of taxes, because of failing public services. Two hundred and fifty thousand people a year, who are not covered by an insurance

[Mr. Howard]

scheme, pay for their operations because the Government are not providing the improvements that they promised in the national health service.

Every year, the Government promise better public services in return for higher taxes, but we get only the higher taxes. In the Chancellor's parallel world, public services are improving wonderfully. He told the Social Market Foundation that the Government had set out a "modern model" for the NHS. However, in the real world, a 22 per cent. increase in health spending in two years led to an increase of less than 2 per cent. in the number of people receiving hospital treatment. What sort of modern model is that?

What sort of modern model has more than 1 million people on waiting lists, and accident and emergency departments where patients have to wait hours, first to be seen and then to be admitted? We were told yesterday that patients are kept in ambulances for hours to fiddle the Government's figures. Does a modern model for schools lead to one in every four children leaving primary school unable to read, write or count properly, and mean that an increasing number of children in inner cities leave school without a single GCSE? In a modern model, do violent assaults on teachers quadruple, teacher vacancies double and fewer than 50 per cent. of teacher trainees still teach three years later?

Does a modern model for transport mean increasing congestion and the longest commuter travelling times in Europe? Rail delays have doubled under Labour, with one in five trains running late.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Howard: In the Chancellor's parallel universe, none of that matters—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The shadow Chancellor has indicated that he is not giving way.

Mr. Howard: The Chancellor says that there is nothing to worry about because his public service agreements will sort everything out. In his parallel universe, they are a great success. He believes that they are a shining beacon of reform for the rest of the world to admire. At the Social Market Foundation, he spoke about clear objectives, well-defined targets, consistency, accountability, equity and flexibility.

In the world that the rest of the country inhabits, the Chancellor's ludicrous targets are objects of scorn. People now know about the Chancellor's vague and ill-defined targets, and his targets to set targets. They know about stifling local initiative, diverting time and energy from front-line services and redefining trolleys as "beds on wheels" so that the Chancellor's targets can be achieved.

Have not the Chancellor and his colleagues used targets as a substitute for genuine, decentralising reform? More than a year has passed since the Chancellor said:

"I'm going to insist that any additional resources must be matched by reforms so that we get the best value for money. There is not to be one penny more until we get the changes."

Throughout their time in office, the Government refused to introduce genuine reform. Its absence explains their cycle of ever-higher taxes and declining public services. Their only answer is higher taxation. When that fails, they impose even higher taxes.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howard: No, I want the hon. Gentleman to pay special attention to my point.

From April, Government spending will race ahead for the first time at more than 50 mph—million pounds per hour. The Chancellor boasts about April's tax on pay and his tax on jobs. He treats ever-higher taxes as a badge of honour. However, they are a sign of his failure and that of his Administration.

Reforming public services is the only way to break the vicious circle. It is the key to everything that we want to achieve. The need for it is urgent and pressing. Only through genuine reform will we obtain the first-class public services for which our people cry out. It is vital to achieve that goal for parents, patients and passengers. It is vital for business and for millions of hard-pressed taxpayers.

The Chancellor promised no more boom and bust. He has managed to provide both at the same time. He promised prudence with a purpose, but he has been neither prudent in handling the nation's finances nor purposeful in reforming public services. He has presided over missed growth forecasts, halved productivity growth, a pensions crisis and increasing Government debt.

The Chancellor excelled in soundbites, but they are now turning to ashes in his mouth. Colleagues, past and present, are queueing up to criticise him. Only yesterday, the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills held a press conference at which they rubbished the basis of his Social Market Foundation speech. Mo Mowlam calls for him to be moved. Andrew Rawnsley asks in *The Observer* whether his next Budget might be his last. Peter Preston writes in *The Guardian—[Interruption.]* Labour Members may find that they dismiss *The Guardian* at their peril.

Peter Preston said:

"the chances of Gordon Brown ever becoming Prime Minister have diminished, are diminishing—and will continue to diminish inexorably. A sad, sad song".

The saddest song of all, however, is that of the British people. They do not live in the Chancellor's parallel universe; they know all too well the reality of the Government's broken promises. Daily they must pay the price of his failure, and more and more and louder and louder they find themselves saying of the Chancellor and of this Government "Enough is enough."

1.10 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes that as a result of this Government's economic management, even in times of global economic uncertainty when the world economy is experiencing the first simultaneous downturn for nearly thirty years and twenty of the world's biggest

economies including the United States, Japan, Asia, much of Latin America and Europe have been or are in recession, the UK economy continues to grow with low levels of inflation and low interest rates; welcomes the 1.5 million extra jobs created since 1997 and resists any attempts to abolish the New Deal and the tax credits that make work pay; further welcomes the cuts in the rates of corporation tax, capital gains tax and small business corporation tax since 1997 and the introduction of the R&D tax credit; and believes that after years of neglect between 1979 and 1997 it is even more important to invest in public services and to support the Government's record extra investment in Britain's health, education and other public services combined with reform to build high quality public services for all and its resistance to any attempt at this time of global uncertainty to cut public spending."

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—the shadow Chancellor—omitted to tell the House today the central economic facts. We have the lowest inflation that we have had for 40 years this year, as we did last year and the year before that. We have the lowest interest rates that we have had for 48 years, and we have lower unemployment than America, Japan and the rest of Europe for the first time since 1945. Today's employment figures, which the shadow Chancellor glossed over—

Mr. Howard: I did not.

Mr. Brown: He mentioned them, but glossed over them. They show that the number of people claiming unemployment benefit have fallen by 3,500 in a month, that unemployment fell by 36,000 over three months, and that despite all the economic uncertainties and the restructuring, which I acknowledge is taking place in the British economy, employment is up by 150,000.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Does the Chancellor think it is a good thing that one person in four now works for the Government?

Mr. Brown: It is right that we have more doctors in the health service. It is right that we have more nurses, more teachers, and more policemen and policewomen.

Running through the shadow Chancellor's speech was one assumption and one assumption only: that the answer to every problem was public expenditure cuts. There are more people in work today than there have been at any time in our history. There are 1.5 million more people in employment now than there were in 1997. There is more employment in every region of the country. Let us remember that in the 1980s 350,000 young people had been unemployed for more than a year—hundreds in each of our constituencies. Today the figure in Britain is 5,000, an average of eight per constituency. Moreover, far from there being an inflation problem, the figures show that earnings growth has fallen to 3.7 per cent.

In the face of the global slowdown that every country has had to confront—we have seen recession in America, recession in Japan and recession in Germany—our monetary and fiscal policy, and the changes that we made in 1997, have not just enabled us to cope with that global slowdown without recession but have enabled growth to rise in every quarter of nearly six years of this Labour Government. The worst policy that could be pursued is that of the shadow Chancellor—to cut spending, abolish the new deal, get rid of tax credits that make work pay, and end up repeating the mistakes that the Conservatives made in the early 1990s.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Is the Chancellor proud of the fact that 600,000 people have lost their jobs in manufacturing? Is he proud of the two manufacturing recessions over which he has already presided? Is he proud of what is happening in manufacturing today? What does he say to those people?

Mr. Brown: What I am proud of is this: we have cut corporation tax, introduced a research and development tax credit for manufacturing, and introduced capital allowances. When the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the Conservative Government, 3 million manufacturing jobs were lost.

When it comes to solutions to the problem, we must recognise that the shadow Chancellor and the right hon. Gentleman are not saying exactly the same things. What did the right hon. Gentleman say in his election address in 2001?

"We need a Government that recognises that teachers, nurses, doctors and policemen in the Thames Valley need pay that meets the cost of living."

The shadow Chancellor is not prepared to say that.

Worse than the danger of abolition of the new deal and tax credits is a proposal advanced by the Leader of the Opposition in an interview on 30 December 2002, when he announced that a study was being conducted by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The study, he said, was

"looking at the target of 20 per cent. savings across the board in Government spending".

[Interruption.] I will quote the whole interview. The interviewer said to the Leader of the Opposition:

"I'm after a precise figure."

The answer was:

"And we're looking at savings. Well I'm telling you. That's exactly what Howard Flight said."

The interviewer said:

"And you would concur with up to 20 per cent.?"

The answer was:

"He said quite categorically yes. Well that's what we're looking at. What we're trying to say is that here is a Government that is wasting money dramatically".

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): If the Chancellor had done us the courtesy of reading the report to which the Leader of the Opposition referred, he would know that it referred to areas of potential for savings. That was absolutely clear. Moreover, the report stated twice that it did not refer to cuts in health or education spending. I ask the Chancellor to end the spin propaganda in which he has been indulging.

Mr. Brown: Now we are getting to the heart of the matter. "Potential" cuts of 20 per cent!

[Mr. Brown]

The hon. Gentleman says that that did not apply to the health service. In that "World at One" interview on 30 December, however, the Leader of the Opposition said that he was looking at cuts

"in extra staff that don't deliver in the NHS and also costs and wasted consultants; he's looking at all of that area".

Mr. Flight: I am surprised that the Chancellor of the Exchequer displays such economic naivety. The scope that exists, to an extent, to make economies in some areas accommodates extra spending in others. The virtuous action of looking for areas of waste, which the Chancellor should be doing, would enable him to deliver much better services by redeploying funds.

Mr. Brown: This is very helpful. The shadow Chancellor will be very pleased that the shadow Chief Secretary has joined us. He has confirmed the "potential" for savings. He has confirmed that the study has taken place. He has not denied the Leader of the Opposition's statement that he was looking for

"extra staff that don't deliver in the NHS".

Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the Leader of the Opposition was misleading people in that interview?

Mr. Flight: The Leader of the Opposition was clearly referring to my comments and to the potential, not to an across-the-board figure. I repeat: I am astonished that the Chancellor has to resort to such cheap, false propaganda to establish his credentials.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman has not denied my point that he is looking at cuts in the national health service. That is what the Leader of the Opposition said. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must have some order in the Chamber.

Mr. Brown: I suggest that we take up the offer made by the shadow Chief Secretary to give us a copy of his report when it is completed. He has identified the potential for savings, and he has not denied that the national health service is part of the investigation. Either that, or the Leader of the Opposition is misleading people.

When asked:

"And you would concur with up to 20 per cent.?",

the Leader of the Opposition replied:

"He said quite categorically yes. Well that's what we're looking at."

Mr. Howard: May I remind the Chancellor of a sentence that appeared in his party's 1997 general election manifesto? Funnily enough, it is directly relevant. The manifesto contained the following sentence:

"The level of public spending is no longer the best measure of the effectiveness of government action in the public interest."

Does the Chancellor still adhere to that?

Mr. Brown: Yes, and because we are increasing value for money and the amount of public money spent, there are more doctors, more nurses, more teachers and more police. The shadow Chancellor cannot get away from the fact that he is embarrassed by what the shadow Chief Secretary has been up to. The interesting thing—I ask the shadow Chancellor to confirm this—is that, in 1997, he made a speech to the British Chambers of Commerce in which he recommended that public spending be reduced to 35 per cent. of national income, and said that that was the right target to aim at. What is 35 per cent. of national income but a 20 per cent. cut in public spending? Until the Conservatives come clean on what their real proposals are and how they would affect the national health service, in every constituency in this country they will be offering explanations as to the number of doctors, nurses and teachers, and they will have to offer such explanations every weekend.

The shadow Chancellor may have something of a problem in that regard. I have in front of me an article that he wrote in the *Folkestone Herald*. Of course, he is adamant that he does not want to make any spending commitments. However, he said in that article:

"I was told . . . about the difficulties . . . as a result of the shortage of GPs . . . Overall Shepway has 44 full-time GPs. It should have 53 . . . The present state of affairs is unacceptable."

Is that not a demand for nine more GPs? Does that not cost at least £500,000? If that were repeated throughout the country, would we not need to spend more on the national health service? How can the shadow Chancellor say that he refuses to spend more on the national health service? Just to show that he is consistent in what he is advocating locally but not telling us nationally, I refer the House to an article that he wrote only a few days ago, in the *Folkestone Herald* of 9 January, entitled "Housing must be our priority". What does he say now about public spending? He states:

"I believe we need more social housing . . . This is something that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency."

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: How can the shadow Chancellor square his demand for extra public spending in Folkestone with the shadow Chief Secretary's demand that it be cut by 20 per cent.?

Mr. Cameron *rose—*

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I shall give way to the former shadow Chief Secretary, and then I hope to make some progress.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Given that activity rates in the national health service are now rising at only one fourteenth of the level of the increase in NHS expenditure, given that last year alone 6,000 nurses left the United Kingdom to go overseas, and given that the right hon. Gentleman failed to meet and then scrapped his own target, set in 1998, for a reduction in truancy, is it any wonder that the British people and his own Cabinet colleagues are selling shares in this Chancellor?

Mr. Brown: This debate must be the first time Conservative Members have regretted the hon.

Gentleman's resignation from the post of shadow Chief Secretary, because they have now been landed with the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs. As far as the health service is concerned—

Mr. Cameron *rose—*

Mr. Brown: If I remember rightly, the shadow Chancellor gave way only four times. I have already given way to shadow Front Benchers at least six times, and I now have the alternative Front Bench lining up to make their case for office under the Leader of the Opposition—or should I say the current Leader of the Opposition?

There were 4.5 million elective admissions in hospitals when we came to power; there are 5.3 million now. There were 11.3 million outpatient attendances when we came to power; there are 12.7 million now. There were 1.8 million emergency admissions; there are 2.25 million now. Do not let people say that the health service is not having, and dealing with, more admissions, more outpatients and more emergency admissions. It is about time Conservative Members started to praise the national health service, instead of calling it a Stalinist creation.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I have to make progress, and I want to make two announcements that I believe will be of interest to the House. In the pre-Budget report, I set aside £1 billion to be drawn on by the Ministry of Defence for security and military matters, if and when it becomes necessary. Nothing should prevent us from equipping and supporting our armed forces, who perform a great service for Britain, as do our security services. Money is being drawn down by the MOD to meet the costs that it is entailing. I shall report to the House again in full in the Budget, but I can tell it today that in this financial year I have increased this sum from £1 billion to £1.75 billion, to be set aside for possible commitments, and to be drawn on only if and when necessary. This is, of course, a time of great risk economically and geopolitically, and I believe that most Members of the House will support what I am doing.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: If it is on that point.

Mr. McLoughlin: I am grateful to the Chancellor, who has just been very helpful to the House. Listening to last night's news, we were told that a number of new police officers had also been deployed to Heathrow airport as a result of yesterday's increased security measures. Does he intend to increase the budget to the Metropolitan police to cover that?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. What he says is true, but he would not expect me to comment on operational matters relating to the police. However, the amounts of money made available in the spending round for policing in general and for the Metropolitan police in particular have increased substantially. I believe that, overall, there will be 5,000 more policemen as a result. So far as security is concerned, in these difficult days we will do whatever is necessary to protect and to make secure the British public.

Just as we are making provision for any necessary preparations for action, we are also providing to meet our responsibilities in terms of peace and tackling world poverty. I want the House to be the first to know of the new document on the technical details of the international finance facility, which I hope we can publish tomorrow with the support of all parties. It will show how aid can rise to $100 billion a year for the poorest countries, and I am grateful to Conservative Members in this House and in the House of Lords, and to members of all parties—Liberals and nationalists—for their support for this initiative.

I have a second announcement for the House. In addition to the work on the euro that is already under way, we will publish an additional four studies, which report on issues that the House will agree are important. The first study concerns the exchange rate and macro-economic adjustment; the second concerns the transition to the euro; the third explains the overall framework for the assessment of the five tests; and the fourth brings together specially commissioned papers by international academics on aspects of British membership of the euro. I look forward to giving evidence to the Treasury Select Committee on 27 February. Next Monday, before I meet the Committee, we will publish our progress report on European economic reform.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: Yes, if it is on that specific point.

Mr. Laws: I am grateful to the Chancellor for giving way. If the assessment of the five economic tests, which must take place before June of this year, shows that Britain has not met them, will that rule out a referendum on the euro for the rest of this Parliament?

Mr. Brown: We have been over this ground before and I am not going to pre-judge the assessment. It will set out the facts clearly, and the hon. Gentleman can make his own judgment afterwards.

I shall give full details of the updated figures on economic growth when we come to the Budget, but I can tell the House that last year, by contrast with growth in Germany of 0.2 per cent., in Italy of 0.4 per cent., in France of 1 per cent., and in Japan of minus 0.3 per cent., the economies of north America and Britain were the fastest growing of the G7 countries, as was stated earlier. So despite the events that have brought the first synchronised world slowdown, the Opposition are quite wrong to claim that we are not well placed to cope with it. Only a few days ago, the shadow Chief Secretary said in an intervention that we were facing likely recession and events analogous to the late 20s and early 30s, but I should tell him—*[Interruption.]* I ask him this: is he really saying that we face events analogous to the 20s and 30s? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Chancellor must continue.

Mr. Brown: I wonder whether the shadow Chancellor might allow the shadow Chief Secretary to have a higher

[Mr. Brown]

role in the next debate. It is always illuminating to listen to his words. When Conservative central office had to explain his earlier intervention, it defended him not as a politician, but as a City expert giving his views.

In 2001, the UK was the fastest growing member of the G7. In 2002, with the north American countries, we were also the fastest growing. The Bank of England inflation report issued today states that, even before the effect of the recent interest rate cut, it expects growth to be 2.5 per cent. this year. Two underlying fundamentals matter if economic growth is to be sustained—that is why the shadow Chancellor's analysis is wrong—inflation and stability. Past Governments have been unable to act during a world downturn because inflation was too high and interest rates could not be reduced. Inflation was 6 per cent. on average, although it rose to 10 per cent. when the shadow Chancellor was Secretary of State for Employment. Under the Labour Government, even in the 1990s, inflation has averaged 2.3 per cent. Every year, we meet our inflation target. We shall continue to do so and we shall continue to exercise discipline in the settlement of wage claims.

As a result, we have achieved lower mortgage rates than those under the previous Government. They averaged 11 per cent. under the Conservatives, but only 6.5 per cent. under Labour. After all the shadow Chancellor's allegations, it is interesting to note that, over the last five years, 693,000 more people in England alone have become owner-occupiers.

Living standards have risen substantially. Despite the fall in equity markets across the world, total net household wealth is still up. Despite oil and other problems, we have achieved not only low inflation and low interest rates, but low unemployment. The figures that I read out today are not the only important ones in that regard; there are 600,000 vacancies and they are in every region—unlike the situation in the late 80s. Because of the new deal, which the shadow Chancellor would scrap and abolish, we have achieved the lowest long-term youth unemployment since records began. I urge the Conservatives, in their review of Government spending, not to abolish a new deal that has given hope to hundreds of thousands of young people throughout the country.

It is because we understand the slowdown in world trade and its impact on the stock exchange that, far from being complacent, we have seen interest rates come down, and small business corporation tax has been cut to 19 per cent; this spring, we are abolishing stamp duty for property purchases in disadvantaged areas; and tomorrow, because I believe that a consensus can be reached on measures that will help Britain to make the most of opportunities when the upturn in world trade takes place, we shall meet the CBI to follow up my meeting with Digby Jones and the joint note that we prepared.

Building on the cuts in corporation tax that we have already achieved, on the cuts in capital gains tax, from 40p to 10p for two years, and on the permanent capital allowances that we introduced, we shall examine investment incentives, especially in the venture capital sector. Building on the small business tax, which is down to 19 per cent., we shall examine how much more we can do to encourage enterprise in every area of the country. Building on the successful research and development tax credit, we shall examine measures for innovation. Building on the employer pilots for greater training and skills for the modern work force of tomorrow, we shall publish a skills strategy later this year. Building on the flat-rate VAT system that we are introducing in April, we shall attempt to do more to encourage flexibility in the economy, including labour market flexibility where there is indeed a case for more conditionality and compulsion in the new deal for the unemployed. I believe that we shall have support throughout the country for the measures that we are taking.

How different from the days of the early 1990s under the Conservatives! Then, when the shadow Chancellor was one of the architects of Conservative economic policy, unemployment went up by 1.4 million. Inflation was 10 per cent. Interest rates went up to 15 per cent. The record is undeniable. When there were difficult world conditions in the early 1990s, Britain did badly under the Conservatives, yet in the present difficult world conditions, Britain is doing well under Labour.

When I hear the shadow Chancellor's pronouncements—with no hint of embarrassment at his past record—on pensions, tax, jobs and public services, are we not entitled to remind people that, on pensions, the right hon. and learned Gentleman was the City Minister at the time of pensions mis-selling; that, on tax, he was the poll tax Minister and described the poll tax as "clear, simple and fair"; and that, on jobs, he was the Employment Secretary when we lost so many jobs in two years? On public services, of course, he was Home Secretary when crime doubled. As Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Gentleman famously coined the phrase "prison works"—I suppose it did, for a number of his former colleagues.

We have taken the necessary action not only on monetary policy but on fiscal policy. In that area, too, the shadow Chancellor has misunderstood what it is right to do for a modern economy. In 1997 and 1998, in a period of growth, we actually froze spending. When others, including some of his colleagues, urged us to spend the proceeds—£22 billion—of the spectrum auction, we paid off debt. We deliberately ran up large surpluses in periods of higher growth and, in one year, we cut more debt—£37 billion—than in all the years from 1945 to 2000.

Let us make some comparisons. Debt is 31 per cent. of gross domestic product, but it is 45 per cent. in the United States of America; it is 47 per cent. in Germany, 55 per cent. in the euro area and 70 per cent. in Japan. As a result of cutting debt we have lower debt interest payments as a share of national income than at any time since 1915 and we can afford to take the action necessary in a period of low growth for the world economy. It is because our fiscal rules are set for the long term and because we paid off debt during times of high growth that our fiscal policies can adjust to the economic cycle.

The shadow Chancellor says that the position—

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I cannot resist the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I am grateful to the Chancellor.

The right hon. Gentleman is talking about his fiscal policy, but the great fault of his policies throughout his chancellorship has been the mismatch between his fiscal and monetary policies. We see that clearly at present when his Monetary Policy Committee is reducing interest rates just as he is about to put up national insurance. It is illogical for fiscal and monetary policy to operate in different directions.

Mr. Brown: I have a great deal of time for the hon. Gentleman, mainly because he attacks his party more than he attacks ours. However, may I remind him of what he said in the House of Commons, just after our announcement of rises in public expenditure? He said that

"the Bank of England will raise interest rates still higher, and that . . . will force up the exchange rate of sterling against the euro."—[*Official Report*, 18 May 2000; Vol. 350, c. 443.]

Neither has happened.

For fairness, we should consider the fiscal policy alternatives being offered by the other parties. The—

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I am happy to give way to the other shadow Chancellor.

Matthew Taylor: At a time when the Chancellor is asking everybody to pay more in order to invest in health and education, which is right, is he happy that the Inland Revenue disposed of its property to a company based in a tax haven in Bermuda in order to reduce costs to the Treasury?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the shadow Chancellor for raising that point. His hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws), who is a member of the Treasury Committee, has been giving radio interview interviews on the matter. The report of the Select Committee will be studied in great detail by the Treasury. We have made a number of changes as a result of what we already know. We shall respond to the Select Committee and take whatever action is necessary. As a result of that, we do not believe that such a situation will be able to occur again.

The hon. Gentleman's intervention allows us to focus on the policies of the Liberal party. Conservative Members, too, will be interested in that. As we know, for the past 10 or 20 years, the Liberals told us that we needed more public spending to deal with every problem that we faced. However, I have a letter written by the shadow Chancellor—the one who lives in Truro—to Liberal Democrat MPs. The letter is about "Alternative Budget 2003"; it is dated 8 January and begins: "Dear Friends". The hon. Gentleman sets out views that we should share with every elector in every part of the country. He wrote:

"Unlike recent years, the budget proposals cannot simply be based on our past programme of tax increases . . . We have already agreed at shadow Cabinet to start from the premise that the Government are now putting in vast real terms expenditure increases . . . simply proposing further spending . . . rises at this stage of the Parliament is unrealistic."

I am grateful for that private, if belated, acknowledgement of what we are doing to make public services—

Mr. Laws *rose*—

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman may want to be shadow Chancellor, but I shall give way only to the shadow Liberal Chancellor on this occasion. The Liberal Democrats should forget every promise that they have made to groups of pensioners and others over the past few years. They should drop their offer to spend billions on education, because it is unrealistic. What happened in the first few days of this month? Press releases issued by members of the Liberal Democrat shadow Cabinet and others said that more money was wanted for teachers' pay, and referred to a "derisory" increase; and that there should be more bonuses for members of the armed forces; more beds for care homes after "chronic" Government under-investment; more housing for key workers; and more for the Post Office, because £2 billion was just sticking plaster. Those were the press releases of just a few days from the Liberal Democrats—the party that is supposed to believe in freedom of information.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not the normal courtesy for speakers, whether on the Front Benches or Back Benches, to address the Chair? Is it not totally discourteous to yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker, when the Chancellor persistently turns his back on you?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): That is the normal courtesy but not one that is always followed by right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House.

Mr. Brown: Liberal Democrat Members should tell their constituents that which they have said among themselves in private—that they cannot make additional public spending commitments and that it is dishonest to do so. They should return to their constituencies and prepare to tell the truth.

Matthew Taylor: The Chancellor has revealed nothing by saying that Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's belated spending increases. We will lay out our alternative. We do not believe that the Government are spending their money well. Just today we discovered that thousands of old people are blocking hospital beds much needed for treatment because the Government are overseeing cuts in private nursing sector provision. It is possible to spend the money better than the Government are doing—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That was a lengthy intervention.

Mr. Brown: We face the next local elections and the Scottish and Welsh parliamentary and assembly elections with the nationalists proposing to cut spending, the Conservatives proposing to cut spending massively and the Liberals unable to say, as they always have done, that they would spend more. That is a welcome tune and welcome honesty from the Liberal Democrat party, and it should be explained to voters in every constituency.

[Mr. Brown]

Conservative Members said that they would not make any public spending commitments while in Opposition but would wait until they had evaluated the circumstances, yet at the Conservative party conference, among the 20 commitments to public spending was one, not to the national health service, but to private health care in this country. The first priority of the Conservatives as set forth by their shadow health spokesman is full tax relief for people taking out private health insurance—a policy that Nigel Lawson, when at the Treasury, rejected as a wasteful use of public money.

If Conservative health priorities, whether in Folkestone or elsewhere, are to prefer private health care funded by tax relief, with all the deadweight costs to the NHS, I do not think that the shadow Chief Secretary's review can yield anything but disaster for the British people. The Government are running the economy in the interests of all, not a few. The Government are running public services for the people. The Government believe in the health service. I commend the amendment to the House.

1.43 pm

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Conservative party called the debate, so it is right to begin by commenting on its extraordinary proposition. Anybody reading the Conservative motion could conclude only that part of the Conservatives' proposals is a tax cut and a cut in public spending to go with it. The motion condemns current policy and the money that is to be put into the health service and education.

The Conservatives say that the problems of the British economy are predicated on tax levels under the present Government. However, the shadow Chancellor cannot or will not give any indication of Conservative tax and spending cuts. We heard not a single proposal for a tax cut from the shadow Chancellor, who says that the problems of the British economy are built on tax. Neither did we hear a single proposition for a cut in health or education spending.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): The hon. Gentleman's colleague and spokesman on health recently told the House that the Liberal Democrats would increase health expenditure through a new tax. Will that tax be set at such a level that health expenditure would be lower, the same or higher than it is currently?

Matthew Taylor: We welcomed the Government's increased taxes and argued that national insurance should pay for investment in the health service. We do not trust the present Government or future Governments to ensure that the extra tax will continue to go into the NHS, so we said that we would dedicate national insurance to the health service, ensuring that in future it will share in this country's increasing wealth, which it failed to do for many years in the past.

Dr. Fox: Will the hon. Gentleman answer my question?

Matthew Taylor: I have just said that we welcome the Government's expenditure and will make sure that it is dedicated to the NHS. I have not finished answering. I have a question for the hon. Gentleman: last year, he told the BBC that he conceded that taxes might have to rise for the NHS. He was immediately slapped down by his party leader, who insisted on taking him through a vote against increases in NHS funding. We know that the hon. Gentleman's position now is to spend billions less on the health service. Alternatively, he intends to raise the money by introducing charges for NHS operations. That is the position that he articulated before the last general election, and he has not said that he was wrong.

Dr. Fox: I asked the hon. Gentleman a simple question. The Liberals say that they will raise a health tax in a different way. Would that produce less, the same or more money than the Government are currently spending on health?

Matthew Taylor: The hon. Gentleman was not listening. I have said several times that we welcome the extra money going into the NHS. We do not believe that spending will rise from £45 billion under the Conservatives to more than £100 billion by 2008. Neither do we believe that it would be appropriate to argue at the moment for extra money. The issue is whether the money is well spent.

The hon. Gentleman opposed spending increases. Presumably he wishes that the Government had stuck to the funding plans in place when the Conservatives left office—not £1 billion or £2 billion less for the NHS but tens of billions. There would have been less for doctors, less for nurses and less in his constituency. We know that, instead, he wants more and more people to be forced to pay for private operations or to contribute to the cost of their operations. How do we know? Before the last general election, he was honest enough to say so. The Conservatives do not offer a single policy now. They have gone quiet. Theirs is a hushed-up policy. They make lots of criticisms but have nothing to say.

The fantasy offered by Conservative Front Benchers is irrelevant—no wonder their own focus groups laugh at any mention of the Conservative party. The Conservatives have no coherence and do not have the courage to spell out their alternatives because they are so unpopular.

The problem facing the Chancellor is whether he has a policy capable of delivering the changes for which he argues. The Monetary Policy Committee's decision to cut interest rates by one quarter of 1 per cent. has thrown the state of the British economy into sharp relief.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. Is there any known precedent for a Front Bench spokesman addressing the House, which the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) is now doing, without a single Back Bencher of his party being present to support him?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair.

Matthew Taylor: The Conservative party has a tiny proportion of its Back Benchers present. *[Interruption.]*

It suddenly has five, but a moment ago it had three. No doubt the Tory Whips will bring in a few more, but despite the fact that this is their debate Conservative Members have not even bothered to turn up. The hon. Gentleman, who resigned from the Conservative Front Bench in despair over their policies, presumably agrees with much of what I am saying and should perhaps refrain from intervening. *[Interruption.]* The Whips are doing a good job, because Conservative Members are pouring in—there are now five of them.

Mr. Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is right that there are now many more administrators in the health service than there are beds, or does he think that we might be able to save some money on the way in which the NHS is administered?

Matthew Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman may not have noticed, but although the Government took too few decisions about investment one of their early decisions was to get rid of the extraordinary bureaucratic architecture of the Conservatives' internal market in the NHS, so as to cut the number of bureaucrats and put more staff on the front line. Liberal Democrats welcomed that. Perhaps he should spend a little more time studying the failures of the last Conservative Government if he wishes to make such points.

The Chancellor's optimism looks increasingly delusional. He is in denial about the state of the economy. Today, the MPC cut its growth forecast, partly because of uncertainty over Iraq but partly because of collapsing UK investment. The concern is that a Chancellor who will not admit the problems of the UK economy will never introduce policies to correct them. If we are to believe the Chancellor, Britain is racing ahead of the rest of the G7 and is a beacon of success in a world economy clouded with difficulties. However, it is not only the world that is at fault. Our economy has been dangerously split between a manufacturing sector in deep recession and a buoyant, if now slowing, service sector, fuelled by rising debt that even the Governor of the Bank of England has described as unsustainable. The overvaluation of the pound has hit every company that competes with imports or exports. The 2001–02 manufacturing recession was the longest since 1945 and the deepest since 1981. In 2002, we had the largest trade deficit ever.

The Chancellor's response is to say that we should expect that at a time of worldwide economic difficulty and uncertainty, but the manufacturing recession is not simply a symptom of a world downturn, as a few international comparisons make clear. UK productivity growth, which the Chancellor originally set as the benchmark for his chancellorship, has been dismal since 1997 at little more than half the average rate since the 1960s and well behind that of our competitors. We have had lower productivity growth in this cycle than in previous cycles. Output per job has increased at an average annual rate of 1.4 per cent. since the mid-1990s and output per person has increased by just 1.2 per cent., compared with average productivity growth of just over 2 per cent. since the 1960s.

The UK failed on seven of the 11 targets that the Government set for productivity growth. Of the four successful measures, two were our performance as measured against Japan and two as measured against Germany—hardly difficult benchmarks to reach on recent trends.

Andy Burnham (Leigh): In his determination to paint a picture of doom and gloom, the hon. Gentleman is being a touch selective with the facts. He mentioned today's announcement by the MPC, but would he care to comment on another announcement made today—the unemployment figures?

Matthew Taylor: Unemployment figures have fallen today, but that is due only to marginal growth in the retail and hotel sectors and substantial growth in Government employment. Manufacturing employment has fallen by 500,000 since 1997. Over the past year, falls in employment in agriculture, manufacturing, other production and financial and business services have been joined in the past three months by falls in employment in other service sectors. The only major economy to suffer worse falls in manufacturing employment than the UK over the past year has been Japan. Moreover, the UK suffered a larger fall in manufacturing output in the past year than France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the USA. It is the hon. Gentleman who is being selective with the figures.

Andy Burnham: Is the hon. Gentleman really saying to the 250,000 extra people in work, compared with the beginning of last year, that their jobs are not worth having?

Matthew Taylor: What about the people who are losing their jobs in manufacturing companies? What about the decline in investment, which tells us what will happen to employment in the future? Astonishingly, in the past 18 months, British investment has collapsed faster than it has in the supposedly stagnant economies of France, Italy, the USA and Japan. According to the most recent figures, investment is falling faster than it is in Germany. In fact, the fall in UK investment is the worst since records began.

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman is being selective in the figures he is using to expound his case. Why is he failing to expose the massive job losses that have been experienced across the world, which are much greater than any that we have experienced in the UK? The issue of manufacturing does need to be addressed, but it is only fair to say that job numbers in this country have risen and continue to rise year after year, compared with the eurozone, the OECD and Japan. The hon. Gentleman pretends that Japan is the only comparison, but he is skewing the figures.

Matthew Taylor: I have given the figures on investment, manufacturing employment and other employment sectors, and I have acknowledged areas in which there has been some growth, but let us consider what underlies that growth. While the internationally exposed sectors of the UK economy are suffering, it is true that the service sector has increased as the housing and consumer debt boom continues. That allows the Chancellor to point to employment figures and GDP growth figures that are better than those of our competitors. However, as the Governor of the Bank of

[Matthew Taylor]

England and everybody else who has considered the matter have concluded, that growth is unsustainable. The economy cannot indefinitely sustain growth based on the fact that debt is rising faster than wealth or incomes. That is plain to everybody. We cannot continue to increase our borrowing faster than the economy grows, as we have done in recent years.

Without rising debt, the British economy would look less like the best among the G7 and more like the sick man. Investment is falling faster, manufacturing is falling faster and our share of overseas investment is falling faster than in other economies. On what measure, therefore, does the Chancellor claim that the underlying economy—not boosted by rising debt and increasing consumption by the British consumer—is doing well? It is not productivity or long-term investment.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The figures for job creation mask a shift from high-wage jobs in manufacturing to part-time, lower-wage employment. That has hit especially hard the heartland manufacturing areas such as the one that I represent and those that many Labour Members represent.

Matthew Taylor: The hon. Gentleman may be right, but the biggest concern is that everybody will be affected. If the fast rise in debt, fuelled by house prices, stops—it is bound to stop, because it is unsustainable in the long term—the economy will not be underpinned by investment in business that could earn money in the long run, not only to deliver the standard of living and jobs that people need but to deliver the Chancellor's plans for investment in health and education.

It is worth looking internationally, because when the MPC cut interest rates again there was some criticism that the European Central Bank did not do the same. The truth is that UK real interest rates are substantially higher than those of our competitors, including our European ones, while investment is substantially lower. Our high interest rate in real terms keeps the brake on investment and keeps the pound uncompetitive.

The MPC has cut interest rates to help manufacturing and investment. Unlike the Chancellor or Labour Members, it has shown itself willing to face the problem. However, the Bank of England has one golf club—interest rates—to deal with one objective: inflation. It does an exceptionally good job in that respect, but it is the Chancellor's job to deal with the two-speed economy. He is so busy blaming everything on the rest of the world that he will not acknowledge the peculiarly British problem that this country faces.

For mortgage payers, of course, the news looks good. Interest rates are down, and another cut may be likely if the gloomy economic news continues. However, the Bank of England decision is a warning shot for householders, too. It implies that the MPC now believes that the threat from collapsing business confidence and investment outweighs the likelihood that house price rises and debt growth will continue to fuel the economy. In other words, the Chancellor may soon find himself with no clothes.

The implication is clear. Not only are house prices likely to go off the boil, in the MPC's view, but there is a risk of a downturn. If that leads to rising unemployment and falling consumer confidence, house prices could easily to start to fall. At that point, the rise in consumer spending will dry up overnight. There may be a return to negative equity and the one thing that is supporting growth in the British economy will have disappeared.

Over the past few years, when world growth sustained the British economy, the Chancellor missed the opportunity to take action to boost investment and productivity. He talks a lot about it, but he must know that his policies have failed because he can read the figures exactly like the rest of us. The record on productivity is catastrophically bad, as is the record on investment compared to that of our international competitors.

Of course, the Chancellor is right to say that inflation is low, which was not the case in the 1980s, and that that has allowed interest rate cuts to take some of the strain of the problems affecting the economy, but even with the interest rate cuts the picture remains unbalanced. Falls in the prices of goods are offsetting 5 per cent. inflation in services. Interest rates alone cannot tackle the wider problems in the UK economy. We need the Chancellor to take action in his Budget to tackle the problems that have made the two-speed economy worse—problems largely inflicted by the Chancellor in the first place.

First, he should stop adding more measures to complicate the tax system, and start simplifying it instead. The increase by one third in the number of tax complications since he took office has left business chasing accountants, while investment and productivity growth, supposedly encouraged by the various tax wheezes, has slumped. Productivity in the UK is dismal, and is growing dismally compared to our competitors. The Chancellor's micromanagement makes it worse—a tax complication here, a new piece of bureaucracy there, centralising targets everywhere. We need a Chancellor who meddles far less. It is time this Chancellor got off the back of business, because UK plc will not succeed if it is chasing tax breaks and fighting red tape.

The Chancellor also needs to take the exchange rate issue seriously. I was very pleased to hear today's announcement that we will get a report on the exchange rate issues associated with joining the euro. That is overdue, and it is a fundamental part of the question of euro entry.

The pound has persistently been in the range between €1.50 and €1.60. Although it is lower than it was, most economists reckon that it remains uncompetitive, and, worse, there is no confidence in industry that the recent fall against the euro will be sustained. The pound is now very high against the US dollar. That represents a double whammy for British exporters. No wonder Britain's share of inward investment in Europe has slumped from 28 to 16 per cent. since the euro was launched, while the eurozone share has risen. Again, that must, in the real world, be a concern for the Chancellor, even if he will not admit it here.

We already know from experience of the past few years that the merest mention by the Chancellor of the possibility of euro membership drives down the level of the pound, because almost everyone thinks that the pound is seriously overvalued. A more competitive rate would be needed before we could join the euro.

A positive assessment of the five tests may bring the pound down to more reasonable levels. If we joined the euro, it would permanently remove the exchange rate

risk for more than half of our manufactured exports. With investment in the UK slumping, that is no longer a theoretical issue.

Those who do not want euro membership, and believe that we should put up with the fluctuations in exchange rates with the EU, our major home market, should provide some explanation of their alternative strategy for tackling a problem that has caused many of the manufacturing job losses—600,000 of them—that the Conservatives have described. I trust that when the Chancellor makes his assessment and subsequent announcements, he will acknowledge that the question goes beyond joining the euro. If he concludes that joining would not be right at this time, he must set out a strategy for dealing with exchange rates in the long term, in a world where speculation seems to be the driver of exchange rates, not underlying real values. Britain has lost hundred of thousands of jobs—probably millions—in the recessions of the early and late 1980s and now again in manufacturing. On each occasion, the pound has been very high compared with our major competitor currencies.

Mr. Bercow: Giving up British monetary policy in return for exchange rate instability against the dollar and the yen is not the height of economic wisdom, but will the hon. Gentleman say what assessment he has made of the effect of the rigidities of the planning process and of the Ofsted inspection system on the inadequacy of affordable and available child care in this country?

Matthew Taylor: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman will find any solution to the exchange rate problems in that, but since leaving the Front Bench he has become keen on a change in the Tory leadership. He would prefer to have the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the former Chancellor, as leader of the party. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the right hon. and learned Gentleman agrees with me about the exchange rate. He definitely does not share the hon. Gentleman's view on the matter. If there is a change in Tory leader, the hon. Gentleman may still not find himself invited back to the Front Bench.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Front-Bench spokesman so to suffer from short-term memory problems that he thinks a reference to the planning process is about the Tory leadership?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am pleased to say that that is not a point of order for the Chair.

Matthew Taylor: I want to focus on the Government for a few final moments.

The Chancellor understands that unsustainable increases in consumer debt cannot save his spending programme for ever. He talks about trying to boost investment and productivity, and I share his determination to do so, but I cannot share the prescription that he has laid out over recent years. The micromanagement of the tax system and the attempts to introduce tax breaks here and there to achieve the targets that he has set have failed demonstrably. The Chancellor needs to recognise that.

Britain needs to earn the money to invest in hospitals and schools. The Chancellor's strategy will not deliver that if he continues to allow all the internationally exposed sectors of the economy to decline. He cannot expect the MPC alone to deal with the wider issues through interest rate cuts, as he knows full well.

The first step on the road to recovery is to acknowledge one's problems. The Chancellor would do well to acknowledge some of the real problems in the British economy that are apparent to all but which are not shared by our competitors. Over the coming months, the Chancellor will be forced to acknowledge those problems. It will look far better for him if he admits as much and acts to tackle the problems before he is forced to do so.

The Conservative motion refers not only to investment but to delivering public services. The Conservatives failed entirely on health, education, housing and transport—the list is comprehensive. The Government are now making much-needed investment, but they need to decentralise and to let go of the controls. When I hear Ministers describe decentralisation as handing down targets to hospital administrators for the delivery of national targets set by Ministers, I realise that they do not understand what decentralisation means at all.

Decentralisation is not setting national targets for local delivery, but allowing local people to set their own targets for their hospitals and schools so that they can design the best services for local implementation. *[Interruption.]* The Chancellor says that that is what he says, but it is not—line after line in his speech is about the process of centralised controls, PSA targets and the rest of it.

I simply do not believe that Ministers in Whitehall, second-guessing those on the front line—doctors in hospital wards or teachers in classrooms—can ever deliver effectively the investment that the Government are now making. Ministers have to be willing to let go. In some cases, they have to be willing to allow local failure to show how things can be done better, just as they need to allow local successes to show how things can be done better because, just possibly, Ministers may never have thought of them. That is the way to deliver successful investment, and it is what the Chancellor needs to do.

2.11 pm

Phil Hope (Corby): This is supposed to be an Opposition day debate, but I am struck by the absence of the Opposition—only four Conservative Members are in the Chamber. Still, that is up to them, I suppose. I had to check the date on the Order Paper because the motion has a lot more in common with the circumstances in which we found ourselves in the 1980s, rather than 2003. In the 1980s, the inflation rate was 10 per cent. for more than four years and the interest rate was at 15 per cent. for a year. Millions of people were unemployed, and millions more were on poverty wages. That was the state of the economy and public services then, not now.

The Conservatives have not learned the lessons, as we heard earlier from the shadow Chancellor. Their sole economic policy now appears to be to slash—to use a one-syllable word, as he said—public spending by 20 per

[Phil Hope]

cent. That is interesting, so let us just think about the figures. The statistics do not give the real picture of what life would have been like under the Tories if that kind of policy had been put into practice. The shadow Chancellor talked about being in a parallel universe. Let us imagine a day in the life of a Corby pensioner if the Tories had been in power and put in place their 20 per cent. slash in public spending.

Let us imagine that pensioner as she gets up in the morning and switches on her television. She will probably have to get rid of her telly because there is no free television licence under the Tories, as there is with the Labour Government. She leaves her cold flat because there is no £200 winter fuel payment a year, as is provided by the Labour Government. She goes out to catch a bus to visit her grandchildren, but she has to stand at a vandalised bus stop in the cold, waiting for a dilapidated bus that is probably running late because, unlike now, the Tories would not have put £1 million into Corby's urban bus challenge, which repairs bus stops, puts new buses on the roads and ensure that fares are affordable.

When the pensioner gets on the bus she now has a bus pass, provided by the Labour Government. However, 20 per cent. public spending cuts would have removed that pass from that pensioner if she had been living under a Tory Government. She would not have had a minimum income guarantee of £98.50. Her pension credit would not have been topped up from her late husband's steel pension because the Tories oppose the pension credit, and it would be cut by their 20 per cent. public spending cuts.

The pensioner arrives at her daughter's house to look after her grandchildren, but she has to do so because there is no £3 million sure start programme, as there is in Corby at the moment, providing help for parents with young children, and there are no nursery places for three and four-year-olds because the Tories would not match our pledge on that if they imposed their 20 per cent. public spending cuts.

While mum is at work, the pensioner decides to give her children some lunch when they come home from school, but, unfortunately, there is not enough money in the house. Child benefit was frozen under the Tories. She would not have the child care tax credit, the working families tax credit or the child tax credit, which is being introduced this April and which will put money directly into the pockets of poor families with children. Those families in Corby would have to live with the 20 per cent. public spending cuts.

So the children come home from primary school for lunch with my Corby pensioner who looks after the grandchildren at home. They are not doing too well because the school classroom is terribly draughty, as there has been no upkeep and maintenance because of the 20 per cent. cut in public spending under the Tories. There are no books. There are no computers to learn on, and there is certainly no literacy or numeracy hour, which the Tories oppose and which has dramatically raised educational standards for primary school children during the past six years.

The children have to keep their jackets and coats on because the council houses are incredibly draughty because they have not received the £3 million major repairs allowance that came to Corby council homes under the Labour Government. That money could not be spent with 20 per cent. public spending cuts under the Tories. So the pensioner says, "I'd better take the children out. I'll take them for a walk to the post office." Of course, under the Tories, £120 million would not be going into the post office network to support it, so the local post office would have been closed. Rural post offices, in particular, were closing hand over fist when the Tories were in power, and more would close if they were able to make their 20 per cent. cut in public spending.

On the way, the pensioner has to walk the children past the burnt out cars that litter the streets of Tory Corby. They would have to experience that because the measures and funding to deal with abandoned vehicles would not have been put in place or have been affordable under a Tory Government with 20 per cent. cuts in public spending. The new multi-agency team—we call it Caspar in Corby—which is successfully reducing antisocial behaviour would be swept aside because no one could afford to put the people on the streets to tackle that problem in Corby.

The council would have had another round of cuts. In the last four years of the Tory Government, we experienced a 7 per cent. cut in grants to local government. With the Labour Government, we have had a 25 per cent. real-terms increase in support for local councils—not a 20 per cent. cut in public spending, which the Tories would impose if they came to power.

Of course when the pensioner gets back home, she meets her son-in-law who has just finished his temporary job on poverty pay because, under a Tory Government, there is no minimum wage. At least, there would not be one for small firms because that is the little trick that the Tories would pull if they ever got back into power. There would be no protection for agency workers because the Tories do not support any of the new regulations. There would certainly be no new deal for that young chap, who got his job under the new deal for the unemployed. The Tories opposed the new deal for unemployed young people every time that it was considered in the House.

My Corby pensioner has toothache, and she would like to go to the new dental surgery. In fact, four new dental surgeries are being built in Corby to provide better dental care. With 20 per cent. public spending cuts, there would not be a single new dentist in Corby if the Tories were in power. Her day ends in misery, of course, when she gets a letter from her private health insurance company saying that she will have to find a little bit extra on the upfront excess to pay for her hip replacement. Under the Tories, there would be no hip replacements on the national health service; those operations would have to be done through private health insurance.

Thankfully, that nightmare life of a Corby pensioner under the Tories has not happened, but it could happen if they got back into power and introduced 20 per cent. cuts in public spending. Instead, we have the most successful economic performance in Britain's history. We are seeing step-by-step improvements to public services, and all hon. Members can see the tangible benefits in our constituencies.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): The chief executive and chairman of my local health trust have just released

its annual report, which states that the Government have put unprecedented investment into my local health service. They cannot understand the remarks of the shadow Chancellor when he says that the NHS is failing. He is accusing every person working in the NHS of being a failure. Does my hon. Friend share my view that that is disgraceful?

Phil Hope: My hon. Friend is right. The worst thing is that, to make a political point, the Opposition run down civil servants and public sector workers who are doing such a huge amount to bring about change. We gave the public sector a real challenge. We put in investment, but asked for reform to go with it. The police, teachers and nurses have risen to that challenge and are now providing better services with real outcomes. There have been cuts in waiting times and waiting lists, and better hospital procedures. When I go to my local hospital, I usually have to wear a hard hat because there is so much building work as new departments and services are put in. I am sure that that is true in my hon. Friend's constituency as well.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman talks about "real outcomes". Will he tell the House why the Government have abolished their own 1998 target for the reduction of truancy and presided over a quadrupling in the level of assaults on staff in schools? Why?

Phil Hope: The difficulty that the hon. Gentleman faces is his failure to grasp—

Mr. Bercow: Answer.

Phil Hope: I shall answer the question in a second. The hon. Gentleman fails to grasp the consequences of his party's policies in schools in my constituency and, I dare say, in every constituency in the country. Teachers are now achieving results that they were never able to achieve before. They are achieving those results because of the investment that we have put into schools. We have backed head teachers with that investment and by giving them new powers and delegated authority, allowing them to control and run their schools to greater effect. As a result, less children are truanting—

Mr. Bercow: Fewer!

Phil Hope: I accept the hon. Gentleman's grammatical correction and thank him very much for it. It is the only thing that he has got right all afternoon.

Fewer children in my constituency are truanting. Unlike the situation under the Conservative Administration, when truant children were simply roaming the streets, measures are now in place to tackle truancy and ensure that those children are identified, provided with an education and brought back into schools, with—crucially—the involvement of their parents. The parents are involved in the school contract to ensure that they, and not only the schools, take responsibility. As a result, less children—fewer children—are leaving school inappropriately and more children are back in school and achieving a higher educational performance.

I will finish now as time is short.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Phil Hope: I will not give way now; I have answered the hon. Gentleman's question.

We have achieved a remarkable economic success. We are making step-by-step improvements to public services. However, there is another challenge—to improve people's quality of life. The challenge for the Labour Government, now that we have the economy right and now that we are seeing improvements to public services, is to raise the quality of life for every citizen in our communities.

2.22 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I have declared my interests in the Register of Members' Interests.

So far in this debate, we have heard a most lamentable speech from the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Truro and St Austell (Matthew Taylor). He should have died of embarrassment as he was wilting on his feet trying to deliver it. He could not answer a single intelligent question—and my colleagues raised several—on Liberal Democrat policy. He was left stumbling by the question on whether they wanted a massive increase in tax and waste, on top of the tax and waste that we have got used to from the Government. He was quite unable to explain how, if there were to be no further increases in expenditure under the Liberal Democrats, there could be any improvement in services. As we well know, they are quite unable to deliver such improvement when they are trusted in councils around the country.

I wish to concentrate on the complacent and unconvincing performance of the downgraded Chancellor—the Chancellor of tax and waste; the Chancellor of boom and bust; and the Chancellor who came to power saying that he would bring about a great manufacturing renaissance, only to dash hopes, sacrifice jobs, and lead many manufacturers to a valley of tears.

Kali Mountford: If the Chancellor is complacent, will the right hon. Gentleman explain the complacency of the members of his own party? This is his party's debate, but where are they?

Mr. Redwood: This debate has been extremely well attended on the Front and Back Benches for the interesting speeches that were given by my colleagues.

Matthew Taylor: But not for yours.

Mr. Redwood: The Liberal Democrats have chosen to make this truancy hour, as we see from their absence from the Chamber. I am delighted to see the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), in his place. This is a team and we are heartily sick of the way in which the Government team have let down this country, let down their pensioners, let down their taxpayers, let down their users of public services and let down, above all, their manufacturers.

Mr. Ivan Henderson *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: Briefly and succinctly, I wish to highlight 10 massive errors of the Chancellor. First, this

[Mr. Redwood]

is the Chancellor of tax and waste. This is the man who has tipped so much money into the health service that we get no visible improvement at all in health care in my part of the world. Where has all the money gone? It is not buying us the nurses and doctors that we want; it is not delivering the extra operations; and it is leading to bed closures and shortages. There has been incompetence on an enormous scale from the Chancellor of tax and waste.

The second great error of this Chancellor was to destroy the savings and pensions industry in this country.

Andy Burnham: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that there has been no increase in the numbers of nurses and doctors, and no new NHS buildings and no improvement whatsoever in his local health service? I will look up the figures but I believe that he is wrong to say that. I would be grateful if he would be honest with the House.

Mr. Redwood: What can be achieved in my local hospital is all too little because of the changes in the way in which the health service is managed and because of the shortage of money to deal with the falling productivity that is the hallmark of the health service under this Government.

The Chancellor has a massive productivity crisis in the public sector and he has no idea what to do about it. The more targets and central controls that he heaps on the systems, the worse they become as local situations are undermined. I want more doctors and nurses, more treatments and more patient activity in my hospital. Despite the money, none of that is being delivered because of the fall in productivity

Kali Mountford: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I have already given way rather generously and I wish to make some progress.

I had moved on to pensions. The Chancellor tried to tell the House that a £5,000 a year stinging tax on pension savings would not be visible. He and the Prime Minister dared to say that, because the stock market was rising when that tax was introduced, all would be well and there would be magic money—pensioners and savers would be better off, and, of course, the Chancellor would be better off with his bags of gold swelling every day. As soon as the stock market started to fall, we saw absolutely nothing from the Chancellor by way of apology or adjustment to his policies.

The Chancellor seemed so little to understand what he had done that he did not realise that there would be a stock market fall in company shares as a direct result of taking £5 billion off the people who had invested in those shares. The market was selling on 20 times earnings at that time. I do not know whether the Chancellor was aware of that or whether he understands it, but it meant that there was bound to be a £100 billion hit on share prices that were held by my constituents and the constituents of hon. Members on the Labour Benches through their pension and insurance funds. Either the Chancellor did not understand, or he did not give a toss. Either way, it is very bad news for the Chancellor of the Exchequer that he was so careless of the savings and future pension entitlements of so many people. Where is he now to apologise? Where is he now to start reducing the tax burden? Where is he now to help savers before many of them reach retirement with a fraction of what they were expecting from the hard-earned money that they had saved? People have been robbed by a rip-off Government and robbed by a rip-off Chancellor.

The third error has been the Chancellor's failure to deal with the problems of manufacturing. Indeed, the Chancellor is the main problem for manufacturing. It is this Chancellor who has stung manufacturing by £15 billion a year through his extra impositions, controls and regulations. It is this Chancellor who believes that he can regulate, control and harry manufacturers, taking money away from them but mysteriously believing that that will do them no damage and that they will come up smiling and bouncing.

When the Chancellor was in opposition as shadow Chancellor, his idea of a good evening out was to sit in the House of Commons Library puzzling over all the numbers coming out month by month from the then Government's statistical machine. As soon as he found a single bad number—jobs lost or manufacturing output not rising—he was on to it and would claim that it was a scandal and a disgrace. Why does he not read the figures now? Why does he not see that he has already presided over two manufacturing recessions? The second was long and deep, and some people believe that he will preside over a third if he survives long enough in office given all the current rumours. This is the man who has let manufacturing down, who has destroyed good, well-paid jobs and who has led to a crisis in our export industries, because he has damaged the productivity and competitiveness of those who make things in Britain.

That leads me directly to the fourth huge error and problem with which the Chancellor has burdened us. It is a problem that he and his Labour predecessors as shadow Chancellor used regularly to complain about when Conservative Governments delivered more modest figures in terms of the problem than this Chancellor has done. I am talking about the balance of payments. It really takes the biscuit for someone who campaigned against any balance of payments deficit in the Conservative years not only to preside over, in the past year, the biggest bumper deficit in history but to say nothing of the fact that we buy £34 billion more of manufactured goods into this country, which was once the workshop of the world, than we are able to sell from it. That is the magnitude of the crisis that he has created in manufacturing.

Many Labour Members have now gone quiet. They know that there have been factory closures and job losses in their constituencies. They are under pressure from their constituents to put that right, but they know that they have nothing to offer because the Chancellor does not care.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) because he has not intervened.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that consumers, and not the

Chancellor, purchase manufactured goods? In fact, the Chancellor has done a great deal to stabilise the economy.

Mr. Redwood: That was incredibly lame. The hon. Gentleman could not name a single thing that the Chancellor has done. I am glad that consumers are still allowed to make their own choices on some issues in this country, but I am sure that Labour is working on stopping that. When the Chancellor was in opposition, he said that he had all the answers. However, in government, he has adopted all the wrong policies. He is the man of taxation and regulation, so he is destroying jobs by his deeds. Lift the regulation, reduce the taxes and the situation would improve for many manufacturers.

The next issue on which the Chancellor has fallen down is the euro. Does he not realise by now that joining a Germany mired in recession, joining a large area where one interest rate certainly does not fit all and hitching our fortunes to the continent of Europe where growth rates and productivity growth rates are far worse even than in Brown's Britain would be the last thing that we need to do? Should he not now lift the burden and uncertainty from business?

One thing that the Chancellor could do today to make business a little happier would be to come to the House and say that he has decided that it would be quite wrong to destroy the pound and the separate controls over our economic life. He could say that business need not waste its time and money worrying about preparations and about whether the Government will hold a referendum. He could remove that uncertainty if nothing else.

The next thing that the Chancellor has done that shows how disastrous he has been was his pathetic sale of gold reserves. It was a signal to the market. If one had been looking for a contrarian view, one should have immediately moved in and bought however much gold off the Chancellor that one could afford to buy. He managed to find and create the deep bottom of the gold market. He sold this country out; he sold it short; he got it wrong; and he has never apologised for the losses that he has chalked up.

The losses to date are a mind-boggling £750 million. What could manufacturers have done with that sum if it had been given back to them as a tax reduction? What could my hospital and hospitals around the country have done with that money if it had been available to purchase enough nurses and doctors to get ahead of the productivity problem that the Government have created in the health service? This Chancellor decides that he can outwit the fund managers of the world. He sold the gold at the wrong price and, of course, he does not apologise. Britain is poorer as a direct result.

The next issue is the telecoms industry. The Government inherited a marvellous telecoms industry that had been created by the previous Conservative Administration's privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation. Their policies spawned thousands of new jobs, many new products, a great increase in exports, a huge improvement in service and an extension of telephony services to many people who simply could not afford them under a Labour Government with a monopoly public enterprise system. This sector of the market was leading the growth and the boom that Labour inherited. What did the Chancellor do? He imposed a swingeing telecoms tax on the industry, charging them £22 billion simply to stay in business.

I agree that that was very clever. The Chancellor wanted to maximise the take and he worked out exactly how to do that. He did that very well. However, he did not seem to realise that that would bankrupt half the industry, turn the other half into walking wounded, lead directly to huge job losses, slow down investment in new technology and extend the damage being done by the dotcom bubble bursting in the States. He made the problem more severe and more difficult in the United Kingdom. He decided to burst his own boom in the leading sector, and he did so dramatically with terrible results.

Mr. Ivan Henderson *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: No, I wish to conclude, because many other Members wish to speak.

Mr. Henderson: What about rail privatisation?

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that the next issue to which I shall turn is the railways.

This Chancellor took a private sector company that needed a modest amount of Government assistance to deal with the very large requirements that the Government were heaping on it to improve safety and standards on the railways and, through bankruptcy and the development of a new type of company—a third-way company, as they like to call it—he decided to waste billions of pounds of taxpayers' money that would not have been wasted if the Government had soldiered on with the system that they had inherited.

Kali Mountford: At the time of privatisation—which was clearly a privatisation too far—why did the right hon. Gentleman's Government not think more carefully about how it should be conducted? Why did they split the industry? Why did they make it unsafe? Why did they make it uneconomic?

Mr. Redwood: We did not make it less safe than the nationalised industry that it replaced. Privatisation led to the great increase in ridership and usage of the railways to which Ministers often refer. They do not realise that they are contradicting themselves when they point out that element of success in the system that they inherited and that they then enjoyed in the good times. This Government bankrupted the private sector company; they decided to impose such strong requirements on the railway that it was not possible to finance it at the then rate; and they decided to tip at least £14 billion into an organisation only to discover that railway services are now worse than they were when they started the dreadful odyssey on which they embarked.

The Government are wasting billions on the railways but commuters from my constituency of Wokingham still cannot get to work on time on a reliable service. The Government's rail regulator is saying that it will now have to cut services because, despite all the money, there is not enough to spend on the things that need doing. Despite all the money, the service is going backwards

[Mr. Redwood]

rather than forwards. The Government will rue the day when they bankrupted that company; they will rue the amount of money that is gobbled up by their new creature without it achieving good results.

Mr. Bercow: Is not the ultimate evidence of the Government's chronic policy failures on Railtrack and of the disinformation provided to the House about such matters the reality that the right hon. Member for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers), who was the Secretary of State responsible, scuttled off and resigned from office?

Mr. Redwood: Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman had to do that. His policy was disastrous and, at times, incorrectly presented to the House and to those outside.

That brings me to the Chancellor's and the Government's ninth catastrophic failure. If he wants to have a fast growing, modern and successful economy, he will have to learn that the first thing that he needs is a good transport system. Yet this Government have managed to combine big increases in public spending on transport with a massive failure of performance.

This is the Government who now nervously await the introduction of the congestion charge in London, knowing that London has been brought to a halt by a combination of central Government misdirectives and a Labour Mayor whose one purpose in life is to stop anyone driving anywhere, whatever the hour, however much it might be necessary to take their tools to work or to travel at times when public transport is not available.

Until this Government understand that a modern economy needs to let vehicle traffic get around as well as railways, until they understand that we need a massive increase in capacity of all types of transport, there is little hope of restoring the levels of growth that the economy once enjoyed, which are now slipping because of the dreadful policies of the present regime.

That brings me to the tenth of my 10 points *[Interruption.]* Labour Members must be very relieved to know that I have limited my speech to 10. I could have done another 10.

The tenth point I have chosen is the Government's strange view that third-way finance will ride to their rescue, that there is magic money in the private sector that can be attracted into public service without a cost to taxpayers. Again, they will rue the day. They will discover that many of the half-baked schemes they have constructed, starting with the London Underground, are badly thought through and will end up with enormous risk to the taxpayer.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Shadow Chancellor is right. The £100 billion-odd of liabilities that are potentially already out there should be on the Government's balance sheet and should be clearly understood by the Government. Next time the Government should pause before signing some of these contracts, because there must be honest finance for these projects. If they are public projects, they will end up with higher taxes, and higher taxes mean a weaker economy.

We desperately need a Government who will lift the burden of regulation, will start to concentrate expenditure on the people and things that are necessary and will hack away at the overgrowth and undergrowth of the political classes and the spin doctors, the administrators, the consultation experts and the great raft of colour brochures that this Government now churn out to substitute for proper policy and managing services on the ground.

There is massive waste in this Government. I say to them: start to chop it out. Give the money back to the people, give the money back to business, and then things could start to grow again.

The Chancellor has let the country down. He has robbed and pillaged the private sector. He has driven people out of work in manufacturing. He should be ashamed. He should apologise to the House.

2.42 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I shall be brief, to allow other hon. Members to speak.

The debate is interesting because it shows that the Conservatives' tactics are to paint a picture of gloom and doom about our public services, to run them down and say that there has been no progress or improvement, whether in the health service, schools or anything else. Clearly, one of their prime activities between now and the next election will be continually to run down our public services.

It is important to acknowledge that we face challenges and difficulties, and that improvements are needed in some respects; but if all that we do in this Chamber is deny the improvement in public investment and progress that we see in my constituency, we shall not serve our constituents particularly well. I shall highlight some of the improvements that have taken place in public services, in the economy and in employment prospects, without failing to recognise that there are challenges in our public services that we need to meet.

Mr. Howard: I should like to remind the hon. Gentleman of one of the statistics to which I referred, which is that over the past two years spending on the national health service has increased by 22 per cent., but hospital treatment has increased by only 1.6 per cent. Does the hon. Gentleman deny those figures? I do not see how he can, because they come from the Government. Does he think that, in those circumstances, we should remain silent about them?

Vernon Coaker: I do not think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman should remain silent. What I am saying is that the Conservative party has clearly decided that in the run-up to the next election it will denigrate and run down our public services. The difference between us is that we are saying that we shall invest in and reform our public services, while recognising progress where there is progress and challenges where challenges remain. What we shall not do is say that the picture is of a complete mess and of failure.

On the number of people out of work, to which my right Friend the Chancellor referred, it is too easily forgotten that a few years ago people like me and many others used to go on marches for jobs. We carried banners at huge demonstrations, where we said that there could be no dignity for any family, no self-respect for any individual and no proper attack on poverty in society if we did not move towards full employment.

We too readily say that, whereas 3 million people were out of work, now the figure is less than 1 million. That reduction is a staggering achievement. It means that people have prospects in their lives. They have the possibility of inclusion, self-respect and dignity, which were denied them before. The reduction in unemployment in my constituency is a phenomenal achievement. In their welfare to work programme, the Government tried to tackle the problems encountered by people moving off benefit and into work caused by the benefits trap. Tax credits, the new deal and other measures introduced to deal with some of the difficulties have been a tremendous success.

I am proud of our record on employment and the fact that a Labour Government have delivered huge rises in the number of people in work and huge decreases in the number of unemployed. That is one of the greatest social steps that can be taken to tackle poverty and give people dignity.

In my local area, too, the increases in public spending have brought real benefits. It is clear from this debate that it is possible to take the Opposition's position. They can say that there is considerable waste, and considerable spending that should not be made, and that their policy is to reduce that spending by 20 per cent. because they think that it will deliver a better result. However, I must tell them that I shall not argue for a reduction in public spending when most people in my constituency are banging on my door calling for increased public spending. They want increases in the amount the Government are doing for their schools, hospitals, roads and transport. They believe not that there is over-investment in those services, but that the decades of under-investment in them led to the current problems.

We all accept that it is not possible simply to plough money in and expect services to improve. Reform is needed alongside the investment. Equally, it cannot be said that reform on its own will deliver improvements. Investment must be coupled with reform if we are to see improvements.

Mr. Bercow: It is a question not of denigrating the services, but of holding the Government to account for their policy failures, which make them worse than they would otherwise be. Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House, in response to the question that I posed to the Chancellor and that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) has just posed to him, why NHS activity rates are rising at a rate of only one-fourteenth of the increase in NHS expenditure? That is the question; what is the hon. Gentleman's answer?

Vernon Coaker: We are investing in capacity to deal with some of the problems. As I understand it, the shadow Chancellor said that public services have been denigrated. He painted a picture of complete failure in which no progress or advance had been made, but we are making progress—although I accept that real challenges remain. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) identifies the problem of capacity, but we cannot address that without investment. We certainly cannot do it by inflicting cuts.

Kali Mountford: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Vernon Coaker: If my hon. Friend allows me to finish, one or two of our colleagues will also be able to speak.

My constituency of Gedling in Nottingham has new schools. Parkdale primary school has been rebuilt; millions of pounds of capital investment have gone into Arnold Hill school, Carlton-le-Willows school and Redhill school; and Arnold View school is to be rebuilt. There are new buildings at Arno Vale school; new classrooms at Burton Joyce; and a new hall at Seely church school. There are more nurseries, a sure start scheme and more teachers and teaching assistants. Colleges are expanding, and the Clifton campus of Nottingham Trent university is like a building site. Those improvements do not arrive out of thin air. They are possible only because of Government investment, and I am proud of that.

Building is going on at hospitals, too. The Queen's medical centre has a new accident and emergency unit; a new breast cancer unit is being built at City hospital, which I visited last Friday; a new urology unit and a new haematology unit are planned; and a cardiac unit is on its way, as are new wards for the elderly. There are more doctors and nurses, and the Gedling primary care trust is working to do something about substandard health centres. Just for the record, Nottinghamshire now has more police officers than ever before.

My central point is that the Government have invested huge sums in public services and we can see improvements at a local and national level. Of course it is necessary to have reform alongside that and to deal with some of the problems that investment brings, but there is a clear divide between those who believe that we can improve public services by making cuts and those who believe that we can do it by investment and reform. Another way would be to praise our teachers, doctors, nurses and police officers. We need to tell those people who work in our public services that we admire their work and understand the difficulties that they face. They need to know that we are proud of the progress that has been made.

2.52 pm

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): It is a curious experience to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who represents the constituency that I represented for 10 years between 1987 and 1997. Although I recognise his sincerity, he has not answered the Opposition's case. Before I go further, I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests.

I hope to build on the outstanding speeches by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood).

Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mitchell: No, I have barely started.

[Mr. Mitchell]

I do not have a list of 10, but will comment on one or two of the points raised. Whatever else comes out of the debate, it must surely be the stunning complacency with which the Chancellor of the Exchequer accounted for the state of the British economy. Things started so well. I remember him saying, probably in song, that things could only get better. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) bequeathed a brilliant economic platform on which to build. The Chancellor did the right thing with the Bank of England and stuck to Tory expenditure plans. He also accurately read the Asian crisis, for which he was rightly praised in the House and the City, when so many commentators got it wrong. I have said a number of times—I like to be fair—that he has been a successful and good Chancellor. However, like so many before him, he sadly believes his own propaganda, and hubris and nemesis are setting in. It will not be many months before he is reviled by every hardworking taxpaying family for presiding over what is about to come.

As the shadow Chancellor made clear, there are serious imbalances in our economy. Even the Liberal spokesman, the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor), made the dangers in the economy clear. A housing boom led to a £12 billion withdrawal of equity in the last quarter of last year. A consumer boom has taken place. The Confederation of British Industry has issued dire warnings not only about the massive increase in taxation, but about the massive amounts of regulation that are being ushered in every hour of every day. We also have Labour's tax on jobs, which starts in April. Those events are taking place when the stock market in Britain has fallen by nearly 50 per cent. from its height and our economy is in a dangerous state.

I call on the Chancellor to announce that he will suspend the £5 billion a year tax on pensions. I do not expect him to abolish it, but it is doing a great deal of damage. Almost everyone agrees that it is vital to put more money into our pensions, but he is taking £5 billion every year. He should announce, at the latest in the Budget, that he will suspend that forthwith while the current economic circumstances prevail.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): That has been one of the Opposition's themes for years, but every time they are taxed with the idea of giving a commitment to re-introduce the £5 billion, they remain silent. What is the hon. Gentleman's view on that?

Mr. Mitchell: The shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer will make plain our position on taxation before and at the next general election. My point is slightly different, however. I am asking for a temporary suspension of the tax, which is causing such damage to British pension funds, while we allow the economy to recover.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has made things far worse. All the independent forecasters outside the House told him that his growth forecasts were wrong. Those people were rubbished and told that they had got it all wrong. Now it is they who are right and he who is wrong. Do we get any contrition from the Chancellor on his errors? We do not. Instead, we have to put up with the bombast, the guff about prudence, the puffed-up and stomach-churning lectures about his golden rules, and the ludicrous pseudo-intellectual speeches about the role of the public sector, such as the speech that he delivered last week to the Social Market Foundation.

Kali Mountford *rose—*

Mr. Mitchell: The Government blandly go on roaring along with their spending plans, but who will bail them out? Perhaps the hon. Lady will tell us.

Kali Mountford: It would be very nice if the hon. Gentleman could introduce some facts into the debate. He makes much about the forecasts. When did any Tory Chancellor get the forecasts right? Surely it is fair to refer to all the items in the Treasury Committee report that show that no one got the forecasts right, not even the independent forecasters. Let us get the facts straight.

Mr. Mitchell: I gave way in the hope that the hon. Lady would tell us who will bail out the Government. As she has not, I shall do it: it will be the long-suffering and greatly abused taxpayer. Had the Chancellor presided over such a failure as chairman of a public company, the company would have been forced to have a rights issue, the share price would have collapsed and no doubt the chairman and the chief executive would have been fired. Under the Government, however, the Chancellor will not be fired; he merely seeks a promotion next door.

We have the odious spectre of a grinning Government spraying around taxpayers' money as if it were going out fashion. They are frittering away the golden inheritance that they got from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and failing to take tough decisions on public service reform.

I wish to make a few points about the six wasted years, the empty promises and meaningless sound bites that we have all had to put up with from this spinning Government. My hon. Friends will remember with affection the slogan, "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime." Violent crime and gun crime have risen. In New York, crime is down by 62 per cent, but in Britain it is rising again. We were then encouraged to believe that the Government were going to "think the unthinkable" on welfare. They appointed a Minister who genuinely thought deeply about those matters, then fired him. Since then, the welfare budget has soared and the Government have had to reinstate benefit rules on asylum seekers coming into this country. They had torn into Conservative Ministers for imposing those rules, describing them as wicked, but six years later they have had to reimpose them.

Then there was "24 hours to save the NHS". Waiting lists are still over 1 million, and we have heard the eloquent comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) about the state of the health service. Government Members should think about the following statistic—survival rates for prostate cancer in Germany are 68 per cent., but in this country, in my constituency and the constituencies of Labour Members, they are 44 per cent. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham said, spending on health has gone up by a staggering 30 per cent., whereas activity—operations—has gone up by only 2 per cent. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is higher spending, but longer lists and worse cancer care.

We were told throughout the 1997 election campaign that there would be no rise in income tax, which was a deeply disingenuous piece of spinning. Today, there are 1 million more higher-rate taxpayers, and the tax burden has risen from 37 to 42 per cent. I could go on and examine transport, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham has already done so extremely skilfully. In the past six years, public spending has risen by a staggering £111 billion or one third. That money has been removed in tax from hard-working men and women who have paid higher tax and got precious little back. That is the catastrophic effect of Labour's experiment in throwing tax money at unreformed public services.

David Wright (Telford): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a key statistic in measuring economic success is the number of unemployment claimants in our constituencies? Is he aware that from 1997 to 2002 the number of claimants in his constituency fell by 33 per cent.?

Mr. Mitchell: There are two answers to that point. First, the hon. Gentleman knows that in Sutton Coldfield there is a tiny handful of unemployed people. He gave not a number but a percentage. Secondly, unemployment has fallen since 1997 because of the firm economic foundations that his Government inherited from their Conservative predecessors.

Finally, the Government have flunked reform. They had the opportunity, and we have heard about their interesting ideas on private investment in education and foundation hospitals, but they are fettered by old Labour dogma. Even the Blairite think-tank Demos in its interesting pamphlet "System Failure", published on 20 May last year, made it clear that those reforms are essential, but said that the Government have failed to implement them. They have failed to learn the lessons that Governments have had to learn since the second world war: government is too big. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) pointed out in an intervention that a quarter of the workforce, or 7 million people, are now Government employees. There is micromanagement by politicians, who are using a 50-year-old model that simply does not work. There is no competition or choice, and there is bureaucracy, regulation and waste.

Even the NHS says that 20 per cent. of its budget, or £10 billion, may be wasted, and there is serious capital under-investment in the health service because of the system. We have a poor service, and there is low morale among those who work in the NHS. Recent surveys show that a fifth of GPs say they want to quit and a third of teachers say that they want to quit within five years. The Government have failed to make reforms and have failed to learn lessons that have been learned overseas. If they cared to look at Denmark, Holland and Sweden, they would see that there is a free choice of school, whether public or private, which is paid for by the taxpayer. In Holland, 70 per cent. of schools are non-state owned; in France, a third of hospitals are non-state owned; and in Germany, 50 per cent. of hospitals are non-state owned. The eternal post-war truth that Government Members should have learnt is that choice and competition deliver for our fellow citizens.

The Government and those on the Treasury Bench have forgotten those lessons. The Government are bent on an orgy of spending our hard-earned taxes, but they are unwilling to make that spending count by making fundamental reforms. They have been found out. Increasingly, they will find themselves paying a terrible price for wasting our hard-earned tax money, and frittering away and destroying the good will and opportunity that they clearly had when they came to power in 1997.

3.6 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): We have heard some deluded comments and nonsense—it is a case of collective false memory syndrome on the Opposition's part. I was going to give a brief speech, but as only one Opposition Member still wishes to speak, I shall allow myself a little more time. We have been presented with another rehearsal of the same ideas, but Opposition Members are blind to the truth. We have been offered a new opportunity to increase unemployment by 3 million; a new opportunity to cut nursing training places; a new opportunity for yet more privatisation. The cat is out of the bag. We have just been told that the way forward is to privatise, privatise and privatise again until everybody pays through the nose for what they are now getting free at the point of delivery. I cannot accept that Opposition Members truly believe that a mix of markets in public sector services would be more efficient or cost-effective or, indeed, deliver the services that people need when they need them.

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Kali Mountford: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman—it might be interesting.

Dr. Fox: I believe:

"Choice mechanisms enhance equity by exerting pressure on low-quality or incompetent providers . . . Competitive pressures and incentives drive up quality, efficiency and responsiveness".

I hope that the hon. Lady does too, as those are the words of the Prime Minister.

Kali Mountford: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not saying that the vast majority of public sector workers are incompetent or unable to do their job. There is, quite rightly, a case for introducing measures to make a work force more effective, such as mechanisms for dealing with a teacher who is not delivering in the classroom, a nurse or doctor who is not treating patients well, or a police officer who is no longer fit for service. However, that is not what the Opposition are talking about. They are saying that a new infrastructure is needed for privatisation, as nationally delivered services are incompetent and incapable of delivering. The Wanless report, however, clearly showed that the NHS is the most efficient and cost-effective way of delivering services to the vast majority of people.

I cannot imagine why the Tory Government in 1996 thought that cutting 7,000 nursing places could increase capacity in the NHS or improve standards. To improve nursing standards, we should give nurses a clear career path and incentives in their pay structure. They should have ways of demonstrating clinical skills so that they

[Kali Mountford]

can have enhanced job satisfaction and improve delivery of services to patients. That is the sort of reform that we want. We do not want reform ensuring that one of part of the population gets one sort of service, while another part—those who can afford to pay—gets the cream of the services. The people who are in the middle and have managed to put away a little bit of money should not suddenly find that that money does not cover all the health provision that they hoped it would. That is not the sort of health delivery that I want.

Nor do I want a mixed-market economy for education in which people get their children into classes of 12, 13 or 14 if they can afford to do so, while the children of people who cannot afford such provision end up in a class of 50 or 60 pupils at primary age. That is the situation that we inherited in 1997. It was not some sort of Utopia, but a nonsensical education system that did not deal with the basics. It was a system in which not one or two children came out of each school at 11 to contribute to illiteracy levels; in some areas, 25 per cent. of children were unable to read and write before they went into comprehensive education.

How could we possibly expect a child to develop, grow and be able to gain some sort of advantage from their secondary education if we never got the basics right? Merely to consider a one year downturn in standards without looking at all six years under this Government and the year-on-year improvements in literacy and numeracy is simply ridiculous. Hon. Members talk about a 1.6 per cent. decrease this year, but let us have a look at the 25 per cent. increases in standards year on year.

I am proud of pupils in my constituency, who have this year lifted standards beyond anybody's expectation. That has happened not only in well-off areas, but everywhere. Children who have a history of parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles being out of work now have the prospect of work. In my constituency, nobody leaving school in the past three years has been incapable of getting a job. That even includes people leaving education with special educational needs and disabilities. The new deal programme has ensured not only that the majority can get jobs, but that those who previously found it hard to be placed in a job can gain employment. We are now saying to employers—this is the sort of measure that the Opposition do not want—that we will be fair to people with disabilities and find ways of ensuring that they get the same opportunities as everybody else.

Of course, that is the so-called new red tape that we are all supposed to be throwing away. That red tape, which the Opposition hate so much, is the very protection that people need. Let us think back to the situation when we had the sort of Government who hated red tape and did not believe in the public sector. What did they say? They said that they would cut red tape, which would instantly mean cutting civil service jobs.

Roger Casale: Will my hon. Friend comment on the bombastic rant that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell), who was not gracious enough to accept my intervention or to remain in the Chamber to hear the next speech? He was gracious enough, however, to remind the House that he had been the Member of Parliament for Gedling between 1987 and 1997—

Dr. Fox: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is only fair to say to the House that I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) has told those on both Front Benches, both Whips and you that he is attending a Select Committee sitting.

Roger Casale: That may be the case, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield would have had time to accept my intervention. Indeed, his having to leave the debate after making his speech was perhaps even more of a reason why he might have accepted interventions.

Will my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) comment on whether the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield lost his seat in 1997, as he reminded the House, because the verdict of the electorate at that time—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should bring his remarks to a close. His contribution is very lengthy for an intervention.

Kali Mountford: I assume that my hon. Friend was rightly reminding the House that the Opposition lost the election because of the very measures to which I have been referring.

As I said, the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield is simply suffering from false memory syndrome. He has forgotten what it was like in those dark old days. He said a great deal about the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), but what did he do? Immediately before the election, when everybody thought that interest rates should have gone up, what did the former Chancellor do? He sat on his hands. Why did he do so? He was worried about the election, but even that decision did not buy the election result for which the Conservatives hoped.

That is why the current Chancellor rightly dealt with the Bank of England and said that we must be independent and that interest rates should not be tied to the electoral benefits or disbenefits of the Government of the day. It was perfectly correct to do that and it is right that that freedom exists for the Bank of England, but the Conservative party never had the guts to introduce it, as they had to have control to fool the electorate repeatedly and bribe them by saying "We should not take this measure now, but we need to deal now with taxes, interest rates and the retail price index." At each general election, they had to buy off the public. In the end, the public saw through that approach and showed that they cannot be bought off with short-termism. That is what we are hearing today—short-termism and a failure to look to the long term. People are looking only at what affects us today.

Let us consider the long term and Britain's overall performance. It is uncharacteristically unfair of the Opposition to say that Britain is in doom and gloom and is about to be in a slough of despond. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let us consider some fair comparisons. On every economic indicator, Britain

performs well against all its major competitors. It is easy for the Opposition to denigrate the Japanese performance, but let us remember Japan's position in the past. It was the envy of the world and it had the economy to which we all aspired, but now that economy has slumped. Have no lessons been learned from that?

Mr. Flight *rose—*

Kali Mountford: I see that the hon. Gentleman is twitching in his seat.

Mr. Flight: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. Does she have any worries at all about the crowding out of the private sector, which produces the money and wealth to pay for the public sector, after we have seen a halving of the stock market in the past three years?

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman raises a very interesting point. Indeed, it is a point that I raised when the Labour party was in opposition. At a party conference, I expressed concern about the same issue with regard to the then leader of the Conservative party, Margaret Thatcher. At that time, we saw absolutely desperate measures being taken, and she told us that we were going to be the shopkeepers of the world and that that was how we would support our economy. I could not understand how an economy based on only one strand of activity could possibly be successful and believed that it would be wrong to let all the manufacturing base simply dwindle away.

Two parts of the manufacturing base are under particular stress—textiles and steel. It is false to say that the whole of manufacturing is declining at the same rate or that it is declining only in the UK. We must consider the whole world economy and the changing economic base. We must look at the new industries, which are not only service industries. In the 1980s and 1990s, I was terribly worried about the growth rate of hotels and the disappearance of the steel and coal industries. Perhaps Opposition Members should be giving us some lessons about what they did wrong at that time, but in similar circumstances, we must ask what is different today.

Let us consider new measures and issues such as the amount of equity release, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and was also part of the total collapse of the economy under the Tories, when house prices were fired above inflation so that people could not afford to keep up. What is different now is the stability that we have in the economy. We do not have the soaring interest rates of 15 or 20 per cent., the rocketing inflation rates or the massive unemployment that we used to have. We have greater confidence in people's own abilities to sustain themselves, and that matters a great deal. If we keep talking down people's confidence and the confidence in the markets, and if we keep talking down Britain, that will become a self-fulfilling prophesy. It is madness, if we look around the world today and see how Britain is faring, even against the strongest economies such as the United States and Germany—

Dr. Fox: Germany!

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman is disparaging Germany, but I seem to recall that it is one of the G7 countries, and one of the four biggest economies in the world. It is another economy that we once aspired to be like, along with that of Japan.

Mr. Howard: Is the hon. Lady seriously suggesting that we want to aspire to be like the German economy? In its latest unemployment figures, 400,000 more people were put out of work, and nearly 5 million people are out of work altogether. Its growth forecasts have recently been reduced so that they show barely any growth at all. Is the hon. Lady seriously suggesting that we should aspire to be like the German economy?

Kali Mountford: I realise that the shadow Chancellor never really wants to hear anything that I say, and that he has probably been half asleep while I have been speaking. I was saying that we used to aspire to be like countries such as Germany and Japan, but we now fare far better than them. They had the strongest economies in the world, but they are now a long way behind the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. and learned Gentleman obviously does not want to hear this, but the UK economy is stronger than the German economy. During his time in government, however, it certainly was not. That is my point.

Mr. Flight: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kali Mountford: How can I resist?

Mr. Flight: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. May I ask her for her views on why the German economy has gone off the rails so much? Will she not concede that part of the problem is that the private sector has withered because the burdens that have been put on it have been too great for it to sustain growth under them?

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman is forgetting the great number of people who went to Germany after the Berlin wall was pulled down, which was an effort for peace that we all wanted but which had a great economic impact on the German economy. There were outflows from that. Every country has to go through the economic cycle and, to be fair to the German economy, it is at the downward end of its economic cycle now. That is one of the problems for convergence, because the cycles simply do not match up at the moment.

Roger Casale: Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that this Opposition day debate has been called one week after interest rates were cut to their lowest level in 50 years, and on the very day on which unemployment figures have fallen by 36,000 to a new historic low? That is the day on which the Opposition have chosen to discuss the Government's failure in economic management.

Kali Mountford: The key fact that my hon. Friend mentioned is the job figures. A Conservative Member tried to imply earlier that the new jobs in the economy were somehow detracting from the manufacturing sector, and that they were poor, part-time jobs that nobody really wanted. But we have to consider those jobs against the background of average earnings. Earnings have risen year on year over the last few years. In the public sector, earnings have risen by 5.7 per cent.

[Kali Mountford]

in the last year. I do not call that peanuts. In the economy as a whole, earnings have risen by 4.9 per cent. If those jobs were rubbish, we would not be seeing that level of increase in overall earnings.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kali Mountford: If I must.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful. Given that the hon. Lady referred earlier to housing, what assessment has she made of the effect of the change, during the last Parliament, in the rules on the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman is digging a hole for himself. I was a member of a council at a time when capital receipts were not allowed to be spent on housing in any way, shape or form.

Mr. Bercow: Debt?

Kali Mountford: If the hon. Gentleman will let me finish, I will tell him that the whole point of housing receipts was that they ought to have been ploughed back into housing. This Government have insisted that, at the very least, that money should be released for investment in social housing and, most importantly, in improving the quality of that housing.

Mr. Laws: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kali Mountford: I have not quite finished my point, but since the hon. Gentleman and I have been old friends on the Select Committee, I cannot resist him this time.

Mr. Laws: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady. I agree that it is important that the receipts from the sales of social housing should be able to be reinvested. Is she not, however, somewhat concerned and embarrassed that, since her Government came to power in 1997, the number of social housing starts and completions has halved from the level at which it stood in 1996–97?

Kali Mountford: I point the hon. Gentleman to the Local Government Bill that is going through Parliament now, and to the housing strategy that has been announced by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. I would be embarrassed if that money had not been invested in improvements to the housing stock, over whose deterioration Conservative Members presided. If we do not invest in housing—in terms not only of numbers but of quality—there will be no social housing available and nobody would want to live in it anyway.

It is an important aspect of the economy that we get the housing strategy right. While there is scope for more house building, we must also look at properties that are hard to let because they are in undesirable areas or simply empty because people have moved out to new areas. That relates to some of the differences in the growth of the economy between one area and another, which we need to look at. We need to ensure that prosperity is spread equally and fairly across the whole economy, through all sectors and regions and to all people.

I cannot imagine that the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) would agree with the Conservatives' strategy for improvement. I am sorry to embarrass the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) again, but that strategy includes a 20 per cent. cut across the board. That simply does not cut it with me. At one point, I even heard a Conservative Member argue that that 20 per cent. cut would be implemented only on Government services. Well, we have been there before, and I have been there before in this speech. Would a cut in public services that related only to bureaucrats—these supposedly sinister creatures of the night—imply that their jobs were not worth while? Are the Conservatives seriously saying that civil servants do not do a good job? As an ex-civil servant, I do not think that that is the case.

I simply do not believe that the proposed 20 per cent. cut would be aimed only at those bureaucrats. It would have to be aimed at the people who keep the whole system running. It would have to be aimed at the local education authorities. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] I am simply considering bureaucrats here, so as to be helpful. Let us consider the managers of our primary care trusts. Now, there is a reform and a half that the right hon. and learned Gentleman never even dreamt of. If we are looking at reform, and at spending money wisely, we could do no worse than to point to that. With a 20 per cent. cut, the primary care trusts would not have the money to spend on their managers—the people who keep their drug budgets down and who invest wisely in their patients' future.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme): My hon. Friend has obviously read her John Maynard Keynes. Does she agree that under the Chancellor's handling of the economy we have been prudent in squirreling away capital receipts for a rainy day—the proceeds of the mobile phone auctions, for example—whereas the Conservatives not only squandered those receipts, but counted them, using dubious accounting, as negative expenditure?

Kali Mountford: My hon. Friend is right. When we have sunshine we squirrel money away, and when we have a rainy day it is there to spend. We are now seeing expenditure in the form of largesse of which Conservative Members would never have dreamed. Moreover, going by what we have heard today, they would not have approved of it and certainly do not aspire to it. Conservative Members do not want to invest in public sector services. Clearly, they do not believe in Keynesian economics, but even if they did I expect that they would get it wrong.

I congratulate the Chancellor on getting this country through some stormy waters in difficult times. That is something of which to be proud, not to denigrate, as Conservative Members continually do.

3.30 pm

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests.

I am pleased to take part in the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford). She spoke with great passion and at some length, but I enjoyed listening to her. It has been a controversial and heated debate; I fear that my contribution may be slightly less so. I intend to be constructive by trying to solve a genuine mystery—where has all the money gone? In our experiences in our constituencies, we have all seen a large amount of Government money being spent, yet, although there have been some improvements, performance in many public services has remained flat or, in some cases, has gone down. My right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor gave the most telling figure of the debate—in the past two years, there has been a 22 per cent. increase in health spending, but a mere 1.6 per cent. increase in activity.

Andy Burnham: On that figure concerning NHS productivity, does the hon. Gentleman accept that the biggest problem that the NHS faced in 1997 was a lack of capacity in buildings and in human resources, and that making those investments does not necessarily lead to an increase in patient outcomes? Will he address that specific point? Conservative Members have mentioned it at least four or five times, but it is facile rubbish.

Mr. Cameron: I shall come to that. A particular problem in the health service, especially in the south of England, concerns the number of nurses. That is the key factor, and it has to be got right.

Here are my three reasons why I believe that money is being wasted. First, we have heard the Chancellor say many times that resources must be backed by reform. Conservative Members would all say that we agree with that, but the question is, what reform? There have been loads of changes in the health service—the primary care trusts, which are now being repackaged and reformulated, the Commission for Health Improvement, and a billion quangos—but have they been the right ones? Take the NHS in Oxfordshire, where the problem centres on nurse shortages. In the John Radcliffe hospital, which serves my constituency, there is a shortage of 400 nurses and a 14 per cent. vacancy rate. The effect of that is cancelled operations. Many constituents come to my surgery having had their operations cancelled six or seven times. There are queues in the accident and emergency department, and our trust is one of the places where patients are being kept in ambulances outside the hospital. We also have bed blocking. Older people who should go into homes in the community cannot because their care packages cannot be put together. What is the problem? A shortage of nurses. Why is there a shortage of nurses? Because in the south-east the cost of living is much higher and we cannot retain them.

Phil Hope: If the hon. Gentleman's criticism is that there are insufficient nurses in Oxfordshire, can he explain how a 20 per cent. cut in spending on the health service will resolve that problem?

Mr. Cameron: As I sat down I thought that it might be a mistake to give way to the hon. Gentleman—now I am certain. If he has been listening to the debate and it has stayed in the gap between his ears for long enough, he should know that we are not committed to a 20 per cent. cut across the board—we are looking for savings.

If the extra money cannot go into extra pay for nurses in areas that need to retain nurses, the money simply will not work. I speak from experience, because my son has been ill and I have spent two of the past 10 months in various hospitals in Oxfordshire and London. The John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford has a superb staff who do a fantastic job. Money is being invested in it. The accident and emergency department has been closed, the temporary department is much better and the new one will be even better. However, delays persist because the hospital does not have enough nurses. The number of entry points to accident and emergency does not matter; if the nurses are not there to process the patients, the problem cannot be solved.

I shall give the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) another example, from a conversation with a male nurse in Great Ormond Street hospital. I was on my way to Health questions and I asked him what he would like me to ask the Secretary of State if I was called. He wanted me to ask about the appalling waste of money on agency nurses. He said, "They cost this hospital hundreds of thousands of pounds. They're far more expensive than normal nurses. It's an absolute scandal and not nearly enough has been said about it." I asked how he knew so much about the subject. He replied, "I am an agency nurse. I'm doing quite well out of it, but the amount of money being spent is scandalous."

I shall relate one more story from my experience. I had to go to the accident and emergency department at St. Mary's, Paddington—a hospital in the centre of London—with my son at about 11 pm. I waited seven hours. We were not in the children's accident and emergency department because a shortage of nurses means that it does not open at night. After sitting there for seven hours, we were offered a bed. None was free in the whole of central London; the nearest was in Guildford.

Shortage of nurses is the problem in south-east London. The extra money will not work unless we have different rates of pay in different parts of the country. [HON. MEMBERS: "More money."] It means more money in some parts of the country. However, the key element is more freedom. We must give all hospitals, not simply 12 foundation hospitals, the freedom to respond to their needs.

In the remaining four minutes, I want to draw hon. Members' attention to another example of wasted money and no improvements. It is a microcosm of the debate. In some places, more spending does not lead to a better or even a level outcome. It can lead to a worse outcome. The NHS has experienced problems with care homes, and the new regulations have led to the closure of several. To give the Government their due, they have listened and intend to make some changes, which may have an impact.

No one, however, has paid attention to the effect of regulation on adult placements in the community. In Oxfordshire, 100 adult placement carers take vulnerable adults into their homes. They are like foster parents. They are heroes and heroines, who do a fantastic job. They are paid a modest amount of money and they keep vulnerable adults, who often have mental health problems, physical handicaps or have been in care, out of the care system. They do a great job.

[Mr. Cameron]

Until now, county council social services departments regulated the carers. The departments interviewed them for 40 hours and inspected them every year. That system worked well. In Oxford, 100 adult placement carers look after approximately 250 people. The Government, armed with all the new money, set up the National Care Standards Commission and introduced the Care Standards Act 2000. As well as care homes, the commission has to regulate adult placement carers.

First, the carers must read a document that is approximately an inch thick and pay for the privilege of registering. They subsequently have to read a 75-page document entitled, "Care homes for younger adults in adult placements". I remind hon. Members that we are considering people who look after vulnerable adults in a loving family atmosphere in their homes, not care homes. The carers must also read the regulations, which comprise 27 pages. They have to plough though 142 pages simply to be regulated.

It is unsurprising that several of the 100 carers who take in vulnerable adults are giving up the ghost. A letter from Oxfordshire county council states:

"At the time I last wrote to you on this subject, an adult placement carer had resigned from the scheme and many more were expressing unhappiness about the changes arising from the introduction of the Care Standards Act 2000. I am afraid that the tally has risen further and 13 carers have now either withdrawn from the scheme altogether or have reduced the categories of care they are willing to provide in order to avoid the implications of registration and inspection by the National Care Standards Commission."

Paul Farrelly *rose—*

Mr. John MacDougall (Central Fife) *rose—*

Mr. Cameron: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman who used to work for *The Observer*.

Paul Farrelly: Before we explore every nook and cranny of Witney, let me take the hon. Gentleman back to his initial question. He asked where all the money had gone. Given the public debt that we inherited in 1997 and the state of the public infrastructure, will he explain what happened to the windfall from privatisation and North sea oil under previous Conservative Administrations?

Mr. Cameron: The hon. Gentleman would probably have done better to stay at *The Observer*.

An easy answer is available to the Government. They need only tell those running adult placement schemes, "You do not have to be regulated by the National Care Standards Commission; the arrangement works perfectly well when managed by social services departments". If the Government do not do that, they will find that in this and other areas all their extra spending will be devoted to extra bureaucracy, extra publications, extra documents, extra inspections—and no extra services. Indeed, in some instances, such as the one I have given, services will actually get worse.

3.40 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): It is clear from the debate that some things are beyond dispute. That the Government have taxed more and that the Government have spent more cannot be disputed by anyone with any objective sense. The question is this: why have the Government failed to deliver? Today the Opposition have first tried to reveal areas in which the Government have failed to deliver, and then suggested reasons for that failure.

The debate began with a forensic dissection by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the shadow Chancellor, of the Government's failures to handle the economy. He mentioned the unpredicted deterioration in the public finances, the disastrous state of our manufacturing sector, the fear that grips the business community in regard to our economic prospects, and the long-term suffering that older people will endure as a result of the Chancellor's pension theft. Robert Maxwell's pension theft was a national scandal; the Chancellor has made it a part of central Government policy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) told us that more regulation, higher taxes, more bureaucrats and greater waste led to a weaker economy and poorer public services. He depicted the Chancellor as the destroyer of pensions. He spoke of the Chancellor's failure to build on the success of the Conservatives' telecommunications revolution, and dismissed the disastrous sale of gold that has cost the British taxpayer more than £750 million. It did my heart good to listen to my right hon. Friend. Far too many Conservatives readily accept criticism of failures in office; too few are willing to accept responsibility for our many achievements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) rightly spoke of the golden inheritance received by new Labour. Never had a Government come to office, he said, at a time of more favourable economic trends. As he also said, despite that—and despite two overwhelmingly good parliamentary majorities—the Government have achieved very little during their time in office.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) pointed out, the shortage of nurses, the huge vacancy rates, the cancelled operations and the level of bed blocking are indicative of a mismatch between supply and demand in relation to NHS staff, especially nursing staff. That in itself points to the need for substantial reform. As my hon. Friend said, flexible pay arrangements are needed, but there are other ways of attracting nursing staff. We need to think about shift flexibility, the physical security of staff—all staff, that is, not just nurses—training and supervision, and professional freedom and self-respect. In the case of the nursing profession, that means not using surgically trained or gynaecology nurses in general medical wards, but affording them the respect that they are entitled to expect given their expertise.

One of the most enlightening speeches was made by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor). As usual, he had his finger on the pulse of public sector failure. He said, "We found out today that thousands of old people are waiting for discharge in our

hospitals." He must be one of the last people in Britain to discover that; only Liberal Democrats could be surprised by it.

What really galled me about the hon. Gentleman's performance, however, was this. It is clear that the Liberal Democrats will tell one group that taxes are too high, and will tell others that they should be raised. They will tell one group that spending needs to increase, and as the Chancellor said, they will write to another group saying that it does not need to increase at all. They tell one group that they are the party of the inner city; they tell another that they are the party of the country. They are pro-war; they are anti-war. They are for free nursing care, but they will raise the cost of nursing care when they are in charge of local government. The fact that the once great Liberal party has descended into the second-rate charlatan collective that the Liberal Democrats are today is indeed a national tragedy.

My hon. Friends have drawn attention to Labour's failures on a number of fronts—education, for instance. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) talked a great deal about literacy and numeracy, but according to the 2002 survey one child in four now leaves school unable to read, write or count properly. These pupils are leaving primary school after six years of her Government's being in office, so talk of incremental change is complete nonsense. In GCSEs, the gap between children in inner cities and elsewhere is actually growing, according to a departmental survey of December 2002. Only 39 per cent. of children are getting grade C or above in maths, English and science.

On law and order, the Prime Minister said that

"crime figures are the measure of whether this Government is succeeding or failing".

In the year to September 2002, overall crime was up by 2 per cent. Robberies were up by 13 per cent., domestic burglaries by 5 per cent., retail crime by 6 per cent., and drug offences by 12 per cent. In the past year, crimes involving the use of firearms were up by 35 per cent., and those involving the use of handguns by 46 per cent. The number of robberies involving the use of firearms increased by one third in the past year, and such robberies are at their highest level for more than a decade. Crimes involving the use of firearms are up by 80 per cent. since Labour came to power in 1997. How can there be any doubt about their failure to deliver on public services?

Transport is a complete shambles. So far, the Government's answer to making the trains run on time is to cut the number of trains running. Well, that is an act of genius. The London underground is a complete debacle. The Government do not know whether to build more roads or to have fewer of them, and they cannot seem to make up their mind whether to build more airports, or to have fewer of them. Today, they have tried very hard to distance themselves from the soon-to-be-hated congestion charge, which is a direct result of their Transport Act 2000.

We need to look not only at the failure to reform, but at the reason behind it, which is to be found in the contradictions within the Government themselves. As I have pointed out, the Prime Minister said:

"Choice mechanisms enhance equity by exerting pressure on low quality or incompetent providers. Competitive pressures and incentives drive up quality, efficiency and responsiveness in the public sector."

How far can that possibly be from the Chancellor's view, as expressed in his speech to the Social Market Foundation? In it, he said:

"In health not only is the consumer not sovereign but a free market in health care will not produce the most efficient price for its services or a fair deal for its consumer."

These views are not compatible, but at least the clear difference that has emerged in the war of No. 10 succession—in the axis of acrimony—is far better than the confused position of the Secretary of State for Health. He began by saying that he would

"come down like a ton of bricks on anyone who has anything to do with the private sector".

Now, not only does he use the private finance initiative at every opportunity; he also wants to establish foundation hospitals, with the freedom to borrow and to set pay and conditions. As a concordat with the private sector, he is using private hospitals for NHS patients, and he wants to put private management into failing NHS hospitals. That is rather striking when one compares it with what he said in this House on 26 June 2001:

"by and large, we thankfully have one monopoly provider and that is the NHS. As long as a Labour Government are in power, that will remain the position."—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 500.]

Little wonder that we cannot get proper reform, and that there is no impetus for real change in the public sector, when there is such a division of ideology and philosophy on the Government Front Bench. The Cabinet fight like ferrets in a sack. They cannot sit on the same platform, and now it is more a question of who is likely to succeed the Prime Minister, rather than what is best for the country. We are all victims of the proxy war in the battle for No. 10.

We have heard several times today about the statistics that are most damning in respect of the national health service. Despite a 21.5 per cent. increase in real-terms funding in the past two years, the level of finished consultant episodes has increased by only 1.5 per cent., and the number of patients admitted to our hospitals actually went down last year by 0.5 per cent. It takes quite a lot of doing to spend that amount of money and get fewer patients into hospitals.

No one doubts the need for greater capacity or the Government's genuine commitment to achieving it. However, before any Government spend the tax that they are taking away from hard-working people, they have a duty to ensure that it is wisely spent. The NHS remains too centralised, too politicised, and too bureaucratised, and there is too much waste. The NHS is a victim of the target culture, and there is too little choice. There is an incipient crisis in general practice, for which vacancies have risen by 70 per cent. in the past year. Indeed, the number of applicants for each place has fallen by 50 per cent. in that time.

The Chancellor has had a good political run, but his own share price is falling. No. 10 and No. 11 may be very close to each other geographically, but the distance politically can be very great indeed. The Government need to remember that they have no money but taxpayers' money. Anyone can spend more money—spending it well is much more difficult. The Labour Government believe that the state can make better choices than individual citizens. We believe that citizens

[Dr. Liam Fox]

make better choices than the state. Labour believes that the state is the best manager for public services. We believe that the state is an inappropriate and poor manager for public services.

The Labour Government believe that Whitehall knows best; they believe in standardisation, centralisation, taxation, taxation, taxation and taxation. We believe in personal choice. We believe in diversity. We believe in innovation. We believe in excellence. We believe in trusting individual citizens. Enough is enough.

3.50 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): This has been a good debate, with excellent speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Corby (Phil Hope), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford). My hon. Friends the Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) and for Central Fife (Mr. MacDougall) were desperate to contribute, but there was not enough time.

How different my hon. Friends were from Opposition Members! They called the debate to talk about the economy and public services, but they failed to call in their Back Benchers. At 2.36 pm, during the speech of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), I, too, did some counting. We all remember his speech and the 10 catastrophic failures. I counted seven: three behind him and four directly in front of him on the Opposition Front Bench. The reality is that Conservative Members failed to come to the House this afternoon because they are either indifferent or ashamed. They are ashamed of their party's record when it was in government: 3 million unemployed, interest rates at 10 per cent. and inflation at almost 10 per cent.

We do not need to look only at the Conservatives' record in government; let us consider their record when they were—as they are now and as they will remain—in opposition. They opposed the independence of the Bank of England; they opposed the new deal; and they opposed the minimum wage, yet they have the nerve to take us to task on our economic competence and the stewardship of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

The Conservatives want to talk about public services. Let us talk about public services. What is their position? What is their record on the NHS? They opposed the NHS at its inception and they oppose its principles today—the very principles that we are pledged to stand up for. Those principles are stability, enterprise and fairness and they characterise the Labour Government's stewardship of the economy and of our public services—[HON. MEMBERS: "Enterprise?"] Yes, enterprise. We are supporting enterprise at a time when the world economy is uncertain. We supported enterprise when world trade growth fell by 12 percentage points in 2001 and when 20 of the world's largest economies were either in recession or just coming out of recession. We are doing so at a time when there are real risks and uncertainty, yet at this time and in this country we have GDP growth. At this time and in this country, we have the macro-economic stability that truly gives businesses what they want: the certainty that they have a Government who are on their side.

Mr. Redwood: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: No. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) did not give way during his summing up, so I shall not do so during mine.

Macro-economic stability is not enough on its own; we have to do more. This Government are doing more to bridge the productivity gap. It is this Government who are targeting reforms at improving the productivity of British business. It was this Government who introduced independent competition authorities. It was this Government who ensured that we had a simplified VAT system. It was this Government who introduced the research and development tax credit. It was this Government who extended to all companies better education and improved work force training. We are entitled to be proud of that.

In November, in the pre-Budget report, we introduced policies that will combine enterprise with fairness. Yes, we believe in enterprise; we are the party of enterprise. In deprived areas, classrooms or boardrooms, the message is the same: "Yes, we can do better, but the Government are there to help and the Government are on your side".

Let us recall the Conservative record on public services. Under the Conservatives, crime doubled; the hospital building programme ground to a halt; eyesight testing charges were introduced; and education funding was cut by £80 per pupil in real terms in their last three Budgets—and they presided over a massive backlog in transport investment.

Conservative Members ask what has happened to the money and what has been going on in the NHS. There has been a 4.9 per cent. increase in elective admissions; a 3.2 per cent increase in outpatient consultation; an 11 per cent increase in patients admitted to hospital since 1997–98; waiting times are coming down; more people are benefiting from new drugs; and more patients are being treated closer to home. That is what we are doing for the NHS. If Conservative Members had their way, all that would come to an end.

Of the extra £5 billion in 2001–02, 40 per cent. was used to pay for additional staff, drugs, supplies, increased activity and the quality of activity; and 14 per cent. was invested in building capacity for the future, which the Conservatives never did. They simply tore down the present. We are delivering; they failed to deliver. In all the contributions by Conservative Members this afternoon, we heard not one constructive suggestion on how they would do better.

Equally important, we have not heard one suggestion either about how a Conservative Government would pay, which is why the hon. Member for Woodspring wound up. The Opposition did not dare let the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) speak. He had to fight his way to the Dispatch Box by way of an intervention. They would not let him speak

because of what he had told not only selected groups of journalists but the readers of any newspaper whose journalists were prepared to interview him.

Mr. Howard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: I will not give way but I challenge the shadow Chancellor to disown his phantom Chief Secretary—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We must hear the conclusion of this debate in reasonable silence.

Mr. Boateng: Will the shadow Chancellor disown the comments of the phantom Chief Secretary? Will he publish the memorandum? If not and he will not let us see the figures, we cannot believe a word he says.

Mr. Howard: Has it occurred to the Chief Secretary that this debate is about the Government's failure over the economy and public services? Does he not realise that whereas my hon. Friend the shadow Health Secretary and I are happy to share this debate, the hon. Gentleman cannot get the Secretary of State for Health and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the same room—except when they meet to squabble in Cabinet?

Mr. Boateng: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman answer the question? Will he respond to the challenge? This is what the phantom Chief Secretary said: "Oh yes, we are certainly looking at sayings." The Leader of the Opposition said, "We are looking at savings." That is exactly what was said by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs.

David Maclean (Penrith and The Border) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 141, Noes 363.

Division No. 88] **[3:59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Fox, Dr. Liam
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, rh Francis
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Redwood, rh John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Wilshire and Mr. Mark Francois

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*

Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Ewing, Annabelle
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*

Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, David
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Phil Woolas and
Mr. Ivor Caplin

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 186.

Division No. 89] **[4.14 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*

Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Phil Woolas and Mr. Ivor Caplin

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, rh Francis
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and
Mr. Mark Francois

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes that as a result of this Government's economic management, even in times of global economic uncertainty when the world economy is experiencing the first simultaneous downturn for nearly thirty years and twenty of the world's biggest economies including the United States, Japan, Asia, much of Latin America and Europe have been or are in recession, the UK economy continues to grow with low levels of inflation and low interest rates; welcomes the 1.5 million extra jobs created since 1997 and resists any attempts to abolish the New Deal and the tax credits that make work pay; further welcomes the cuts in the rates of corporation tax, capital gains tax and small business corporation tax since 1997 and the introduction of the R&D tax credit; and believes that after years of neglect between 1979 and 1997 it is even more important to invest in public services and to support the Government's record extra investment in Britain's health, education and other public services combined with reform to build high quality public services for all and its resistance to any attempt at this time of global uncertainty to cut public spending.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Not three hours ago I raised a point of order with Mr. Speaker, in which I pointed out that the chairman of the Labour party had made very strong statements about the problems that gave rise to the action at Heathrow. Not very long after I raised that point of order, the chairman of the Labour party appeared on the radio again, not in this House, and made statements that appear to contradict his earlier statement. That is a very serious matter.

We are dealing with life and death. It seems appropriate that there should be clarity. Conservative Members support the actions that the Government are taking. We want to have the opportunity to ensure that, in a sober-minded fashion, the nation can hear a clear account. Have you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, received from Ministers any request to make a statement about this matter?

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As you will be aware, my constituency lies directly to the west of Heathrow, under the flight path, and a large number of my constituents work either at Heathrow or for various airlines. There is immense confusion after the contradictory statements from the chairman of the Labour party. Whereas my constituents and I do not expect detailed information that might be security sensitive, I would ask you whether you have yet received any request for any clarification to be made at this very difficult time, which is what my constituents would want?

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Speaker has on many occasions deprecated Ministers' making outside the House statements that should have been made in it. It is a folly that is compounded when contradictory statements are made. Would you be kind enough to have a word with Mr. Speaker? I realise that he cannot summon a Minister to make a statement, but could the concern that is felt both in the House and in the country, with people feeling exceptionally confused and worried, be reflected in a message to Ministers, so that before the House rises tonight we have a statement of clarification?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I understand that other hon. Members will have local concerns, and the whole House obviously has deep concern over what is acknowledged on all sides to be a grave matter, but, as has already been recognised in one of the points of order, the Chair cannot dictate when a Minister of the Crown should come to the House.

I am aware that the Government gave a commitment some while ago that they would keep the House informed. I am sure that they will have heard what right hon. and hon. Members have said, and I imagine that this matter could further be pursued through the usual channels.

The straight answer is that the Chair has not received any indication as of now that there is to be any further ministerial statement in the course of this sitting day.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Just for clarification and to help the House, which I know you want to do, when you say that the Chair has no power, is it not the case that, procedurally, if the Speaker granted an urgent question on the matter, the Minister would be obliged to give an account of events to the House? That and perhaps other procedures are available to the House and the Speaker for us to ensure that we hear about vital matters from Ministers rather than hearing contradictory accounts on the radio or, indeed, anywhere else.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that that procedure exists, but it cannot apply at this point in the sitting day. There is a time when submissions can be made to Mr. Speaker, which he considers totally impartially and on which he reaches a decision. It is open to any right hon. or hon. Member to make such a request to be considered at the next opportune time.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You probably recall that the IRA terrorist attack on Heathrow was mounted from my constituency and that the aircraft involved in the last crash at Heathrow came down in my constituency, so you can guess how my constituents feel at the moment. I have been trying all day to get information that I can convey to my constituents to reassure them about what is going on so that they know that their interests are being looked after. Is there any way at all that my constituents, who are rightly worried by what is happening, can get some information from someone? If we cannot get a Minister to the House, can you suggest how else we can get some facts?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's concern is perfectly understandable bearing in mind the geographical placing of his constituency, but I cannot

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

add to my ruling. I am sure that the concerns that are felt will be reflected in the Government's thinking and no doubt in the mind of Mr. Speaker if he is called on to adjudicate on another request for an urgent question.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Do you think that Mr. Speaker would be more minded to grant an urgent question tomorrow bearing in mind the fact that the co-operation of hon. Members on both sides of the House is essential on matters of security and intelligence, so the Government's behaviour should be of a higher standard than is usually the case in the party political situation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I cannot possibly anticipate how Mr. Speaker will react to any such matter that is put to him. I do know, however, that he will give it sober and impartial consideration. We must now move on.

HUNTING BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [28 June 2001 and 29 October 2002],

That, in accordance with the Resolution of the Standing Committee of 11th February 2003, the programme order of 16th December 2002 in relation to the Hunting Bill be amended as follows—

In paragraph 2 of the order, for '13th February' substitute '27th February'.—*[Mr. Derek Twigg.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day
Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Bill

As amended in the Joint Committee, considered.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Committee of the whole House be discharged from considering the Bill.—*[Dawn Primarolo.]*

Question agreed to.

Order for Third Reading read.

[Relevant document: The First Report from the Joint Committee on Tax Law Rewrite Bills, Session 2002–03, on the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Bill, HC 287—I.]

4.33 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am pleased to open the Third Reading debate on a Bill that rewrites income tax rules on employment income, pensions and taxable social security benefits. It has been produced by the tax law rewrite project, which is a long-term undertaking to modernise direct tax legislation so that it is clearer and easier to use. Before dealing with the specifics of the Bill itself, it may be helpful if I explain a little about the work of the project.

The project was set up in 1996 to rewrite most of the direct tax law, currently running at more than 7,000 pages of legislation enacted over the past 200 years. The key aim of the project is to produce rewritten legislation that is acceptable by all the main users as clearer and easier to apply. While making measures more accessible, the project takes a great deal of care to preserve the effect of the present legislation apart from minor agreed changes.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I wonder whether the right hon. Lady can help me. She said that the project reflects the 1996 announcement to rewrite tax rules over many years. How up to date is it? Has it taken into account all the new taxes that the Government have imposed on the British people?

Dawn Primarolo: The project was started in 1996 by the previous Administration and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), and is supported by the Government. The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is yes—both the Capital Allowances Act 2001 considered by the House two years ago and the Bill cover all the legislation to date. If he cares to scrutinise the Committee proceedings, he will find some interesting debate on the more unusual measures that the previous Government introduced into our tax system. I am sure that he is waiting with bated breath to read that as his essential bedtime reading.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I am sure that there have been failings by Members on both sides of the House in the past. However, was the Inland Revenue asked to provide a full compliance cost assessment of each measure while, at the same time, looking at the way in which they could be rewritten? Will the right hon. Lady put that full compliance cost into the public domain? Having looked at the matter, has she

concluded that the best way to simplify the burden of dealing with those forms is not merely to rewrite them but to simplify the tax system itself?

Dawn Primarolo: On this occasion, it is not for me to criticise the previous Government on its foresight in establishing the tax law rewrite. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is precisely that—a rewrite of the current tax legislation. The question of tax simplification, which the House has discussed many times, and will do so again in future because of its importance to the tax debate, is a separate issue. The hon. Gentleman asked about compliance cost assessment. As a measure in the new format, the Bill has to undergo an assessment on compliance costs. That information was available to the House on Second Reading and in Committee and is included in the explanatory notes. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is pleased that there will be negligible compliance costs, if any. Because the increased compliance is so small it is impossible to measure. However, there is considerable evidence from everyone who was consulted that the new legislation is easier to understand and therefore less of a burden on taxpayers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I am happy to give way, but I hope that hon. Members will look at the tax law rewrite, rather than extend it into a wider debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The right hon. Lady has a number of hon. Members from whom to choose.

Dawn Primarolo: What an enviable position to be in! While not wishing to detain the House, perhaps we should work through them one by one. I shall give way to the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban).

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): On the issue of compliance costs, given that the Bill is the second measure to come before the House from the Joint Committee on tax law rewrite Bills, what research has the Treasury done on the beneficial effects of the first measure, the Capital Allowances Act 2001?

Dawn Primarolo: I do not have the regulatory impact assessment of that Act with me, although it has already been discussed and passed by the House. However, I can make sure that a copy is sent to the hon. Gentleman. I draw his attention to the regulatory impact assessment accompanying the Bill, which is one of the papers available to the House today and will answer his questions. On capital allowances, he will know as well as I do of the enormous relief, amounting to many billions of pounds, that they provide for businesses.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell), as I am pleased to see him back in the House again.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): I thank the Paymaster General for that kind endorsement from the Labour party, which I shall bring to the attention of my constituents at a subsequent election.

I strongly support the rewrite Committee and the work that the Paymaster General and her colleagues are doing. Of course, as she said, the project was set up by the last Conservative Government. Clearly, the rewrite is enormously technical and involves a lot of practitioners in the City and elsewhere. How does she go about ensuring full consultation with all interested parties and with practitioners in particular? Will she tell us whom she consults, and on what basis and how she consults them?

Dawn Primarolo: In giving way to the hon. Gentleman, I said that I was pleased to see him back in the House on this occasion. I was not extending my remarks any further, much though I recognise that he may be an agreeable fellow.

I shall deal in my speech with the points that the hon. Gentleman raised about who was consulted and the consultation process. The point that underlies his question is extremely important. We must have very wide consultation. If the process is to achieve its objectives of being easy, clear and helpful to practitioners, the practitioners themselves must agree that that is the case.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I shall give way first to the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight), who is sitting at the back, but I shall work back down the Opposition Benches and I shall not forget the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

Mr. Greg Knight: (East Yorkshire): I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she not keep us in suspense until later in her speech, but deal with a point that follows on from that which my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) raised? I notice from the Committee's minutes that, on 14 January, it ordered that

> "The uncorrected transcript of the oral evidence together with the associated memorandum be published on the internet."

When were those details placed on the internet and are they still there? If so, can the Minister tell the House the URL—universal resource locator—for the internet page? Has provision been made to encourage public feedback? Those of us who are interested in pursuing more online consultation want the public to be encouraged to give their feedback on such issues via the internet.

Dawn Primarolo: At this precise moment, I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the exact reference for which he asks.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I should like to answer one question at a time, even though the hon. Gentleman might be trying to help me.

I shall ensure that I provide to the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) the information that he requests before the end of the debate. He is absolutely right in his comments, as the hallmark of the consultation on the Bill was that we continued the

[Dawn Primarolo]

process even after the final drafts had been published to ensure that all possible corrections and errors could be put before the Committee. When I have given him the reference that he requests and he looks at the proceedings of the Committee, he will see that the Government had to table amendments even at the Committee stage to correct some aspects of the draft Bill. We will continue to pick up those issues.

The organisations that took part in the consultation are listed in volume 1 of the explanatory notes to the Bill: the Cardiff law school at Cardiff university, the Chartered Institute of Taxation, the City of London Law Society, the Confederation of British Industry, the construction industry joint taxation committee, Deloitte and Touche, Ernst and Young, Global Employment Solutions, the Holborn Law Society, ideasUK, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, the Institute of Directors, the Institute of Payroll and Pensions Management and John Jeffrey-Cook. Other representations came from KPMG, Mayer, Brown, Rowe and Maw, the share scheme lawyers group and the special committee of tax law consultative bodies. The list goes on; I shall not read all the names into the record, but they are there for the right hon. Gentleman to see.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien *rose—*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman on the Front Bench first, as that is what I am required to do, but other hon. Gentlemen should not be too worried, as I shall give way to them as well.

Mr. O'Brien: I am most grateful to the Paymaster General for giving way. She has most helpfully read out a list of the many consultees that have been helpful and supportive in the project. In case it is of some help to her, I should like to point out that the URL that has just been requested is www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/rewrite/index.htm.

Dawn Primarolo: I thank the hon. Gentleman for supplying that information to the House. That reinforces the point about cross-party support for the tax law rewrite project. The Special Committee procedure was chaired by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)—who very skilfully saw us through our Committee stages—and Lord Howe of Aberavon, who has been energetic and committed to this project for some time. If anything had been awry or not correct, or if the Government had been attempting to do anything in the Bill that they should not have been doing, I am absolutely confident that those two right hon. and learned Gentlemen, whose skills are enormous, would have spotted it.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): The right hon. Lady will be aware that the Inland Revenue's 2002–03 annual report on this project stated:

"The current volume of new legislation annually on direct tax means that the project is now operating in a very different environment from that in which it was conceived."

I am not entirely clear what that means. Does it mean that there are many more taxes being introduced now than in 1996? The report also says:

"This has made it all the harder to find and maintain resources for our work."

Will the Paymaster General confirm that those resources are being provided to the Inland Revenue?

Dawn Primarolo: I can confirm that the resources are being maintained and committed to the Inland Revenue tax law rewrite project. Indeed, if the hon. Gentleman reads our Second Reading debate in *Hansard*, he will see that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe complimented the Government on continuing their commitment to ensuring that the tax law rewrite project would work through the programme of legislation. He also took note that, when the tax law rewrite project was announced in 1996, the then Government gave it five years in which to complete the review. He accepted, as did Lord Howe of Aberavon, that that was somewhat optimistic, but good progress is none the less being made in what continues to be a complex area of taxation, particularly in the international dimensions.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I well recall the racy and intoxicating speech made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe on a previous occasion in a debate not dissimilar to this one. I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for confirming that the Government's 53 new taxes are included in the rewrite project, but will she tell the House—in the light of the 2,000 new clauses and schedules proposed by the Government over the last five years—whether a distillation and synthesis of the material is intended, such that there will be a reduction from the current 7,000 pages to something altogether more manageable?

Dawn Primarolo: It is part of the project to ensure that the legislation is easier to read, has shorter sentences, is easier to use, and has comprehensive signposts—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk) is pleading for larger print. It is true, however, that a simpler explanation that is easier to use can sometimes be of greater length than the original. Above all, however, the tax law rewrite project enables us to remove legislation that is no longer needed but happens still to be on the statute book, so this is a win-win situation. The legislation is usable and, where possible, shorter, and redundant legislation is removed so as not to confuse the taxpayer.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I have been listening intently to the Paymaster General's intentions regarding the simplification of the tax position that underlies the Bill. Surely the best way to simplify the tax situation is to abolish some of the taxes. The former Chancellor, Lord Lawson, made it a hallmark of his tenure of the chancellorship that he abolished a tax in each of his Budgets. Can the Paymaster General tell us how many taxes she or the Chancellor of the Exchequer have abolished over the past six years, in addition to the 53 extra taxes that her Government have created?

Dawn Primarolo: I stress to the hon. Gentleman that the tax law rewrite project is not about simplification as

it is understood within the tax debate, but about ensuring that the existing legislation is easy to understand. I can give him one clear example; there are many. The Government removed the tax relief for private medical insurance, which a Government of his party would apparently want to add to the system. That relief was complex, expensive and made no progress at all in terms of its use. I venture to say to the hon. Gentleman that if he suggested to business that the Government should remove capital allowances from the statute book—

Tim Loughton: Taxes.

Dawn Primarolo: Well, he needs to be clear. The tax system and its complexity is made up of many areas. People want relief when it will help them, despite the fact that it brings complexity, but do not want complexity if the relief goes to someone else.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I have already given way to the hon. Member for Buckingham, so I shall be fair to the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), who is rising for the first time.

Mr. Cameron: I am grateful to the Paymaster General for giving way. I am enjoying this debate more than some of us may have expected. Given that the rewrite has been delayed, can the right hon. Lady explain how much of that delay is due to the length of the Budgets of this Chancellor who, I believe, holds the record for the three longest Budgets in our history?

Dawn Primarolo: The tax law rewrite project has not been delayed. I was being generous to the previous Administration, but that was clearly a mistake on my part. When the previous Administration made their original assessment that the entire tax code could be rewritten in five years, they were a tad optimistic, and that would be an understatement.

Mr. Cameron: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I know that hon. Members are enjoying the debate enormously, although it has taken a slightly different turn than I anticipated. I assure them that the rewrite is necessary because the central objectives and the central pieces of legislation involved in the tax law rewrite have been in place for some considerable time.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman again, I should check that no other hon. Member is waiting in the queue. If not, I shall gladly give way to him before I make progress on my speech, for which I am sure he is waiting with bated breath.

Mr. Bercow: I look forward to it with bated breath, eager anticipation and beads of sweat upon my brow. However, I must implore the Paymaster General to widen her intellectual horizons. Tax law rewrite and tax simplification need not be mutually exclusive. In the interests of good governance, she would be well advised to take note of the seminal ten-minute Bill on tax simplification that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) introduced in the last Parliament, as well as a similar Bill that I introduced for the edification of the House on 6 June 2000.

Dawn Primarolo: I always follow closely everything that the hon. Member for Buckingham says on the Floor of the House, irrespective of whether I agree with his allegations.

The tax system—in terms not only of the language of the legislation and its accessibility to those who wish to use it, but also of balancing fairness, certainty and continuity for business with ensuring that all taxpayers get a fair response from the tax system—does not always lend itself easily to simplification. Simplification can be unfair, short and discriminatory, like the poll tax. I am sure that hon. Members will therefore agree that I should move on to consider the Bill.

It is beyond the project's remit to make any change in the main tax policies. However, as the long title suggests, the rewrite can encompass minor changes in detail that further improve the Bill. Examples include: new provisions to fill gaps in existing legislation; incorporating extra statutory concessions; abolishing obsolete material, and correcting minor anomalies. Major changes to tax legislation are matters for the Finance Bill alone. Hon. Members who want to discuss the complexity of the tax system should make their points during consideration of that measure, as they do every year.

Mr. Eric Forth: (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I have been very generous. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman is the only Conservative Member to whom I have not given way and I shall therefore allow him to intervene later so that he does not believe that I am persecuting him. First, I should like to make a little progress.

The Joint Committee focused on the minor changes and satisfied itself that their significance was small and thus within the Bill's remit. The Joint Committee also noted the wide public scrutiny of the Bill, especially the minor changes, which the consultation process clearly flagged up. The project drops any proposed changes that do not fulfil the public scrutiny test.

There is a rigorous system of public consultation for the rewrite Bills. For example, three exposure drafts and a draft Bill were published for formal consultation before the current measure was issued. Meetings have taken place with representative public bodies and informal contact has been made by electronic means with various interested parties.

The Bill is the second measure to emerge from the project. The first dealt with capital allowances two years ago. Tax professionals and other users warmly

[Dawn Primarolo]

welcomed the Capital Allowances Act 2001. On Second Reading, I said that I was gratified to read the comments of a leading tax author, who wrote:

"For those learning about capital allowances for the first time, the Capital Allowances Act 2001 is an unqualified blessing. Besides consolidating the old law into one Act, the new legislation is much more clearly laid out than the patchwork of legislation which it replaced."

That is considerable praise.

I want to consider the second rewrite Bill. It makes a start on the rewrite of income tax by rewriting schedule E. Approximately 25 million people are taxed under it, giving rise to more than 90 per cent. of total income tax. The charge to income tax is currently broken down into several schedules. They have come and gone, but we currently have schedules A, D, E and F.

Schedule E deals mainly with income from employment but also includes some charges on pension income and social security benefits, when they are taxable. The Bill covers the current schedule E provision. It brings together all provision for pension income in part 9 and therefore includes even pensions that are currently taxable under schedule D. It also includes the primary legislation for pay-as-you-earn. In the spring, in response to users' representations, the project will publish for consultation a complete draft of the rewritten pay-as-you-earn regulations.

The Joint Committee concluded that the Bill was a welcome clarification of existing law and would be easier to use and more accessible to Parliament, the judiciary, informed professionals, business people and other users. Various techniques have been used in the Bill to effect that.

The first and most important element is the imposition of a coherent structure. Instead of the ramshackle order of provision in existing legislation, the Bill presents all the material logically and groups linked topics. For example, all provisions dealing with taxation of benefits in kind are drawn together to form a benefits code. And, for the first time, all legislation for share-related remuneration is brought together, including, for instance, the various types of share scheme and share option plan.

Another feature that makes the Bill easier to use is the inclusion of plenty of navigational aids for the reader, such as introductory scene-setting chapters and signposts to other relevant provisions. All those are designed to help readers find their way through this large body of legislation. Other features of the rewrite include shorter sentences, modern language, more consistent definitions and, where it is helpful, more use of reader aids such as formulae, tables and method statements.

All that combines to make a new style of tax law that is more accessible, easier on the eye and altogether more user-friendly. That is evidenced by public reaction. For example, the Confederation of British Industry described the Bill, as published in draft last summer, as

"a very great improvement on the existing legislation",

and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales said it was

"another major step forward in improving the intelligibility of UK tax legislation in areas of the law that affect the majority of taxpayers".

The title of the Bill is self-explanatory. It is a Bill to

"Restate, with minor changes, certain enactments relating to income tax on employment income, pension income and social security income; and for connected purposes".

That is its limit. It is not a tax-reforming Bill. It is, however, an important Bill, and it is also a success. I am firmly convinced that it will make things better for everyone who uses tax legislation.

Before I finish my speech I will give way to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), if he still wishes to intervene.

Mr. Forth: The Minister can now claim almost to have achieved a full house, or a running flush, or whatever the appropriate term may be.

In paragraph 3 of the Joint Committee's first report, we are told

"The Committee is satisfied that the only changes that the Bill makes to the existing law are of such minor significance that they need not be referred to the attention of Parliament."

I must confess that phrases such as that cause me some concern. I take the view that nothing is of such minor significance that it need not be referred to Parliament. While I accept that the process we are now undergoing constitutes a reference to Parliament, what reassurance can we have that these matters are indeed of "such minor significance"? Even if they are of minor significance, why is there an implication that the rest of us need not be bothered about them?

Dawn Primarolo: Extra-statutory concessions would not normally be in the body of the tax legislation, but would be used alongside it. One example of a minor change would be the incorporation of such a concession in the legislation.

The right hon. Gentleman suggested that he might want to elaborate on his point. If he looks at the explanatory notes, he will see that every minor change in that category is flagged up. The notes explain what the change is, and where it can be found in the Bill. Committee members focused specifically on those changes to satisfy themselves as to the procedure. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Committee considering the Bill was not dissimilar to one that would consider a consolidation Bill. It is a Committee of both Houses, in which the Government do not carry their automatic majority. Its discussions follow a slightly different procedure from those in other Committees, and it is able to call independent witnesses if it so chooses.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: This is the very last time that I shall give way before I sit down.

Mr. Burnett: I am extremely grateful to the Paymaster General for giving way. Are those the only changes that are being made through this legislation? I had heard that one or two others are perhaps being made, particularly with regard to pay-as-you-earn regulations, some of which may well have been ultra vires since about 1960.

Dawn Primarolo: I wish I had had written notice of that question. As I said in my opening remarks,

the PAYE regulations are being re-drafted and are going out for consultation. They will be fully scrutinised through such public consultation before they are updated.

Mr. Cameron *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I have been extremely generous in giving way, and if hon. Members want to make other points during the debate, I shall of course pick up on them, if I can catch your eye at the end of the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I commend this Bill to the House.

5.6 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Let me begin by noting that when my colleagues saw that the Paymaster General would be taking this very interesting measure through the House on Third Reading, they could not resist packing the Chamber to listen to her. Hers has been a useful opening to this important provision, which affects everybody in this country who has income.

This Third Reading debate follows Second Reading upstairs in Committee on 16 December, and the formal granting by the House of a Second Reading two days later. I thank the Paymaster General for the lucid and comprehensive way in which she has set this important Bill before the House—*[Interruption.]* She seems to be implying from a sedentary position that that might be the kiss of death, but I should like to thank her for the courteous and patient way in which she dealt with numerous interventions from my colleagues, who on this occasion are themselves numerous. Collectively, they have provided a remarkable fount of wisdom to assist her in today's discussion. I hope to cover some of the points that they made in those interventions, to the extent that I can possibly add to the answers already given.

As the Paymaster General said, this is the second Bill to emanate from the tax law rewrite project. The first became the Capital Allowances Act 2001, which applies primarily to businesses. This Bill has a much wider application and involves many of our constituents, which is why it has attracted so much interest and attention. It is no mean Bill, as it consists of 725 clauses and eight schedules. That may come as no surprise, given that it deals with the significant arena within the overall income tax field of earnings and pensions and, as she rightly said, of social security income.

Against the background of the introduction of income tax in 1799, the Bill seeks to encapsulate law that has more than 200 years of history behind it. Given the Bill's sheer size, right hon. and hon. Members will doubtless have found that the best way to gain the clearest possible understanding of it—given the remarkable speed with which my colleagues have attended to it, they must have used this technique—is to start with the exceptionally helpful accompanying explanatory notes, and then to contrast and compare provisions and expressions in specific parts of the Bill with what they replace.

Mr. Greg Knight: May I associate myself with my hon. Friend's remarks about the Paymaster General?

Has my hon. Friend received any assurances from the Government that the whole rewrite process is not putting undue burdens on the office of the parliamentary draftsman? I am among those Members who want more pre-legislative scrutiny. The Leader of the House has told us that there are difficulties due to the pressure of work on the parliamentary draftsmen. This process—worthwhile though it is—should not mean the neglect of other work that I regard as more important.

Mr. O'Brien: My right hon. Friend raises a fundamental and important point about both the rewrite project and the pressure on parliamentary draftsmen generally. Under the ghastly guillotining procedure, the bulk of legislation is passed with no scrutiny, which puts even greater burdens of responsibility on the parliamentary draftsmen.

Later, in what I hope will be relatively short remarks, I shall ask the Paymaster General to answer particular questions, one of which will address the point that my right hon. Friend has raised.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend will have seen that the Order Paper helpfully notes that this debate can continue until any hour, so I hope that he will not deprive the House of his research and comments on the Bill by feeling any time constraints whatever. The House is at my hon. Friend's disposal. We want to hear what he has to say "until any hour", so I hope that he will take every advantage of that.

Mr. O'Brien: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. No one in the House has a greater reputation than my right hon. Friend for day-in, day-out commitment to parliamentary scrutiny and for using this Chamber as the proper forum for debate and holding the Government to account. I noted the words on the Order Paper and, as we explore the issues, we may be glad to avail ourselves of the opportunities that they offer us. Under the hideous new hours to which we are subjected, the 10 o'clock motion is now the 7 o'clock motion, so we shall have to contend with that. If my right hon. and hon. Friends and, indeed, right hon. and hon. Members from other parties find that they are fully engaged with the issues, they may feel that they need time to explore them.

These important issues relating to income tax apply to many citizens.

Mr. Bercow: The compassionate instincts of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) are never far from public view. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) agree, however, that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is indeed right, and that it is especially incumbent on my hon. Friend to discharge his responsibility and to offer us his exegesis of the work and lucubrations of the parliamentary draftsman, as represented by the 13 major publications in the form of exposure drafts issued during the past five years?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I wonder whether "exegesis" might not qualify for the tax rewrite project itself, but I take his point on board. In what I thought were going to be brief opening remarks, I was trying to show that I had genuinely tried to understand this vast mass of documentation before we allow the House to enact the measure. I hope that gives my hon. Friend some comfort.

[Mr. O'Brien]

I am confident that the Bill is a genuine stride forward in making our existing primary, direct income tax legislation on earnings and pensions clearer and easier to use. I do not propose to take up too much time itemising, contrasting and comparing each clause—save to admit to donning an anorak for that purpose. With a wet towel wrapped around my head, I have studied the Bill. In my view, the Joint Committee has done a truly excellent and admirable job.

Mr. Hoban: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that a Bill of such magnitude and importance was covered by only four sittings of the Joint Committee? Notwithstanding that it received extensive pre-legislative scrutiny, should not the House spend more time on a Bill of such magnitude and importance?

Mr. O'Brien: I believe that the Paymaster General had a genuine point when she made it clear that the process of consideration involving a Joint Committee of the House was designed to tap into the vast expertise and experience of individuals who are able to bring their work to the assistance of the House, in supporting that which we as legislators want to achieve: a rewrite in much clearer, user-friendly language of a measure covering the important subject of income tax law as it relates to earnings and pensions.

Although it may seem on the surface that there has been less than the full number of debates that my hon. Friend might have expected, I am satisfied with the process because so much has been done through a number of Committees that have reported to each other. Although it is up to the Paymaster General to give my hon. Friend the reassurance that he seeks to pass on to his constituents, I have taken the trouble to satisfy myself that the process has been well designed and properly adopted.

Mr. Hoban: Has my hon. Friend read the speech that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) made in the Second Reading Committee about the process that led up to the Bill? He said:

"It is rather difficult to meet our duty of scrutinising legislation when these Bills come here after so much consultation, which usually leads to the full-blooded support of every professional body for the work that is produced."—[*Official Report*, Second Reading Committee, 16 December 2002; c. 10.]

Mr. O'Brien: No doubt the Paymaster General has listened to my hon. Friend's point with care and wants to comment.

Dawn Primarolo: I am sure that the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) is not seriously suggesting that the Government should not make every effort to ensure that legislation is properly drafted before it reaches the House, simply so that outside bodies can give Opposition Members something to say in debate? Surely the Government should be applauded for undertaking so much consultation and ensuring that legislation before the House is of the highest possible standard.

Mr. O'Brien: The Paymaster General almost takes the words out of my mouth. It is wholly proper and appropriate that, in addition to the genuine tribute that I have paid to the Paymaster General, the House should record its gratitude to a number of the prime movers. The tax law rewrite project was established in December 1996 by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who gave it the authority and impetus that has led to the overall project's success so far. My right hon. and learned Friend would like to have been with us today but is unavoidably detained.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who is elsewhere on Select Committee business. These ghastly hours mean that we all have to be in too many places at once. I pay tribute also to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt), who has dedicated himself with great assiduity to the Bill. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is he?"] He is not in the Chamber, but that is forgivable, given the absence of my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr. Forth: As ever, my hon. Friend is a true gentleman in seeking to exonerate the other right hon. and hon. Members whom he mentions. However, if the Bill is as important as the Paymaster General suggested—and as important as my hon. Friend suggests by giving so much of his time to it—is he puzzled and disappointed that the very people to whom we should have looked for guidance today deem it to be more important to be elsewhere, rather than in the Chamber assisting us with the knowledge and experience that they gained in Committee? My hon. Friend and the Paymaster General apart, are we not left rudderless on the matter as a result?

Mr. O'Brien: I am somewhat disappointed that my right hon. Friend feels that I am not up to the task. The absence of the right hon. and hon. Members is understandable in the circumstances. However tempting it is to make a cheap point by condemning hon. Members for not being present in the Chamber, I shall not do so. It is encouraging, however, that so many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have felt it necessary to ensure that the Bill is given proper scrutiny on Third Reading. The Bill is the result of a long and rigorous process and I therefore hope that my right hon. Friend will gain some comfort from the knowledge that proper scrutiny has been granted to it. During the debate, he will have many opportunities to assure himself that that is the case.

Mr. Greg Knight: May I reassure my hon. Friend that we make no criticism of his handling of the matter? He is a powerful advocate. However, can he reassure me that nothing in the Bill alters the ruling in the well-known revenue case of Hochstrasser *v.* Mayes?

Mr. O'Brien: My right hon. Friend has obviously had the opportunity to read the explanatory notes. If not, paragraph 17 on page 5 explains everything that he needs to know about Hochstrasser *v.* Mayes (1959) 38 TC 673, [1960] AC 376. We should pay tribute to the hard work that has gone into the explanatory notes that support the Bill. As is so often the case on other Bills, they are exceptionally helpful to Members. On this

occasion, my right hon. Friend will find all the answers that he needs, and it would be tiresome and unnecessary to read out the paragraph concerned.

Mr. Cameron: My hon. Friend's wet towel exercise—as we shall now have to call it—of looking through the Bill was obviously complete. Did he consider clause 700, which deals with the taxation of share options? Does he share my concern that the proposed law may differ from the existing law, because the Bill mentions taxing an option the moment that it is assigned, instead of the moment that it is exercised? In that case, the person holding the option would not have made a profit out of it, but would be taxed on the nominal value of its assignation.

Mr. O'Brien: Accountability for the content of the Bill lies ultimately with the Government, but if it is of assistance to my hon. Friend in seeking further assurance from the Paymaster General, I can tell him that the annexe to the Bill contains a list of 183 changes, which are classified as minor.

Mr. Forth: Oh!

Mr. O'Brien: My right hon. Friend will no doubt be interested to learn how those changes are classified and how the House may be assured that they are not a cause for concern. He will then have to decide whether he is satisfied with the explanation.

If my hon. Friend looks at the schedule 183 changes, he may well find that the change in clause 700 is classified as minor. I shall look it up if he needs further clarification, but his challenge is appropriate in this debate. He mentioned the wet towel. I assure him that it was very wet, but I am satisfied that the change is in line with the original intent not to inflict unnecessary burdens on users of the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

Mr. O'Brien: This must be the last intervention, as I need to get to page 2 of my speech.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is typically generous. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) said in his Budget speech in November 1996 that the project was as ambitious as an attempt to translate "War and Peace" into lucid Swahili. He and other senior and influential Members are too busy to be here today, but does my hon. Friend think that they would approve of clause 130 on the notional price of an accessory?

Mr. O'Brien: I was born in Tanzania and my father speaks fluent Swahili. The Bill is more difficult than the translation suggested by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe. I suggest that my hon. Friend looks at the definitions of any terms contained in inverted commas. That is always useful in tax matters. He can then decide whether "notional price" amounts to correct English usage. It is helpful to wear an anorak when comparing and contrasting this Bill with the wording in the original legislation.

I want to make progress. The Paymaster General was exceptionally generous in giving way to interventions, and I do not want to be less so. However, Labour and Liberal Democrat Members seem unwilling to intervene.

As I was saying, I pay great tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, but also to my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde and to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, both of whom served with great dedication on the steering committee overseeing the project. I salute all the steering committee members, under the indefatigable, focused, charming and determined chairmanship of my noble Friend Lord Howe of Aberavon, which has been patently effective.

Mr. George Osborne: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I should like to make progress, but I appreciate that my hon. Friend wants to make a relevant point.

Mr. Osborne: We are praising the work of the Joint Committee and approving the project, but the regulatory impact assessment states that the costs of the rewrite project are almost impossible to quantify in advance, and that it is impossible to arrive at an objective measure of the benefits. Does my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour agree that it is surprising to be considering a Bill whose costs and benefits remain unknown to us? I hope that the Paymaster General will at least say something about the costs.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour raises an important point, which the Paymaster General and I discussed in the Second Reading Committee, and I shall refer to it a little later in my remarks. If my hon. Friend will be patient until I reach that point, I shall perhaps be able to deal with it in the round and he will get a more contextual answer. We have to bear in mind where the offset of the costs may arise, as well as the actual numbers. However, given the assurances in the regulatory impact assessment, it would be fair to say that, overall, they are relatively de minimis.

I add our genuine thanks to the many members of the accountancy and legal professions and taxpayer representatives who have taken part in the consultative committee that has reviewed this work, as well as to all those who have participated in the consultation, among whom are those listed on pages 3 and 4 of the explanatory notes, which the Paymaster General so helpfully read out during her opening remarks in response to an intervention made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight).

I make no apology for taking time to pay tributes because the House would be unable to undertake such work without the support and expertise of so many people dedicating considerable time and effort. Our gratitude rightly extends, equally, to the Inland Revenue staff who have been involved and, not least, to the team of parliamentary draftsmen, to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire referred, who have grappled with this complex and continuing project.

It is important to note that the Bill, as with all rewrite Bills, is not intended to change the effect of current legislation in any significant way. That point was made

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by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). However, each rewrite will include a number of minor changes to the law—for example, to legislate for extra-statutory concessions—and this one is no exception.

As I said earlier, 183 changes are listed in the second volume of the Bill. I ask the Paymaster General to highlight a number of those changes, including additional examples of where this project has afforded the opportunity to discard obsolete provisions, during our proceedings this afternoon—it is rapidly becoming this evening—to underwrite the crucial element of trust that has to inform our proceedings.

In the Second Reading Committee, I raised that issue with the Paymaster General and asked her to flag up those changes well in advance so that, in addition to the process being transparent, it continues to carry with it the crucial trust and integrity by which it has been characterised to date. That should provide some of the assurances to which my right hon. and hon. Friends alluded in earlier interventions.

Although it was estimated that the rewrite project would involve 6,000 pages of legislation and initially take about five years, it has long since been recognised that the original programme would not be attainable. I agree with the Paymaster General that it is more important for work to be done properly, rather than quickly, as she said in a written answer on 31 January 2002.

Since its inception, this project has rightly attracted interest and support across the political spectrum, as well as in the business and financial services community. We have to recognise that the whole tax law rewrite project is a continuing one and that it will improve the democratic settlement between taxpaying citizens and the state in terms of transparency, communication and clarity, as is our obligation, only if it maintains its momentum and the Government remain wholeheartedly committed to it.

I have no doubt, frankly, that that is the Paymaster General's intent, but I ask her to confirm to the House that, as a minimum, the same resources—not least the availability of appropriately skilled and experienced parliamentary draftsmen—are maintained and supported in moving on to the next stage in rewriting the PAYE regulations, which, as she rightly said, are out to consultation.

In answer to an intervention made by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), it is important to recognise that the Paymaster General would help the House enormously if she were to tell us the programme for the next stage of the project. Although the rewrite of PAYE regulations was not within the original remit of the rewrite team, it has rightly been included in response to representations. Will the Paymaster General confirm that resources will continue to be made available for a timetable within the overall tax rewrite project? Will she push the project forward?

Will the right hon. Lady tell us what resources will be made available for the third Bill of the rewrite project—covering trading, property, investment, miscellaneous, and exempt income—in 2004–05? The boundary between the Bill that we are discussing today and the third income tax Bill has, understandably, been fluid. However, it was said that the boundary definition would be finalised during 2002–03. Will she give us that boundary definition?

In the Second Reading Committee, there was confusion in one quarter, but it is important to acknowledge that this Bill, and the whole rewrite project, is not aimed at the simplification of tax policy. The Paymaster General rightly said that we must distinguish between clarification of tax, in the rewrite project, and simplification of tax, which is a separate project. The rewrite project concentrates on codifying English tax law. However, there is an important qualification. Were my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst still here, he would be able to hear the assurance that I promised. I will tell him that tomorrow's *Hansard* will make riveting reading. The qualification is that, under Standing Orders Nos. 60 and 152C, it is for the House, in scrutinising the Joint Committee's work, to determine tax law. The Committee's judgment on any changes made by the Bill will have to be scrutinised by the House in order to determine whether the changes are minor or not. That goes to the heart of the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) made a few minutes ago. That point underscores the point that I made earlier about trust. The powers of the House must not be prejudiced. On the issue of trust, I ask the Paymaster General to take a few examples from note 183 in the annexe to volume 2 to show that they are indeed minor.

This Bill is before the House as a result of considerable work and time devoted by many experts and professionals, who have had to consider a number of what are called exposure drafts. There has been concern—and even complaints—about a new syndrome, which has become known as exposure draft fatigue, or EDF. The 2002–03 tax rewrite annual plan says:

> "In order to build on the consultation process—and with the full support of the project's Steering and Consultative Committees—we now take a more flexible approach to the development of draft legislation prior to a final round of formal consultation. This includes more use of the Internet and, as soon as Departmental IT resource permits, we hope to set up a discussion group for draft legislation—that is an Internet page where people can post comments, reply to comments posted by others, and read the project's response."

My noble Friend Lord Howe of Aberavon has taken that point on board and the process has become more streamlined. It is, I would say, the better for it. There is now a considerable amount of material on this project, which the Inland Revenue has helpfully published on its internet site: www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/rewrite/index/htm.

Accompanying the Bill is a regulatory impact assessment, and some points have already been made about it. It is an important and useful document that was signed by the Paymaster General and discussed in Committee. While recognising that it is difficult to quantify the costs to taxpayers, it is important to recognise that there will be some costs involved in retraining tax practitioners so that they become familiar with the new structure. However, the regulatory impact assessment is fair in regarding the costs likely to be offset or, taken as a whole, to be relatively de minimis.

Will the Paymaster General confirm the Inland Revenue's view contained in the regulatory impact assessment? It said that although

"it would be difficult to quantify most of the benefits in advance, and impossible to arrive at any objective measure of the benefits . . . the interested parties, whom we consult during our work, still firmly believe that any costs will be more than outweighed by the benefits flowing from the project."

Mr. George Osborne: Unfortunately, I have not read the *Hansard* report of the Committee discussion on this point, but was there any discussion of the costs to the Inland Revenue of the project? What are the direct costs to government from all the work that has been done on the rewrite, the use of the parliamentary draftsmen and so on?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not least for his rapier-like persistence that we should at all times discharge our duties to look out for the waste of taxpayers' money. He will see in paragraph 28 of the regulatory impact assessment that the cost to the Inland Revenue of producing the Bill has been estimated at about £7.6 million spread over a period of six years that started in 1997 and goes through to the current financial year. As the assessment says:

"These costs can in part be offset by the costs that would have been expended on the consolidation of the ICTA 1988"—

the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988—

"and the subsequent Finance Acts, but for the work of the project."

Paragraph 29 adds:

"There will also be a small cost to the Inland Revenue in updating the relevant parts of the guidance manuals and internal training material."

There is, therefore, a cost, but it has to be considered in the round. As my hon. Friend heard earlier, we have to consider whether making income tax law—particularly as it relates to earnings and pensions and income from social security—easier to understand represents value for money in terms of the significant cost that is incurred. I believe that it does.

Mr. Greg Knight: Is there not another cost that I touched upon earlier? That is the cost of a possible lack of scrutiny that results from the fact that the parliamentary draftsmen have been overworked by this project. They are therefore not able to devote their time to producing every piece of proposed Government legislation in draft. That is what we want. The Leader of the House said that he also hopes that that will happen.

Mr. O'Brien: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. In a sense, I defer to him because he has experience in government and I do not. It is my impression from what I have managed to glean as a member of Her Majesty's official and loyal Opposition that the parliamentary draftsmen are not only an expert but a somewhat scarce commodity available to Government. They are under enormous pressure given the volume and weight of Bills that are continually being introduced. It is important therefore to recognise that we seek an assurance from the Paymaster General that the resources that have been devoted effectively to date will, at least, be maintained at that level. That will enable us to move ahead with the third Bill on the tax law rewrite in the 2004–05 Session and the additional rewrite on the PAYE regulations that will affect everyone who earns. I hope that that reassures my right hon. Friend, but the Paymaster General may have an opportunity to add to my remarks.

Mr. Hoban: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. He has been very generous at taking interventions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) talked about the burden on parliamentary draftsmen as a result of the process of pre-legislative scrutiny. My hon. Friend has referred to exposure directive fatigue. In parallel with parliamentary draftsmen becoming involved, external bodies also have to look at these matters. It is not just the tax law rewrite that involves professional advisers. Before the last Finance Act, there was a considerable input from practitioners on capital gains tax. Is my hon. Friend concerned, as I am, that professional bodies may be devoting a great deal of resources to tax law rewrite, when they may have other tasks because of the Government's programme?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because what he has said helps me to repeat the gratitude of the whole House to the enormous number of experts and practitioners who, because they are so expert—one can place enormous reliance on them for their judgement and expertise—are exceptionally busy in their professional and other practical work. To have a satisfactory consultative body that is effective in support of the tax law rewrite project, which I believe our consultation Committee is, inevitably puts an enormous strain and demand on the time and effort of those people, who are already very busy in their own right.

It was exposure draft fatigue, not exposure directive fatigue—if I may gently correct my hon. Friend—that led to the establishment of use of the internet for dialogue, rather than the many meetings and paper drafts. Those of us who have been in professional practice, as I was before I entered the manufacturing industry, know that it is very time consuming to have to measure one draft against another. On the internet, as my hon. Friend well knows, time can be saved, not least because, in a rather professional way, there is a chat room to exchange good ideas.

Mr. Forth: I worry when I start to hear talk of chat rooms and e-things. Is not my hon. Friend worried that a large proportion of the population is disfranchised by this ghastly modern process? Every time I hear glib talk of internet chat rooms and the like, it comes to my mind that the latest figures show, I think, that only 40 per cent. of households are connected to the ghastly internet. Therefore, potentially 60 per cent. of households are disfranchised from the so-called consultation process. How do we non-cyber folk get to know about these things, and how are we simple, non-electronic people, consulted?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, I would point out that we are going a little wide of the Third Reading of the Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Indeed, I could almost say

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"rescue". I was concerned that my right hon. Friend might be referring to E-substances in food, given the nature of his question at one point, but I understand where he is coming from in terms of his non-cyber existence. I recognise that he inhabits the non-cyber world in a very firm and, I suspect, unshakeable way. But when he quotes statistics as to who is and is not hooked to cyber, it is important to recognise that we are not talking about the broad citizenry at large. We are talking about the professionals and those with particular expert knowledge in the field, who can help on the consultation Committee and also as consultees in the process. It is also important to recognise that it would be very difficult for them to do their professional work if they were not prepared to join what is regarded as the more modern e-world, with all its opportunities—and indeed shortcomings, as my right hon. Friend is never remiss in observing and pointing out to the rest of the nation.

I shall move forward as rapidly as I can with opening remarks that have taken somewhat longer than I had expected. I support and reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said in our Committee proceedings, that we not only hope that the precedent of issuing a regulatory impact assessment of the Bill will be followed for all future tax law rewrite projects, but also believe that it should be applied to all future tax changes, to include economic tests and an analysis of what the Chancellor expects any tax measure to achieve.

Dawn Primarolo: Has the hon. Gentleman been following the same debate in the United States, where Congress and the President disagree on how to make an assessment on that basis? Given that they cannot resolve the problem, is he seriously suggesting that it would be helpful for us to engage in such a dispute?

Mr. O'Brien: In a sense, the Paymaster General gives me the assurance that I seek. The fact that she is conscious of the debate in the United States means that Treasury Ministers are keeping a watching brief on it. That gives me some encouragement. The model in the United States is often much more fruitful than models nearer to home. It will be helpful to see how the debate develops and how—if at all—the Americans manage to resolve the problem. If it is resolved satisfactorily, it will help to underpin the settlement between the citizens of this country who have to pay tax and the state, as represented through the Executive, which takes and applies the money. We need to ensure that they have the best possible information to understand how the money is valued and what is expected up front.

It is no different in the private and commercial world. It is no bad thing for hon. Members to experience the discipline of working in the real world that everyone else inhabits before they come here. If someone wants to raise money by going to a bank, he would be held to his business and repayment plans and would need to have an idea of how things might work out. That is not the habit of Government, as the Paymaster General knows. It is worth considering such a project, especially on the back of what is being considered in the United States. I am grateful to know that that might be under the gaze of Treasury Ministers, and we look forward to further reports on it.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said in Committee, tax legislation is too often enacted

"on a wing and a prayer, wondering whether it will do some good or hoping—for political reasons—that it will",

but all it can add is further complexity. Therefore, for all users of tax legislation, the overriding need is for both clarity and certainty. Indeed, the Paymaster General made that point in her opening remarks. Although the rewrite project addresses clarity, I hope that the Paymaster General and the Chancellor will listen carefully, especially as the Budget is coming soon and the planned tax increases, which will hit everyone's pockets, are just 53 days away. They need to act on that, not least to make it easier for tax practitioners and taxpayers, but also to gauge, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde said, the "before-and-after effects" of tax measures. That is, perhaps, the equivalent of the proposal, coupled with a post-audit review that one would expect in any walk of private business and commercial life. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) touched on that in the context of the compliance issue. I am grateful that the Paymaster General is nodding. She obviously acknowledged the importance of that, and I look forward to further announcements from the Treasury.

I hope that I am pushing at an open door, because in Committee the Paymaster General concluded with the words:

"Tax legislation is not always perfect. It is, however, about striking a balance between fairness and enabling competition, and it is about giving certainty."—[*Official Report, Second Reading Committee*, 16 December 2002; c. 12-17.]

That is a fair test and we need to adhere to it.

As we said in Committee, there would be no harm in submitting the document for scrutiny by the Plain English Campaign. That would help with clarity. Some of us have tried to earn a return for shareholders' money while at the same time supplying high-quality goods and services that customers want at a fair price. Many of us who have worked in the manufacturing, wealth-creating side of the economy have had to produce annual reports, especially if we have done that on the back of other people's money. In this ever challenging, regulated and, at times, politically correct world, annual reports have to contain all manner of things. They assume that people are always driven by the worst of motives rather than the best. Given the plethora of regulations that have to be satisfied in companies' annual reports, the application of the crystal mark by the Plain English Campaign has been particularly helpful. One of the first companies to use it, to its credit, was the National Westminster bank, in which, I hasten to add, I have no interest. I was going to say that I have no money, but that is another point. The bank's annual reports are a model of their kind, especially as many of the areas that they cover, including compliance and liquidity, are not dissimilar to those covered by the Bill. As part of the rewrite project, it would be exceptionally useful to submit the Bill to the campaign, as it is more likely to be read by private citizens than by businesses, which, with their professional tax advisers, are more likely to read the Capital Allowances Act 2001, the first of the tax law rewrite measures.

It would be useful to submit the Bill to the Plain English Campaign to discover whether the test that the Government have set themselves satisfies the campaign

as well. The campaign would also have to recognise that it is not possible to reduce everything to a small novella. In our earlier debate, there were some interesting examples of fictional novellas from Government Members, who were trying to pretend that they were delivering a critique of Conservative policy. We, however, had the chance at last to hold the Government to account for their disastrous economic policies. I am straying outside this debate, so I shall simply tell the Paymaster General that it would be helpful to introduce a further test in the tax law rewrite project by submitting the Bill to the Plain English Campaign to discover whether it could attain a crystal mark, which would be a signal demonstration of the success of all the fine work that has gone into it.

Clause 176, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde highlighted in Committee, can be understood with the aid of the exceptionally helpful flow chart on page 72 of the first volume of the explanatory notes. For the assistance of Members following our debate with intense interest, there is another chart on page 91. It is unusual that explanatory notes should include helpful diagrams that make the flow of money readily understandable. In Committee, my right hon. Friend strongly recommended that such diagrams be more widely used, not just as part of the rewrite project but more widely in legislation, not least draft legislation to assist with pre-legislative scrutiny. I, too, urge greater use of that form of explanatory communication, and I ask the Paymaster General to tell us in her winding-up speech whether there are any impediments against the wider use of the technique. Diagrams are included in the explanatory notes, but are notably absent from the Bill. It would be helpful to have a flow diagram, even if only in a schedule or annexe, as our education system relies heavily on computer technology. I know that it would be a burdensome challenge for my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, but the rest of the population is familiar with menu options—people are being educated to respond to more diagrammatic ways of learning and understanding. A chart may therefore have a greater resonance with them than the product of the more literary, arts-based education of the past.

Mr. Bercow: Far be it from me to seek to check my hon. Friend's heady and almost Panglossian optimism about pages 72 and 91, and the charts therein, of the explanatory notes, but will he remind the House that, as is customary with all legislation, there is a proviso on the front page of the explanatory notes reminding us that they are to be read in conjunction with, but are in no sense a part of, the Bill? Does he therefore think it necessary to issue a warning that the charts may not be a full, accurate and exhaustive description of the matters to which they relate?

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I had hoped that he was listening a tiny bit more attentively, as I suggested that the charts were a helpful model that could be incorporated in legislation. I fully accept that the explanatory notes should be read in conjunction with a draft Bill and that they would always be available after a Bill was enacted. None the less, if such information were included in the legislation as a schedule or annexe, it would help us to understand whether it was a genuine, full and fair representation of reality. It would be readily understood by hon. Members as well as all the users who will have to deal with such provisions once they become law. Indeed, it would be reviewed from time to time if the legislation were amended.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) will be reassured by that clarification or restatement of the position that I sought to outline earlier. He is an example to all hon. Members of the benefits of a tremendous arts-based education, not least because of the great literary prowess that he demonstrates on numerous occasions, as well as his acrobatic ability with the English language. I hope that he will recognise that not everybody's mind works completely as his does and that some people may find the more diagrammatic and figurative—and even, dare I say it, more numerate—approach of some help.

As I seek to bring what I hoped would be short remarks to a conclusion—I do so somewhat desperately, given the late hour—I must highlight one area of caution.

Mr. George Osborne: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am trying not to be delayed, but I shall give way once more.

Mr. Osborne: My hon. Friend referred to the late hour, but I remind him that, as I am sure he knows, the business can continue until any hour. We are still only at 6 o'clock in the evening, which is fairly early in what used to be the parliamentary day.

Mr. O'Brien: I am aware that the business can continue until any hour, but I would not regard it as our proper duty as Her Majesty's loyal and official Opposition to do anything other than use the time of the House effectively, as I have been seeking to do. Given the shortness of the earlier debate, which occurred in Opposition time and dealt with the absolutely crucial matter of holding the Government to account for their failed economic policies and failure on public services, the way in which Labour Members used that time was questionable. I therefore feel no compunction or compulsion to feel constrained except by the need to hold the Government properly to account in the Chamber, where we have the opportunity to do just that. If it takes us until any hour to do that, we will take until any hour, but I hope that that will not be necessary and, given the number of questions that I have asked, I am looking forward to the assurances that I am sure the Paymaster General will be able readily to give us.

I was about to deal with an area of caution. Everything that today's Chancellor does works in contrary motion to the underlying principles of the rewrite project. There is growing evidence to suggest that the tax system has become more complex, especially in recent years, as a result of the weight and size of tax legislation and the guides written to assist persons or businesses that wish to understand it. The cost of administering the system has grown along with feedback from professional surveys. There has been growing criticism of the complexity of the tax system. Accountants and others have been arguing that the

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situation is beyond the comprehension of most ordinary taxpayers and is imposing an unnecessary burden on business.

Mr. George Osborne: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is exceptionally assiduous.

Mr. Osborne: My hon. Friend will be aware that "Tolley's Tax Guide", the bible of tax accountants, has grown in size by 30 per cent. in the past few years. Indeed, smaller print now has to be used to accommodate all the extra complication of the tax law that has occurred under the current Chancellor.

Mr. O'Brien: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. It is clear that he has received the same briefing as me. Indeed, I was about to deal with that point. Tolley's standard tax manual, the bible for tax accountants, has indeed grown by more than 30 per cent. in the past three years. This is a point with which I happen to be familiar, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it. The *Financial Times* on 24 November 2001 highlighted the increase in the weight of tax manuals since Labour came to power in 1997:

"Britain's 'tax bible' has grown by more than a third since Labour came to power as the nation's accountants struggle to understand the word of Gord. Tolley's manuals on VAT, income tax and corporation tax—the accountant's favourite reference tool—have had to add a total of 855 pages to explain the gospel according to Gordon Brown."

A gospel is normally described as good news, so I have to take serious issue with the *Financial Times* on that. It goes on:

"The three guides, which together have 3,414 pages, are longer than London's residential and business telephone directories. Tolley's has even had to reduce the print size to cram in more."

When my hon. Friend talked about reducing the size, I was worried that hon. Members might be confused and think that the volume had contracted. Far from it—it has grown and has had to reduce its print size so as to cram everything in.

This is quite an extraordinary record, and one that fully illustrates how this Government's actions are going in contrary motion to the very proper tax law rewrite project that is gaining tremendous consensual cross-party support—and rightly so—in the House. Throughout the Chancellor of the Exchequer's tenure in office, a feature of his Budgets has been the sheer size of the subsequent legislation published in each Finance Bill. According, again, to the *Financial Times*, the "door-stopping" Finance Bill of 2002, with 140 clauses and 39 schedules, was the third largest ever. The *Financial Times* states:

"At 488 pages, it is the third-longest in history and it does not even include some of the most significant legislation coming out of the Budget, such as the rise in national insurance contributions"

which we will all have to suffer in 53 days' time. Can you believe it, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not discussing the Finance Bill this evening. Perhaps we can discuss the Third Reading of the Bill that is before the House?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I may have taken slightly longer than you think necessary to make my point about the 53 days—

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Not true.

Mr. O'Brien: I think that the hon. Gentleman is trying to place on record a comment about the question of 53 days. Of course, it depends on whether one is an employee or an employer. Both will face tax rises. The employers' contributions will increase at the beginning of the month and, as anyone who has worked in the real world of industry will know, the employees' contributions will rise at the end of the month, unless they have a special dispensation through their employer or through any other legislation or regulations—there are plenty of them—to change that to another date in the month. So it is 53 days until the employers' contributions will change, and we shall all have to suffer in 53 days' time—or more, depending on whether we are talking about employers' or employees' contributions. Given the appalling attack that this will represent on the pockets of the citizens of this country, I am very surprised that the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) should have the gall to highlight this matter in the way that he has done.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so generously yet again. Surely the essence of this matter is that the tax law rewrite project has to be viewed in the context of the central charge against the Government, which is that of more complexity, on the one hand, and less information being made available to the public on the other. In that context, what consideration has my hon. Friend given to the verdict of the Treasury Committee, which is very germane to our considerations tonight, that the Chancellor is to be excoriated for his failure to publish the impact of his direct and indirect taxation measures on people in the respective income deciles?

Mr. O'Brien *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) is again being tempted into byways that are not really to do with the Third Reading of the Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: I will certainly take your strictures to heart, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and leave on the record what my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham has said. I hope that the Government will take serious note of his contribution in that intervention.

I was seeking to highlight, by way of example, why there is real concern about the consistency of the Government's action in relation to the tax law rewrite

project, a crucial element of which is the Bill before us tonight, and to mention the assurances that we wish to see under the PAYE regulations.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman was complaining about the Finance Act 2002, in which the Government took out all the provisions on loan relations— which were a complete mess—and rewrote them, which equates to less pages of legislation.

Mr. Bercow: Fewer.

Dawn Primarolo: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the grammatical correction—fewer pages. The hon. Member for Eddisbury cannot seriously suggest that the Finance Act 2002 entirely comprised new legislation, because a huge chunk of it rewrote legislation that his Government had messed up.

Mr. O'Brien: Hon. Members on either side of the House will have different interpretations, but the recollection of my right hon. and hon. Friends is that the *Financial Times* was justified in calling that Finance Bill a doorstop, regardless of whether some clauses were taken out.

Given the consensual nature of the tax law rewrite project, the work of the Joint Committee and my support for what the Paymaster General has done, I hope that she realises that I do not intend to be unfair or difficult. However, there is a question in my mind about the consistency of devoting so much time and so many people to the valuable work on the tax law rewrite project, which is demonstrated by the Bill, and the inevitability of having such large Finance Bills. We do not know what will be in the forthcoming Finance Bill, and the Paymaster General will not disclose any of the contents of the Chancellor's Budget, whenever it takes place—I hope that we will soon be told the date. It will help the future work of the tax law rewrite project if the standards applied to that project are used in the drafting of Finance Bills. I believe that the Paymaster General indicated that that was the case in her opening remarks.

Dawn Primarolo: It is the case that when legislation is rewritten and put into Finance Bills, it is rewritten in the tax law rewrite style. When, for a Finance Bill of a few years ago, we completely rewrote some VAT legislation using the tax law rewrite style, Opposition Members thought that it was a completely new piece of legislation and opposed it on that basis.

Mr. O'Brien: The Paymaster General has the advantage of me, in that I was not party to that. Different interpretations can always be made, but the point is that every year we dedicate ourselves with a great deal of effort to the most important Bill that goes through Parliament, namely, the Finance Bill. I am simply asking the Paymaster General to recognise that it is important to take a consistent approach to the tax law rewrite project and to the framing of Finance Bills.

The Chancellor's Budgets of 1998 and 2000 were two of the biggest Finance Bills. As regards the 2002 Finance Bill, nine pages set out changes to rates of duty for small brewers, six pages dealt with new tax arrangements for community and amateur sports clubs, 14 pages set out new tax arrangements for vaccines research and five pages were given to revisions to the aggregates levy. Specialists are alarmed by the size of legislation. John Whiting of PricewaterhouseCoopers has said:

"The only thing that keeps it bearable is the fact that we have seen a lot of it before. But for that, we'd be utterly floored."

In response to the 600-page 2000 Finance Bill, John Whiting, who was then also vice-president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation, said:

"The whole of the personal tax area is ripe for simplification."

Again, I emphasise that point. We should not confuse the tax law rewrite project with tax simplification. That is another demand that the Government should note.

On the same subject, Frank Haskew, an executive at the Institute of Chartered Accountants, commented:

"This is out of all proportion to anything we have ever seen before. The volume of tax law has doubled since the 1980s. I do not know how ordinary people have a hope of understanding their tax affairs. Even accountants are struggling."

The trend of more complex and lengthy tax law is crucial to the debate. We hope that the Government will ensure that the standards that apply to the tax law rewrite project are adopted for all Finance Bills. I believe that the Paymaster General's intent is genuine, but the record to date gives no ground for hope.

As we rapidly reach the conclusion of my remarks on the subject, it is important to comment on the increasing complexity of the tax system in relation to the Capital Allowances Act 2001, which was the first measure in the tax law rewrite era.

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): I had not intended to intervene, although I am an expert on income tax because I have paid it for approximately 40 years. However, my hon. Friend said that even accountants were struggling. In my experience, accountants do extraordinarily well out of such monsters as the Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and important point. I do not want to decry accountants, because so many experts on whom hon. Members have relied to reach our current position of considering a tax law rewrite Bill are accountants. It is not right to condemn those who are properly and professionally able to make a sensible and sometimes rewarding living out of being experts. Perhaps simplifying the law will make it more challenging for them to earn a crust. That relates to the impact assessments that some of my hon. Friends wanted clarified earlier. I try to emulate my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) in many respects, but I dread the day when I shall have paid income tax for 40 years.

I am deeply conscious of your earlier guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about not being tempted to stray too far down alleys, byways and cul-de-sacs by my hon. Friends, who are perhaps struggling to come to grips with the vast array of documentation.

The Capital Allowances Act 2001 was the first element of the tax law rewrite project. My noble and learned Friend Lord Howe of Aberavon said:

"The Finance Act 2000 . . . is almost twice as long as our only rewrite product so far—after about four years' work—the Capital Allowances Bill. As I said last summer, 'It is like trying to repaint Brighton Pier at a time when its owners are trying to extend it to the French coast.'"

[Mr. O'Brien]

That has a sad resonance in the light of recent events at the West pier and the Palace pier in Brighton. My hon. Friends and I send our condolences to people in Brighton. Lord Howe's comment was so apt that I quoted it as a memorable illustration of our argument on the current tax law rewrite project.

We are also considering burgeoning costs to the taxpayer.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am in danger of never reaching the last paragraph of my speech, but I shall give way.

Mr. Bercow: I know that my hon. Friend wants to be reminded of the integral relationship between the complexity of tax law and its implications for the introduction of each Finance Bill. Does he agree that it is therefore right to record what Lord Howe of Aberavon is too modest to note? His first Finance Bill, in 1979, in marked contrast to a measure of 488 pages that the current Chancellor introduced, was merely 28 pages long.

Mr. O'Brien: I of course defer to the remarkable body of factual knowledge, both useful and completely useless, that my hon. Friend is so often able to deploy for our elucidation. The example he gives is, I think, an example for all time, and it would be most helpful if Chancellors—especially this Chancellor—heeded it. Under Parkinson's law, 22 pages are likely to receive better scrutiny.

David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, who so far has spoken only from a sedentary position.

David Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that while there is sometimes a positive correlation between the size of Members—such as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—and their quality, the correlation between the length of Acts and their quality can be inverse?

Mr. O'Brien: I hesitate to stray too far in the direction of the analogy about size and other matters. It is important to recognise that the contributions of members of all parties here are always to be respected, because they are all honourable Members.

This has been a helpful and, indeed, somewhat surprising debate. Like the Paymaster General, I dare say, I had not expected so much interest to be displayed. I am glad that I put in all those hours of work before a debate on what is, after all, quite a dry and technical subject. Thank goodness I did not decide to go and do something else, instead of doing at least some of the homework that was necessary for me to understand the vast array of documentation with which the Joint Committee has so ably presented us.

As I was saying, all this comes at a cost—a burgeoning cost to the taxpayer. If we have any duty at all, it is to consider taxpayers' interests at all times. Despite computerisation and the increased use of companies in the administration of the tax and benefits system, it costs about £6 billion a year to run the Inland Revenue and the Benefits Agency. In 1950–51 it cost less than £1 billion, in 2001 prices, to run the Revenue and the equivalent of the Benefits Agency. We should look for any available way of making legislation relating to the Revenue simpler.

I hope that part of the benefit of the tax rewrite will be the elimination of waste in connection with the running costs of a Department. I also hope that, as soon as possible, the Paymaster General will deliver a positive assessment. I should like to think that, as a result of the clarification and ease of use that will result from the rewrite project, some of the administration costs in the Inland Revenue will be reduced. As the Paymaster General is the Minister responsible for such matters, it is incumbent on me to address these remarks to her. We must always be on the lookout for opportunities to minimise waste of the public money that has been so hard earned by the taxpayer.

Given all that I have said, and bearing in mind the warning that I gave in the latter part of my speech—and provided that the Paymaster General and the Chancellor are prepared to heed that warning—my colleagues and I, as Her Majesty's loyal and official Opposition, will be more than happy to support the Bill. We congratulate all who were involved in its presentation in its current form.

Mr. Cameron: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you give us some guidance on the correct way to state Members' interests, including those of Ministers? The Bill deals with taxation arrangements for Ministers and other Members, specifically in clauses 291 and 295. Clause 295 covers transport and subsistence arrangements for Ministers. Should we have registered our interests, given that we all have an interest in the Bill?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Bill does not change the law in any way. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, all other Members are well aware of what they must do to declare their interests during debates.

6.24 pm

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): I am delighted to be able, finally, to participate in this debate. My party welcomes the Bill, although my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) may want to catch your eye later on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to pick up on some points of detail.

I want to begin by making some general comments, and by following the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) in congratulating all who put in the hard and not always enjoyable work involved in getting the Bill to this stage, including the Paymaster General, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), members of the other place and the officials who doubtless did some of the serious grind behind the scenes to introduce greater accessibility and, to some extent, simplicity to the Bill's wording.

We have consulted a number of tax specialists about whether the Bill is a success. Perhaps the kindest thing that I can say to the Paymaster General is that the salient comment of one tax adviser was that they take a very dim view indeed of measures such as this, which, in simplifying the tax system and making it easier for people to understand, could reduce their own fee income.

Dawn Primarolo: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's point about whether practitioners are happy with the rewrite. I direct him to the support papers, which include a list of all the changes that tax practitioners would like to be made to the system, every one of which would increase the complexity but none of which would pass the test of simplification.

Mr. Laws: I take the Paymaster General's point, but I hope that she noted the somewhat barbed compliment that was being paid to the work that she, her officials and others have done in respect of this Bill.

Dawn Primarolo *indicated assent.*

Mr. Laws: In making the tax system more accessible and simpler for the ordinary man in the street, they have created a potential benefit for the economy—even if it is a disbenefit for tax accountants.

Several detailed points have been made in the debate, one of which concerned the potential cost of measures such as this. In her closing comments, will the Paymaster General say a little more about what we have learned from the Capital Allowances Act 2001—one of the first benefits of the work done by Tax Law Rewrite Committee—whether business or tax advisers have made representations about the effects of that measure, and whether it has made the system simpler or added to costs in any respect.

Perhaps the most important point that I want to make, which was touched on by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), was also made in a debate in another place in January of last year. It is not the same issue that many Conservative Members sought to raise—whether the Bill's detail could change the precise nature of our tax law—albeit that that is a very important issue about which legitimate concerns have been expressed, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon; rather, I am referring to the point made by Lord Howe in a debate in January 2002 about the general desire of both Houses, and of those involved in the Bill, to make the tax system more accessible, simpler and more economic to use, not just for tax practitioners but for businesses and individuals throughout the country. There is a great danger that this attempt to make the wording of tax law simpler to understand will mask other problems with the way in which the tax system has developed in recent years, not least since 1997.

Lord Howe said:

"My central conclusion is that there is no chance of a knock-out success against tax complexity . . . we need to identify, define and establish not an event"—

such as the Bill—

"but a process—a comprehensive mechanism through which the problems can be addressed and managed tenaciously over the years. It is a long-haul business. The continuing insistence of the process on simplicity must be as irremovable and as constantly present as the voice of the tax-raising departments and as the politically restless, impatient input of successive Chancellors of the Exchequer."

Lord Howe was warning us that we have much to learn. That is especially true of the Bill. Changes introduced by successive Chancellors, not least the current Chancellor, may not complicate the words that we use in tax law but they can certainly complicate the tax system itself, which is far more important.

Mr. George Osborne: The hon. Gentleman cites the sage words of Lord Howe. How would Lord Howe's comments apply to Liberal Democrat plans for local income taxes? We should then have 20, 30, 40—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) must not be tempted down that route.

Mr. Laws: It is immensely tempting, but I shall adhere to your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Lord Howe continued:

"We need to ensure that the neglected constituency of stability, as well as simplicity, is effectively represented at every level and every stage of the tax-making system." —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 January 2002; Vol. 630, c. 1470–71.]

Without straying from the substance of the debate, will the Paymaster General describe how we can embed the simplification of new tax changes in the Finance Bill and Budget processes; and how we can move away from the general trend of tax policy, especially over the past five years, to complicate the tax system, thus making it more expensive for practitioners and businesses to use?

Finally, I pay tribute to the Paymaster General for her work on the project. I hope that it will be the beginning of a process that ensures not only that the words in the tax system are easier to understand, but that the system itself is simpler.

6.32 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I, too, pay tribute to Lord Howe, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the Joint Committee and its officials and the Paymaster General. The rewrite project has been her Herculean labour.

The Capital Allowances Act 2001 was a significant improvement; it was reasonably intelligent legislation in which numerous provisions were dovetailed. This Bill does the same thing. I hope that, as the right hon. Lady has assured us, successive measures will continue to be written in the same style so that they fit easily and intelligibly with the Bill. The Joint Committee's ambitions have mainly been achieved. The use of plain English, with shorter sentences and a clearer structure, is welcome.

As I have said before, successive Finance Acts have added countless complications and numerous rates of taxes. It is asking enough of the Committee to rewrite the plethora of existing legislation and to dovetail it in specific Acts; the Government must resist the temptation gratuitously to tinker with the tax system, thereby making it more complex.

I do not want to be too pedantic and long winded, but there have been one or two changes, and they may not be inadvertent. Clause 684 is intended to correct PAYE

[Mr. John Burnett]

regulations, some of which have operated ultra vires since 1960, especially those on the coding-out practice—a system of re-coding in the subsequent year underpayments made in the previous year.

I do not mean to be churlish, but one or two parts of the Bill are unnecessarily long winded. I am grateful to the Law Society for prompting me. I cannot understand why there need to be 15 definitions of "employee" and why clause 66(1)(b) and 2(b) inexplicably contain two definitions of "employer".

Clauses 638 and 639 deal with exemptions for awards for bravery. Right hon. and hon. Members will recognise that individuals who have won the Victoria Cross or other decorations do not have any complexities attached to their tax affairs. It should be made clear beyond all doubt that the entire income gained from a hard-won award is free of taxation. Both clauses begin:

"No liability to income tax arises".

I am not convinced that that wording will be fully effective. The fact that liability may not arise on those specific items of income does not seem sufficient to exclude the recipient's total income, which might affect the individual's entitlement to age allowance. I raise that point not because I think that income will be taken into account by the Inland Revenue but because, in the interests of the House and all taxpayers, it should be made absolutely clear that my understanding is correct—that payments for valour will not adversely affect any aspect of an individual's liability to tax and that he will be entirely free of taxation.

That is a small but important point, not least given the great sacrifices made by our service men and their families, who are likely to be called upon to do the same in the near future. If we can get that clarification on record in the spirit of Pepper *v.* Hart people will know how the system should operate.

The Bill is a success and perhaps the Paymaster General will remind us about the next project, which is probably in tow as we speak. I congratulate all those responsible for the measure; it is a remarkable improvement on what has gone before.

6.38 pm

Dawn Primarolo: I begin with the point made by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) about awards for bravery. My understanding is that there has been no change, but I will check with my officials. As we have tried to demonstrate through the tax law rewrite project, we want to make the legislation clear.

It might help if I explain how minor changes are made to legislation in the rewriting process and how the tax law rewrite project undertakes consultation. Ministers receive the tax law rewrite project only when it has been completed and moves into its parliamentary stage. I said that I would give examples of minor changes to the legislation, such as new provisions to fill gaps in the existing legislation—for instance, the incorporation of extra-statutory concessions—the abolition of obsolete material or the correction of minor anomalies.

The project must first exercise judgment in deciding whether a proposed change is minor enough to fall within its remit. It identifies all proposed changes in the various consultations and asks for comments. That request does not come to Ministers. If respondents all agree that the change should be made, as part of the rewrite, it is placed in the Bill and flagged up so that Parliament may consider it. If the reaction is unfavourable, the change is generally dropped and a reason for it not being included is given. For example, an extra-statutory concession might need to continue.

In cases of doubt or mixed reaction to the consultation, guidance is sought from the Joint Committee, whose membership, of course, includes Members of both Houses; this evening, compliments have been paid to their work. Ultimately, it is for Parliament to decide whether the Bill should make those minor changes. Up to that point, however, the project is all embracing and, for Treasury Ministers, an unusual exercise in that it allows those outside the House who use the legislation to give their opinion on whether the change should be made. The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) asked for examples of such changes and I shall provide them in a moment.

The next issues are not directly related to the Bill, but I hope that with your tolerance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I may refer to them in passing. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) raised the vexed question of complexity and simplicity, as if we lived in a perfect world in which the tax authorities never had to consider the practice of individuals or commercial organisations in respect of tax legislation and whether it followed the intent of Parliament in passing the legislation. The problem we have is mainly with anti-avoidance legislation, which is long and complex because it responds to complex relationships. The hon. Gentleman asked me to speculate on how we might overcome that. Could we get tax planners to agree a truce, under which they would stop their creative tax planning and we would not need our anti-avoidance legislation? I live in hope, but I think not.

Mr. Laws: The Paymaster General's comments notwithstanding, would she accept that a Chancellor can pursue a policy of tax simplification and reduce the number of taxes, as Lord Lawson did in the 1980s, or he can introduce new tax allowances and reliefs that complicate the tax system—as most people believe the present Chancellor has done since 1997?

Dawn Primarolo: With respect, the hon. Gentleman has never been in the position—and probably never will be—of receiving Budget submissions, be they from the CBI, the Institute of Directors or even the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. Without fail, those submissions ask the Government to intervene to assist in a particular area; they can be hugely beneficial.

For instance, the legislation on the research and development tax credit was widely celebrated and acclaimed by businesses small and large. I seem to remember that it took up some 90 pages, and that Liberal Democrat Members supported it in this House. However, when it comes to the question of simplicity and complexity, some hon. Members seem splendidly unaware that the UK economy is part of the global economy. Tax planners arrive at intriguing and

interesting interpretations of tax law, and so the matter is never as straightforward as some hon. Members suggest.

I agree, however, that the idea that the Government set out to make tax law complex is rubbish. Even so, hon. Members must turn their minds to the challenges faced by all tax authorities, not simply by the authorities in this country. The hon. Member for Yeovil may be right to say that legislation that is easy to understand may not be so easy to get around; I doubt that but, again, I live in hope.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) asked several questions about parliamentary drafters. A dedicated team of drafters is part of the tax law rewrite project, and that is taken fully into account in the resource planning for that office. That will continue. The PAYE regulations will be out in the spring, and the next tax law rewrite Bill will be available in the later part of this year or early next.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury asked about regulatory impact assessments. I know that he is familiar with the argument that they are difficult to achieve when the tax law remains unchanged. However, the assessment for this Bill makes it clear that when the rewritten legislation has been up and running for a number of years, the Government will work in conjunction with the relevant interested parties on the long-term and short-term cost of the Bill. In that way, a more meaningful understanding of how to proceed would be arrived at.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury asked for examples of minor changes. I draw his attention to the clause dealing with the exemption of certain lump sums from pension income, which now provides that the lump sums provided under retirement annuity contracts are exempt from income tax, as long as they are provided under the approved rules of the scheme. That change is in principle in the taxpayer's favour. Another example is the reporting requirements for the acquisition of shares. Those requirements used to be 30, 60 and 92 days, but the Bill sets them all at 92 days. That minor change introduces simplicity, and is clearly in the taxpayer's favour. The supporting material always makes clear whether a change is in the favour of the taxpayer or of the tax authorities. With only a couple of exceptions, the changes are all in favour of the taxpayer.

There are many examples of discarding obsolete provisions, but I shall give just one. Section 648(A)(2) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 has not been rewritten. Explanatory note 2381 makes it clear that that transitional measure is no longer needed.

The redraft of the PAYE regulations will be out in the spring, and I hope that they will come before Parliament later this year. However, the third rewrite Bill will be published in draft in the first half of next year—not later this year, as I suggested. I apologise for that error. It will cover income tax, property income, trading income, savings and investment income and foreign income.

Mr. Laws: Will the next tax rewrite Bill resolve any of the problems alluded to in today's Treasury Committee report, which touches on the issue of tax avoidance by the Inland Revenue?

Dawn Primarolo: I have been in the Chamber all day, and I have not had a chance to read the report to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I am sure that, when this business concludes, I will rush out and study it avidly.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury also asked about flow charts. I agree that they are helpful and that they can be used, but there is a slight problem with incorporating them in legislation: it is very difficult to frame legislative amendments to flow charts. We shall be as helpful as we can, but I wonder whether that might just be a trick question.

It is not for us to submit the Bill to the Plain English Campaign, but I am sure that those involved in the campaign will study it, although I do not think that they are necessarily noted for looking at technical legislation. I concur with the hon. Gentleman's view that the Bill is an excellent piece of drafting and that it is well understood.

I was asked about electronic consultation. All the tax law rewrite project drafts and draft Bills are published in paper form, announced in press releases in paper form and are accessible to everyone in every way.

Finally, I thank all the professional bodies, the Inland Revenue team, the tax law rewrite team and the Members of Parliament involved in the tax law rewrite project. I also thank all those hon. Members who have stayed in the Chamber this evening and made this debate so fascinating, if a little varied at times. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Mid-Term Review of the Common Agricultural Policy

[Relevant Documents: European Union Documents No. 7964/00, Special Report No. 8/2000 of the Court of Auditors on the Community measures for the disposal of butterfat, No. 12457/01, Special Report No. 6/2001 of the Court of Auditors on milk quotas and No. 12782/02, Special Report No. 5/2002 of the Court of Auditors on extensification premium and payment schemes in the common organisation of the market for beef and veal. The Third Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Session 2002–03, on The Mid-term Review of the Common Agricultural Policy (HC 151).]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I must tell the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the official Opposition.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of European Union documents No. 10879/02, Commission Communication on the Mid-Term Review of the Common Agricultural Policy, No. 10896/02, Commission working document containing a report on milk quotas and No. COM (03) 23, draft Council Regulations on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy; supports the Government's objective, to work for a sustainable Common Agricultural Policy which contributes to prosperous rural areas, enhances the natural environment, and provides high-quality, safe food and high animal welfare standards, a fair and competitive environment for farmers and better value for money for taxpayers and consumers; welcomes the European Commission's proposals on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, in particular the proposals to decouple payments from production, to move from production-linked subsidies to wider agri-environment and rural development measures, and for further market reform, while lessening the adverse impact on trading opportunities to less-developed countries; but regrets that the proposals in several areas did not go further, that they include a complex and potentially unfair mechanism for transferring funds towards agri-environment and rural development measures and, on dairy reform, that they do not meet the requirement of the Berlin agreement that there would be a mid-term review 'with the aim of allowing the present quota arrangements to run out after 2006'.

The European Commission's proposals on common agricultural policy reform, published on 22 January, give us a real opportunity to set down a sustainable basis for European agriculture policy. As we said in response to the Commission's initial discussion document last July, the Government strongly support the direction of those proposals. They will enable us to lay the foundations for a sustainable and internationally acceptable CAP, which will command the support of all stakeholders in the enlarged European Union. However, we have some significant criticisms of the package—I will come to them later—but we believe that, in general, the reforms are going in the right direction. Of course there is much work to be done before we can be sure that we have fully evaluated those proposals. Finding a fair, practical and acceptable outcome will not be easy.

Against that background, there are three key points on which I want to focus: the importance of securing changes to the CAP that bring real benefits to all our farmers; the importance of the EU taking a strong and forward-looking stance in the World Trade Organisation negotiations; and the need to take account of the wider international context.

We must take this opportunity to reform if we are to avoid further environmental damage, regenerate our rural areas and support our farmers in ways that allow them to plan ahead with confidence. There are real benefits to United Kingdom farmers in those proposals. In particular, decoupling support from production will be a massive advance for us, not least because it will improve the financial position of farmers. They will continue to receive much the same level of support as they do now, but they will no longer have to stick to certain production patterns to do so. As a result, they will be free to optimise, rather than being driven to maximise, their output. Of course they will have a great deal of flexibility in their businesses.

Decoupling will have wider benefits, too. Our farming will come closer to its markets, and it will be more efficient and more environmentally sustainable, as well as being more profitable. Research commissioned by my Department and by the Commission concludes that incomes will rise as a result of decoupling. The CAP will be simpler to administer because of the major reduction in bureaucracy that will follow these proposals. Reducing the overregulation of farmers is a key outcome that we should aim for.

Decoupling will lead to changes in farming practices. In some cases, those changes may be significant, or have significant effects on upstream or downstream activities. The implications for extensive beef production in some parts of the European Community—including the less favoured areas—are one area of concern. We will have to explore flexibility in the regulations as a way of dealing with specific sectoral or regional problems.

Agriculture is both the prize and the stumbling block in the WTO Doha development round. The EU should seize the initiative and put pressure on the United States and others to change their protectionist policies. A good outcome on agriculture will unlock a wide range of opportunities for developing countries. By contrast, stalemate in agriculture could put the round in jeopardy and therefore deny us the gains that we could make in agriculture and in other sectors. Delay, evasion and prevarication are not in our interests. We must acknowledge that September's WTO ministerial meeting in Cancun is a real deadline. We must prepare for it accordingly.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): The Minister refers to the widely welcomed change in direction that will lead to decoupling of payments. However, there are risks associated with that, as I am sure the Minister would agree. One particular risk is land abandonment. How might that risk be tackled?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend asks a reasonable question. If there are direct payments, issues to do with stocking arise. I think that my hon. Friend is alluding to that. We can deal with such problems through our agri-environmental approach. On some issues, such as upland management, the agri-environmental approach can be a more appropriate management tool than

production support, which can distort markets and cause all sorts of problems. I assure my hon. Friend that we will take his concerns into account.

Andrew George (St. Ives): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: Briefly. I want to keep my contribution brief because this is a brief debate.

Andrew George: I appreciate the Minister's willingness to give way. Following the previous intervention, I wonder whether the Government have made any assessment of the impact, on tenant farmers, rents and land values, of decoupling and direct payments to the farm simply for being a farm. Is the Minister concerned that there could be a hike in rents and land values that would put many tenant farmers in difficulty?

Mr. Morley: Some of the effects of decoupling are unknown. It does not necessarily follow that there will be a sharp hike in rents. There are changes in the proposals that would benefit tenant farmers. I am sure that we will touch on them in the debate. We will have to think carefully about certain issues and I accept that the proposals contain some unanswered questions. We will continue to debate such points among ourselves and in consultation with farming representatives.

We must not overlook the wider international dimension of CAP reform. Seen from the point of view of developing countries, our policies—and those of the US and other developed countries—deny them the opportunity to exploit their natural competitive advantages and trade their way out of poverty. CAP reform has to be part of the EU's efforts to help the poorer countries of the world to improve their lot. For all those reasons, the Government broadly welcome the proposals. However, we have a number of significant concerns that need to be addressed. I will run through them.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: I will, but I will make this the last intervention.

Mrs. Shephard: The Minister knows the concerns of sugar beet farmers. He is talking about careful negotiations at the WTO. What words of comfort has he for sugar beet farmers—on alternative uses of sugar beet, for example? Sugar beet production may be phased out in this country.

Mr. Morley: As the hon. Lady knows, changes will inevitably occur in the sugar regime. The agreement on the sugar regime means that it will run until 2006. However, we cannot ignore the implications of decoupling for the sugar regime. I agree that there is an important role for sugar in industrial crops, such as ethanol fuels and in other forms of industrial production. I know that research programmes at the Central Science Laboratory have been examining the whole issue of industrial crops, and I agree that we need to consider how we can broaden the opportunities for farmers and, in particular, for those who are involved in the sugar sector. I take that point seriously.

Although we support the general proposition that there needs to be a switch from the first to the second pillar of the CAP—from production-based support to agri-environment and rural development measures—we feel that the proposals should go further in that direction than the EU is proposing. I also support the view that the existing system needs to be considerably simplified. The proposals being made are very complex.

We also have problems with the specific approach proposed by the Commission. It appears to put the burden of reductions very heavily on a minority of member states, including the United Kingdom and Germany. That cannot be right in relation to how the reforms should be put in place. Their impact should be much more fairly distributed. Moreover, some of the proposals would put the burden of change on some of the more efficient farmers that have a viable long-term future. We run the risk of turning the clock back and driving farms to split up into less competitive units.

At the January meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State argued that we needed a simple system that applied the same rate or reduction to everyone. It must be fair and easily understood by farmers, and easy for our administrative systems to cope with. He also explained our serious problems with the Commission's proposed distribution key for the reallocation of rural development money between the member states as a result of the proposed modulation. This takes no account of the fact that the existing budget is not distributed on anything like a reasonable or equitable basis. The Commission proposals do nothing to correct this. We shall certainly want to press that point very hard.

It is ridiculous that a member state with an agricultural and rural sector as large as that in the United Kingdom receives only 3.5 per cent. of the current rural development budget. The Commission proposals would make the situation even worse. That is clearly not acceptable to us. The distribution of money raised through modulation must, at least, start to redress historic funding inequalities in the allocation of pillar 2 resources

We are also disappointed that the Commission proposals do not start modulation until 2006. If there really are barriers to an earlier start to the new system, I believe that more needs to be done to encourage member states to take better advantage of the existing voluntary system and to provide more flexibility within the system. One way or another, the rates of modulation need to be pitched so that they allow continued implementation of the rural development programme that we are developing in the application of modulation and into which we are putting more money.

Andrew George: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is important that interventions are taken as they help to make the Government accountable.

I agree with the Minister entirely in his criticisms about how the proposals for modulation have been drawn up, so what alliances will the UK Government

[Andrew George]

seek to form with other member states to drive through the kind of reforms that he and I would like to take place?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. To get change, we need to seek the agreement of other member states. Other than ourselves, I think that Germany is the only other country that is currently using the voluntary procedures. France tried that, but its scheme ran into all sorts of problems. They applied 20 per cent. maximum modulation to some farms and it appears that the French did not have the schemes to spend the money on. It was not the most brilliant of programmes.

Germany certainly supports our views. Other countries also support our views on how the proposals should be changed. Many Scandinavian countries strongly believe that there should be a shift from production support to rural development support. Hon. Members will probably be aware that part of the Commission proposal is that not all the proceeds of modulation will go to rural development. Some of the proceeds will go into paying for restructuring of other aspects of the CAP. One can see some logic in that, but it is a pity that the way in which the modulation is constructed and pitched will reduce the amount of funds available for rural developments, which we think is where the money should be switched. Clearly, there will be considerable discussion on how that is applied and about the details.

Finally, in terms of our concerns, we find some of the proposals related to the reform of the dairy regime very disappointing. While I strongly support the Commission's approach in relation to extending and rebalancing the price cuts in this sector, I have serious concerns about the suggestion that the dairy quota regime should be extended for a further seven years. The Commission has proposed changes that go some way down the road we shall need to travel if we are to remove quotas entirely and to improve our competitive position in world markets. The United Kingdom's views are well known. We would welcome an orderly phasing out of milk quotas, and it seems that member states and the Commission are moving to a position in which they accept that milk quotas will end. If so, the sooner we do that, the better it will be, rather than extending it in this way.

David Burnside (South Antrim): As the Minister comes to the end of his concerns, will he comment on a major concern in Northern Ireland, where our farms are smaller than those in England, Scotland and Wales, with the 32,000 farms averaging out at about 60 acres? The biggest impact of the reduction of £340 million between 2006 and 2012 will fall on the small farm sector, and that is a major concern of the Ulster Farmers Union.

Mr. Morley: I understand that. The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that the Commission's proposal includes a threshold limit in which there will be no modulation, so there will be some protection in its proposals for the smaller farms. There are arguments for and against. We have applied modulation in this country across the board. We had some debate about that when we were originally discussing how modulation should be applied. There were proposals in our own country that there should be a similar approach of a threshold in relation to smaller units. However, when one looks at the detail one sees that there are all sorts of problems. There is the risk of encouraging people to divide farms into small units to get on to the threshold.

We felt that the standard, across-the-board modulation, which is simple, easy to understand and easy to apply, was the best approach. We believe that the Commission should take this approach as well. As it happens, this system, given the structure of Northern Ireland farms, which I know very well, offers them some protection.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): There are similar concerns in Scotland. Is the Minister convinced that the level, which I think is €5,000, is too low to affect smaller farms? There is also serious concern in Scotland that the medium-sized farms in constituencies such as mine, rather than the larger and very small farms, will be hard hit by modulation, because they will lose a considerable part of their income. Does the hon. Gentleman have anything to say on that?

Mr. Morley: I think that the €5,000 issue is a matter for debate. At this stage in the proposals, obviously all the details are debatable in the negotiations. We shall listen to views that we receive about the threshold levels.

With regard to medium-sized farms, if there is a percentage modulation the larger units and those receiving the most in subsidies are the ones contributing most in modulation. So there is an element of fairness in the way in which it is applied, in that it recognises the level of subsidy that individual units receive.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The Minister said that he is opposed to the extension of the milk quota to 2014. I hope that he will understand that for those farmers who have quota, which include those who are still actively engaged in dairy farming and some who own quota for which they paid but who lease it out as part of their income, there is a need, as with any other business, to be able to plan for the medium and long term. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will qualify his remarks by saying, if he is opposed to 2014, what he thinks is the optimum time. Farmers, particularly in the dairy sector, are very concerned, and deserve clarification. If I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I may say more about that.

Mr. Morley: The Government have made it clear many times that quota should be phased out. That can come as no surprise to the dairy sector. The hon. Lady will know that there are mixed opinions in that sector, but many people think that quotas have stultified its development by acting as a brake on innovation and expansion, and they would welcome their demise. I accept that people have invested in milk quota and we would not expect to see them end overnight. I agree that a reasonable date should be set which we can work towards to phase out quota. Although we think that the proposed dates are too far away, there are also proposals gradually to increase the amount of quota for

each member state. That will liberalise the regime to an extent. We think that 2006 would be a more realistic date for the phase out of milk quotas.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire): With a reduction in the intervention price for dairy products, the value of quota could reduce to almost zero. The National Farmers Union anticipates a fall of more than 30 per cent. in milk prices. With farmers finding it difficult to produce milk that covers their costs, will any dairy farmers be left in Britain?

Mr. Morley: I believe that there will be because the dairy sector can adjust to the changes. Of course there are structural problems in the sector. My noble Friend Lord Whitty recently chaired the meetings of the food chain initiative. It has addressed some of the sector's problems, such as its seasonality and the slump in prices because of that. It has also considered ways to even out production and the low value products that milk goes into.

The issues can be addressed. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about the value of milk quota. It is likely to fall. There is the added complication of the recent European Court ruling on non-producing holders of milk quota. They will have to divest themselves of it, which means that a lot of quota will come on to the market, and that is bound to influence prices. Having said that, there are complicated proposals in the mid-term review on calculating entitlement in terms of what quota someone may hold in future. That is unsatisfactory because it encourages people to accumulate quota on the basis that that might influence the support payments on the quota that they hold. In turn, that might remove quota from the market, especially in terms of lease availability. So there are all sorts of complications in relation to quota. That illustrates why we would be better off by moving away from them. We find it impossible to understand the logic that has driven the Commission to propose a further two years of price cuts on milk and an extra seven years of quotas. That is not appealing.

Those are the main criticisms, but we must not lose sight of the positive elements of the Commission's proposals, in particular the benefits of decoupling. That is an important gain and certainly one worth having. I also accept that much technical work has to be done on the proposals before the Council is in a position to assess the details of what they mean to our farmers. However, the reforms are crucial to our ability to deliver viable and sustainable farming in Europe and to withstand increasing competition from the rest of the world. That is why we need to get on with the negotiations, to reach an agreement and to address the details of the proposals. We will robustly make the case for UK farmers when the proposals are clearly against our national interest and we will argue for changes to be made. We will also look closely at how some of them are meant to work, including the problems inherent in the details and the possible bureaucracy that they might create. We will, of course, listen to the agricultural sector and other stakeholders, and will listen closely to hon. Members who wish to comment on such issues, especially in relation to their constituents. The CAP reforms are long overdue, but they are going in the right direction, as they put farming on a much more sustainable footing.

7.15 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I beg to move, To leave out from "Policy" in line 5 to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"recognises the need for a substantial recovery in farm incomes from the present low base to a level at which UK farmers are earning sustainable and competitive returns; supports the objective of achieving prosperous rural areas, an enhanced natural environment and provision of high-quality, safe food and high animal welfare standards; welcomes the European Commission's appreciation of the need to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, which absorbs half the EU budget, and recalls Government failures in this regard; further welcomes the proposals to decouple payments from production, and for further market reform; but has deep reservations about the effects of the current proposals on UK agriculture and recognises that the British people are increasingly hostile to a system that penalises both UK taxpayers and farmers; believes that dairy regime reform should provide greater opportunity for the UK dairy sector to add value to their product through producer-based processing; notes that the Commission proposals involve a potentially unfair mechanism for transferring funds towards agri-environmental and rural development measures; and urges the Government to use all the means at its disposal to ensure that these proposals are redrafted in the interests of UK farmers and consumers."

Calls for common agricultural policy reform have been the habit of politicians in the United Kingdom and across Europe as long as the common agricultural policy has existed. Crises, watersheds and turning points have come and gone, so the House will understand my scepticism about the likelihood or even possibility of reforming the CAP in our nation's farming interests. Similar scepticism among farmers is not just the product of realism about Machiavellian Euro politics, but is spurred by the demoralisation of British agriculture in recent years. Although it is understandable for reasons of political expediency, it is wholly unacceptable that the Government failed to mention in their motion the desperate state of UK farming. Our amendment properly sets that out, thus putting the debate in its proper context.

As the whole House knows, British agriculture is in crisis by any measure. Farm incomes are about a third below their 1995 level, a fall greater than that in any other European country. In 2001-02, input costs rose by 1.8 per cent. in Britain, whereas they have fallen in Europe as a whole. The number of people leaving the industry continues to grow, bank borrowing is still increasing, and in most sectors farm-gate prices are insufficient to give farmers a real chance of earning a decent living. British agriculture is in a desperate state, but things are different for our so-called partners in continental Europe – the kind of partners who are ever ready to take commercial advantage of catastrophes such as BSE or foot and mouth, and conspire to frustrate the Government's half-hearted efforts to protect our national interests. Conservatives recognise that there can be no viable British countryside without viable British agriculture.

It is unclear whether the Government share our view, but it is certain that most Europeans are not faintly interested in the survival of British farming. It is clear, however, that the CAP has encouraged highly intensive production-driven agriculture, as the Minister acknowledged in his opening remarks. Over-

[Mr. John Hayes]

production, for example in the beef and dairy sectors, and price distortions have led to a perverse agricultural marketplace.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that to operate a viable farm business such as an intensive farm business in Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom, many small farmers have land on conacre year on year? It is not clear where the benefit of the new change will be felt. Will farmers benefit from the land that they own or rent on conacre, or will the benefit go to their landlord?

Mr. Hayes: There are genuine issues about whether the payments will go to the owner of the land or the farmer, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise them. The hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) made a good, fair point about tenant farmers, which the Government need to address. We expect purposeful and robust answers from the Minister to clarify the sensible point made by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs).

Mr. Morley: It may help the House if I answer straight away. Under the proposals, the payments go to the farmer, whether he is a tenant or landowner. If he is a tenant, he has the right to payment if he moves to new land, which gives him some protection.

Mr. Hayes: That is, of course, right, but there are often difficulties in the relationship between owner and farmer, and they need to be ironed out. If payments go to the farmer, they can be moved around as the Minister suggests, but we need clarity about the different responsibilities and opportunities that exist for owners and farmers of land. I think that that is the point that the hon. Member for East Antrim was making, and it is a good and solid point.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: I must now make some progress, but I shall give way again later if I have time to do so.

Farmers, often against their instincts, have pursued a regime that has resulted in a distorted market with an increased propensity for disasters, all at enormous cost to the British taxpayer. No one can blame farmers for dancing to a tune composed by others, nor honestly claim that the process has been led by consumer demand. Through its payment structure, the CAP has stimulated larger farms in the UK. I am mindful of the large, efficient arable farms in the east of England, many of which are situated in my constituency. They are good businesses run by good people, so it is a bitter irony that the Commission's modulation proposals will penalise large, efficient farms—in other words, British agriculture, in which farm size is larger than the European average.

Mr. Roger Williams: Last night, the National Farmers Union told us that the proposals abolished the €300,000 ceiling, yet the Minister said that there was some disincentive in respect of the efficient holdings that the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Mr. Hayes: I can clarify that issue for the hon. Gentleman. That ceiling or cap existed in the proposals issued in July 2002. It was dropped in the proposals published at the beginning of this year, as I am sure the Minister will confirm by nodding, but he is right that there is concern that some member states want to reintroduce the ceiling. There is enthusiasm among some continental Europeans for reintroducing the cap, which would do even more damage to large farms, as he suggests.

It is clear that British farmers who happen to be large farmers will lose almost 20 per cent. of their income as a result of the direct payments. Worse still, it is true that some people want to reintroduce the cap to which the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams) referred. In general, there is a strong case for allocating single payments to the farmer. As the hon. Member for East Antrim suggested, the complex issue of transfer of entitlements will need to be resolved where landlords and tenants are involved. As I said, it is important for the Government to develop a scheme that fairly reflects the legitimate interests of the relevant parties.

Mr. Beggs: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to intervene again?

Mr. Hayes: Yes, but I want to make progress as this is a short debate. If I may, I shall ask the hon. Gentleman to keep his remarks fairly short. I shall then try to deal with them.

Mr. Beggs: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. We have an entirely different system in Northern Ireland. Tenant farmers have been mentioned and the situation is relatively clear in that respect. However, most farmers in Northern Ireland own freeholds and rent land from other farmers who are not active. That is where clear guidance has to be given.

Mr. Hayes: I would never attempt to second-guess the hon. Gentleman's legendary expertise in all matters Northern Irish, but I heard what he said, as I am sure the Minister did. Clearly, those issues will need to be taken into account when such matters are dealt with in further European negotiations.

The current reform of the CAP is motivated not by a desire to address the sort of problems that have already been mentioned in this debate, but by the realisation that maintenance of the CAP in its current form is incompatible with enlargement. For that reason, in addition to modulation, we face decoupling—a cocktail that, in its proposed form, is likely to be highly disadvantageous to British farming.

There is a good argument for recognising the special role that farmers play as custodians of the countryside through agri-environmental payments, but such payments must be equitable, enforceable and cost-neutral. To ensure that they are equitable, a baseline must be established that recognises past good practice and ensures that British farming is not measured merely by the unrepresentative post-BSE and foot-and-mouth years.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): My hon. Friend mentioned baselines. Foot and mouth and BSE are two diseases, but my constituents suffered very heavily as a

result of classical swine fever. Is it not wrong that farmers who suffer as a result of such diseases and therefore have very atypical years should be penalised because those years are treated as a baseline?

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am familiar with the problems of that kind that have been suffered by pig farmers in Norfolk. The payment will be calculated on the basis of the physical facts of successful claims made over three years: 2000, 2001 and 2002. One or more of those years can be dropped if it is felt to be unrepresentative or exceptional, but the point is that all those years were exceptionally bad for British farming. The baseline that will be constructed will therefore be implicitly unfair to British agriculture, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight that point.

Measuring the environmental impact and the social and cultural importance of farming requires a balance sheet for agriculture. I recommend to the House and to the nation Lincolnshire's Charter for Agriculture and Horticulture, which provides an excellent model.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): A fine document.

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend has obviously read it. It suggests such a calculation of the true value of food farming and horticulture, leading to an annual statement. To be respected, and therefore enforceable, any system must be founded on such a degree of empiricism. The criteria against which payments are made should be fairly scrutinised and cost-neutral to the industry. Farmers have faced a bureaucratic burden that has increased overheads at a time when incomes are falling. But if the integrated admission and control scheme—IACS—is complicated, imagine what a multi-faceted, multi-tiered environmentally friendly payment system might mean in terms of paperwork. Simplicity is crucial. A straightforward system of single payments based on a clearly defined, understandable set of criteria is the best means of re-establishing a demoralised industry's faith in the new regime.

Farming's problems are typified by the plight of the dairy sector. It is almost impossible to make money producing raw milk when farm-gate prices barely exceed the cost of production. The only way in which a viable future for the British dairy industry can be established is by creating a climate in which farmers can add value to their base product. This means collaborative, producer-based processing. The Minister—the whole House—will know that Britain is unusual in terms of the concentration of processing capacity outside the industry. That means that the dairy sector is particularly vulnerable to price pressures, and this must be addressed in the reform of the regime.

Dairy farmers also need action on bovine tuberculosis. The National Farmers Union said:

"The disease is completely out of control and the government have no policy."

In 2002, 16,066 new cases were confirmed, and if we wait until the end of the trials, the whole of the west country will be a hot spot. It is well established that badgers are one—I say only one—of the various causes of the spread of TB, yet the badgers culled so far have been killed to no effect. What vaccination measures are the Government considering? How quickly can reliable tests using the latest science be put in place? How bad will the crisis be allowed to get—with farmers suffering the horror of TB outbreaks and ever more taxpayers' money being spent—before the Government consider a limited cull of badgers outside the trial areas, when there is clear evidence of the infection being passed between species?

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): The Minister will be aware of how concerned I have been about the crisis facing cattle owners in the United Kingdom. There are several problems with the current situation. The Krebs trials, as they are known, will probably not produce a conclusive result. The huge amount spent on research into tuberculosis is spent mainly on human tuberculosis. Does my hon. Friend agree that the real problem is that a commercially viable vaccine might not be found? If one is found, the Government must insist that it is produced, or in some way make it economically viable to produce. I hope that my hon. Friend will continue to pay a great deal of attention to this crisis, which is having a big impact on dairy and beef producers across the United Kingdom.

Mr. Hayes: I am tempted to say that that is why I included the issue in my speech. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there is a profound problem. He is also right about vaccinations, which is why I challenged the Minister on that matter. I know that the Select Committee will look at the question in some detail. My hon. Friend is a notable—some would say inspirational—member of that Committee, and he will bring the diligence that he has already shown in defending his farmers over this issue to the tasks that lie ahead. *[Interruption.]* I was pausing for breath as I thought about those dreadful problems.

Other important questions deserve equally clear answers. It is proposed to reduce the single payment between 2006 and 2012. As the Under-Secretary knows, the UK is one of the few member states that operate a voluntary modulation scheme to fund rural development. Does he agree that, to be fair to UK farmers, the current rates must not increase unless and until there is a parity of rates in a compulsory modulation scheme throughout the EU?

It is proposed to use a proportion of the amount arising from payment cuts to make budget savings that are destined for future market needs. Will the Under-Secretary guarantee that any such digression must be at the flat rate, with no de minimis exemption for small farms in the EU? Farmers rightly highlight their anxiety that the UK will suffer most from modulation and digression proposals because it has relatively large farms.

It is proposed to establish compulsory, permanent set-aside. Does the Under-Secretary realise that that is incoherent and unnecessary, and should be fought? Again, farmers have stated their opposition to the proposal and to the proposed ban on growing energy crops on set-aside land. The Chirac-Schröder agreement on CAP finance in October means that little money will be left for rural development. How will the farm advisory service and related measures be funded?

The British people have had enough of the wasteful, bureaucratic, inequitable common agricultural policy. Despite their rhetoric, the Government have not even

[Mr. Hayes]

taken up CAP reform where the Conservatives left off. The Under-Secretary looks sceptical, but I remind him that when in government, our Ministers produced "The Case for Radical Reform" of the CAP. It received little support from the then Opposition, of whose agriculture team the Under-Secretary, for whom I have a great deal of respect, was a prominent member. The Conservatives were determined to grasp the nettle, but the current Administration do not share that determination.

The motion simply expresses the Under-Secretary's regrets. He talked about taking robust action to defend the British position and highlighting some of the issues that hon. Members raised. However, the motion contains no call to action or fighting talk. Regrets come cheap and hon. Members will share my doubts about how hard he will fight and where he will draw the line on behalf of our farmers.

The tortuous negotiations that surround the reform are emblematic of Euro-politics. They are never straightforward, always esoteric and seldom in Britain's interests. Britons see their farmers facing ruin while they subsidise tobacco growers, non-existent olive farmers and bloated Brussels bureaucrats. The British people pay more than £1.5 billion a year for the privilege of being part of that club.

Mr Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Daylight robbery.

Mr. Hayes: I would not put it in such lurid terms because I always speak with moderation. However, the British people's total contribution in 2000 was £1.8 billion and half the EU's budget goes on the CAP. In Blair's Britain, we all face the awful prospect of being robbed, but choosing to be robbed is extraordinary. Those whose nights are plagued by the European dream justify it on the basis that there is no alternative, and that some mythical, predetermined course of history makes closer and more expensive involvement in a failed collective policy for European agriculture inevitable. We are also told that our national freedom is irretrievable and that we have travelled too far down the road to national oblivion to turn back.

I do not share that defeatist mentality, and neither do most Britons. I was about to say that I did not share that Vichy mentality, but I did not want to make faint hearts flutter. The CAP must be radically reformed or die. This is the last chance for reform. Surely the Minister will not return to the House with a half-hearted package that will disappoint both Members and our farming industry, and tell us that further reform is on the cards. We have heard that so often before.

I am proud of British food and British farming. Agriculture anchors rural communities to the land. The availability of agricultural employment gives opportunities to young people and manual workers who would otherwise be excluded from the rural economy and from the countryside itself. But, even more than that, agriculture is at the heart of our consciousness and culture. It assures the continuity of our agrarian history and binds man to nature.

British farmers deserve better than these proposals, and Britain's countryside deserves a fair deal. The Government must fight for a decent future for British farming—or step aside and allow those of us who will fight to take on the people and policies that threaten rural Britain.

Viable British agriculture, policies that are accountable to the British people, and a living, working countryside—those are our goals; that is our mission. Conservatives will never be deterred from battling for British farming.

7.36 pm

Mr. Anthony D. Wright (Great Yarmouth): As many Members will know, Great Yarmouth is one of the UK's major tourist resorts, but a large proportion is rural and there are many arable farmers. Over the past few years, one of my constituents, Richard Hirst, has raised several issues with me, one being the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy.

Mr. Hirst tells me that, while he does not disagree with the principle of decoupling payments from production, the current proposals will have a severe effect on farmers like him who have not used their entire farms to grow eligible crops but have engaged in a sensible rotation including cereals, sugar beet, potatoes, vining peas and other vegetable crops. Over the past three years about 35 per cent. of the cropping area of his farm has been eligible for area aid payments, and about 6 per cent. for set-aside payments.

The new proposals suggest a single payment—to which Mr. Hirst does not object—based on the average claim for area aid between 2000 and 2002. That means that he will receive a much smaller payment than neighbours who have made much higher claims in the past. He will also have to set aside 10 per cent. of the cropped area to qualify for the payment, with no restrictions on the cropping that he can undertake. That means that a neighbour could receive a much higher payment, and then start introducing other crops and offer his produce for sale for a lower price than Mr. Hirst can offer, in the knowledge that he is receiving a greater subsidy per hectare than Mr. Hirst can receive. Mr. Hirst will also have to set aside more land than he sets aside now, which will also reduce his income significantly.

At present, Mr. Hirst is trying to do all the things that DEFRA suggests. He is growing crops for specific markets, mostly with contracts with processors or as near to the end user as he can get. He has land in countryside stewardship, and is about to undertake a study with Birds Eye to look at the possibility of producing crops in a sustainable manner. Because he is doing all that, he will be severely penalised—to such an extent that he suggests it might be better for him to give up farming altogether.

Mr. Hirst has put to me two options that he believes may mitigate some of the proposals. If the Minister cannot deal with them now, perhaps he will write to me. The first suggestion is that payments should be based on all eligible land, not just that claimed for arable area payments in the previous two years. The set-aside levels would again be based on those of the previous two years. The second is that, if the proposals are not changed, there should be a restriction on cropping preventing farms from undercutting those who grow alternative crops.

I would appreciate a reply from the Minister. I am sure that farmers in my constituency appreciate the work that he is trying to do for farmers, not just in my constituency but in the UK as a whole.

7.39 pm

Andrew George (St. Ives): I appreciate the Government responding to the European Scrutiny Committee by enabling this important debate on the future of agriculture in Britain, so that the House can give the Government a mandate to bat hard in Europe on behalf of our agriculture. It is clear that the proposals for the mid-term review, although welcome to some extent, do not go far enough. In many people's eyes they constitute a timid fudge, compared with what we should be seeking to secure. It is also clear that the Government need to form alliances in the manner that certain other countries have publicly sought to do, in order to secure the better outcome for British farmers that the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright) spoke of a moment ago when discussing one of his constituents.

Although the documents before us are somewhat technical and complicated, and use language that will seem opaque to those who are not linked to the farming industry, they relate to the heart of the British people's relationship with the land, and to their psyche. To some extent, there still exists in the rural community a whimsical romanticism and a sense of utopia: a sense of man in close relationship with, and being challenged by, nature; a sense of the connection between man and his environment. *[Interruption.]* I mean "man" in the general sense—mankind. Indeed, this issue is fundamental to the way in which we look at agriculture in this country; it is at the heart of our identity.

It is important to reflect on the fact that, as any agricultural economist knows, it is inevitable that farms get larger over time. Over the past two centuries, concerns have been raised and protests made about the drift towards ever-larger farms. Of course, as people spend less of their disposable income on food, it is inevitable that farmers need to make more money from their holdings if they are to retain the same living standards as the rest of the population. The inescapable result is that farms become ever larger, which is why it is important that the Government intervene. If we are to retain a connection between rural society, the countryside and the primary industry that occupies most of that landscape, and if we are to prevent the countryside from being turned into prairie and ranch, in my view and the view of many who represent rural constituencies it is important that appropriate interventions be made to ensure that small family farms have a future.

Despite what the Minister may say about the need to reflect and protect the interests of larger farms, and about the impact of these proposals on such farms, the fact is that in a year when 15,000 farmers went out of business—the largest number who have done so since the second world war—there is serious concern that that process is likely to accelerate over time under the current agricultural structure. Indeed, certain aspects of these proposals are liable further to accelerate that process, which is why many people are concerned about them.

There is cross-party consensus that the proposals on decoupling are welcome: to break away from production payments and to move towards single payments is essential. Will the Minister tell us how long taxpayers can be expected to tolerate payments to farmers for, in effect, doing nothing? I realise that there are cross-compliance issues, but farmers will be paid merely for being farmers. The European Scrutiny Committee felt that the point should be covered in the debate.

The Government must have made an assessment of how long the current arrangement is likely to last, so it would be useful to know their view. UK society is largely urban, so the majority of taxpayers are town dwellers. They will find it less and less credible to pay farmers merely to be farmers. The Government should link management contracts to those payments so that they can be used to deliver the public, animal welfare, environmental and other outcomes that, for example, the Government seek to achieve through the creation of environmentally sensitive areas and other types of scheme. The public would then see genuine benefits from payments to farmers.

The Minister drew attention to the significant unfairness in the system of modulated payments. It is fundamentally wrong that such payments should go to Brussels and be distributed through Brussels rather than a UK authority. I know that my colleague in the Scottish Executive, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, has joined the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in making strong representations to other European leaders and to the Commission. The arrangement is wrong. British farmers make significant payments to the central European fund but receive back only a fraction of them in the form of rural development and agri-environment scheme funds. British agriculture quite rightly protests that it does not operate on a level playing field in relation to the rest of the EU.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. There will be inequities not only within countries but between them. Europe could absorb money from our farmers and our industry and then reallocate it to other countries. The money will be lost not only to farming but to the nation. The hon. Gentleman's point is worth amplifying.

Andrew George: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. I urge the Minister to tell his European counterparts that we require national modulation schemes whereby funds are disbursed in the country in which they are raised. Instead of taking a uniform approach on the exemptions—the floors and ceilings—that apply, it would be far better to have variations that reflect the structure of farm-holding in each EU state. We need genuinely to devolve some of those decisions, especially on the management of the system. I urge the Minister to pursue that point in his negotiations.

Mrs. Browning: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman about looking at the differences, but as a Liberal Democrat spokesman will he please understand that a single market—for which his party is constantly pressing—means uniformity? That makes it so much harder to achieve any distinction between different markets, methods of farming and sizes of farms in EU countries.

Andrew George: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention but her party took us into the single market

[Andrew George]

and encouraged us to take the line of bland uniformity that Liberal Democrats do not accept. As with fishing and many other policy areas, of course we need to agree fundamental reforms at the centre, but Liberal Democrats would like to see devolution of the responsibility for the delivery of those policies. This may come as news to the hon. Lady, but our policy has remained consistent. We cannot take a uniform approach to agriculture, fishing and other industries across the whole of Europe and say that it must apply however difficult the circumstances. We must have a policy that reflects agreement on fundamental principles, then applies them appropriately in a devolved way in each nation state.

As to the dairy regime, if the Government favour—of the four options available in the mid-term review—a rapid phasing out of quotas by 2006, in the Commission's own estimate that would result in the price of raw milk at the farm gate falling by 38.5 per cent. on the basis of the 2001 benchmark. Dairy farms in this country are considerably larger and much more efficient than in many other countries, but they are barely able to make a living from current milk prices. It is important that the Minister addresses the likely impact of a further 38.5 per cent. price reduction. It could bring a ranching of the UK dairy sector, with much larger units divorced from farming and the local community in a way that has not been seen before. Having broken up Milk Marque, which we argued was inappropriate, perhaps the Government need to grab the bull by the horns and address farm gate prices. It is clear that dairy farmers do not receive a fair income that meets their production costs.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): That is a desperately important point for dairy farmers, in terms of the asset value of quota and the revenue stream from milk prices, which are still far too low. Does my hon. Friend agree that one problem is the oligopoly in the supermarket sector, which will get worse if Safeway is taken over by one of the other big players? Does he agree that Safeway's acquisition needs to be put to the Competition Commission straight away?

Andrew George: I entirely agree. There is no point pussyfooting around. It is essential that the Government seek to intervene, make their view clear and ensure that the matter is referred to the Competition Competition. Whichever of the interested parties goes forward with the purchase of Safeway, that acquisition is likely to have a detrimental effect on farmers and farm-gate prices.

My concern is that the Government are lurching forward piecemeal, with no real vision or passion for farming. They are timid and uncertain in negotiation and insufficiently bold and brave to make clear beforehand how they will deliver a clear vision for the future of agriculture in this country. It is not that I believe that the Secretary of State or the Minister lack commitment or do not have a passion for farming, but the real Secretary of State for agriculture is the person appointed to the post of rural tsar by the Prime Minister—Lord Haskins. The Minister and the Secretary of State are merely the managers of the Department and the real vision comes from Lord Haskins, who was recently dubbed the villain of the countryside by *Country Life* magazine, perhaps appropriately.

We have serious concerns about the proposals in the mid-term review. It is an inadequate and timid fudge. UK farmers have lost out and will do so further unless we have an even playing field, especially in relation to modulation. We are concerned about the fundamental divorce of agriculture from the rural community if we let reforms go ahead that would result in the prairie and the ranch. Many of us fear the ranching of the British countryside.

We have not been given enough time to debate these important changes, which are fundamental to the future of our rural communities. Matters need to be resolved by June, and I urge the Government to give us more time to debate the issues before the Council of Ministers meets to resolve them.

7.57 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I wish to add my voice to the others tonight that have urged the Minister to set out a clear path for the future of UK agriculture. It is not clear what the Department's view is when it enters negotiations on the CAP reforms. The Minister touched briefly on some aspects of agriculture, especially the dairy sector, to which I shall return, but farms are businesses and they have been through a horrendous time, what with BSE, foot and mouth and other animal diseases.

I am concerned about planning for the future and how we can sustain the family farm. We need to address the shape of agriculture in the future. Ranching is a concern, but east and mid-Devon do not have much arable farming, because the good grass that we grow is well suited to livestock farming. I would hate to think that the countryside of Devon would be overtaken by conifers or some such commodity. As much as possible, we should provide the food that we eat ourselves, and that must include meat as well as grain.

The Department's latest figures show that farm incomes have risen by 14 per cent. in real terms in 2001, although that is still 62 per cent. below the 1995 figures. Worryingly, that increase depends on £140 million of net production subsidy, with only an extra £20 million coming from the marketplace. Whatever package of reform the Government produce, I hope that they will bear in mind the fact that although the dairy sector provides 95 per cent. of our own liquid milk production, it loses out time and again in the production of value-added dairy products because we suck in masses of imports.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Lady has correctly identified one of the problems with milk, and I do not disagree with her. On prices and incomes, she is right that incomes rose by nearly 15 per cent. last year. That was the second successive year in which farm incomes rose. I do not want to be complacent about the problems facing the farming sector, but the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) both used 1995 as the baseline year. That year was very unusual, in that price cuts in arable aid meant that compensation was paid for price falls that

did not take place. That element of double subsidy in 1995 means that it is a very artificial base year to use as a comparison for price falls.

Mrs. Browning: I am quoting figures provided to south-west MPs by the south-west branch of the National Farmers Union. The information provided is excellent, and is said to be "according to DEFRA". I am therefore putting into the public domain information from the Minister's own Department.

The farm business survey shows that only two sectors are in decline. Dairy is one, and it is down 21 per cent. The situation for the dairy farm is dire. In my part of Devon, dairy farms are mainly family farms. I intervened on the Minister earlier to refer to a couple with bought-in quota. They still own that quota, because they hoped that their son would keep the farm on. He has now gone to live abroad. That is typical of many families in Devon, as the next generation of people look at what their parents went through. They consider the future of farming, and decide that it is not for them. That will have a huge impact on the shape of the countryside, its environment, and our ability to produce our food.

I have flagged up to the Secretary of State, in response to recent Government papers on agriculture, that there has to be competition and that we need good quality food. We also need to know about food's production standards and origins. However, countries in the single market covered by the CAP should not sign up to policies that would lead to their ability to produce the basic commodity and the finished product being leached away. That would mean that the UK would suck in more of those imports, with all the value added.

The Government's plan for CAP reform must set out where we can diversify, add value, and make sure that there is sustainability. Farming businesses need to be able to plan. The Minister will be amazed to learn that I am a vice-president of the Devon young farmers club, some of whom are not so young. When I talk to farmers, I am encouraged by the enthusiasm of many young people. They know that they will have to do things differently, but they want to know where the industry is going. They will give up if the direction and planning are not there.

My plea to the Minister is as follows: will he ensure that the country and the House know what the national plan is? When the Government negotiate at the heart of Europe, we will then have an idea of what the future will be for farmers and for the production of own food.

8.3 pm

David Burnside (South Antrim): I start by referring to the Register of Members' Interests, in which I make it clear that I receive an annual rent from my home farm.

Mr. Beggs: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Burnside: Very well.

Mr. Beggs: I thank my hon. Friend, but I want to take this opportunity to declare my own interest. Although I will not have time to make a speech, I have made a number of interventions, so I want to draw the attention of hon. Members to my entry in the register.

David Burnside: If we do not look at CAP reform in a much more radical way, we will encounter many problems. We joined the common market in 1970, and the two biggest losers have been the farming industry and the fishing industry.

I am the son of a farmer, and I remember that the yield on barley was about 40 cwt an acre 20 years ago. Farmers received £120 a tonne in those days, without any subsidy. They now get up to 50 or 55 cwt an acre, and receive about £60 to £70 a tonne, plus a £40 top-up. They cannot cover their costs. At present, milk hovers at around 17p, 18p or 19p, but it costs 17p to produce.

We have had the wettest winter in history, which has destroyed hay and silage production and increased the cost of feeding during the wet period. I have asked the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether she will press for wet weather aid, but I have had no response. Farmers deserve special wet weather aid.

International comparisons are always a bit superficial, and I am sure that the Minister will have read the report produced by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs after our visit to New Zealand, which is often held up as the glowing example of freeing the market. Of course that market was freed after a currency problem in the early 1980s; people did not say, "We must free farming". The currency market created a reduction in subsidises across the board in a country with a very different climate and scale of farming.

The Ulster Farmers Union makes representations to me as the Ulster Unionist farming spokesman, and it is not happy with the deal. We will lose out because of the £340 million reduction between 2006 and 2012. The system will still be semi-subsidised. Farming is in a dreadful state. The pig industry in the United Kingdom is in an absolutely dreadful state. Dairy farmers cannot cover their costs, and no one can make money from barley.

Fudging around with this type of French-German deal on CAP reform is not in the interests of British farmers. Somewhere along the line, we will have to take hold of Europe by the neck, rather than being at its heart. We will have to take hold of the Commission and get a radical reform in the EU, because British farmers can be efficient.

We have to alter the scale of farming. I am afraid that we in Northern Ireland have to learn that the 60-acre has to become the 200-acre farm; the 80-cow dairy herd has to become the 250-cow herd—the minimum herd size in New Zealand—with a man and his wife, normally, farming.

Labour has declined on farms. On my father's family farm, we employed six to seven farm labourers—farm workers, as they are now called—20 years ago. In

[David Burnside]

Northern Ireland, 32,000 farms are owned by 22,000 farmers, but there are now only 2,200 farm workers. In New Zealand, farmers can make money for 10 years, sell up and go on holiday, but it is difficult to persuade a son or daughter that it is a good idea to go into farming.

Farming is a very serious state, and I am afraid that there are not enough votes in fishing and farming for this Government. That is the problem, but it is time we had a radical review of the whole system of support because it is damaging farming. We are just surviving at present. I hope that the disease problems—obviously, foot and mouth and the other diseases that have had a short-term effect on us—will not come back. We are just about hitting our production levels at present, but those in some sectors are going out of business. We need a radical reform of the CAP, not the tweaking at the fringes that is currently being done.

8.9 pm

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): I want to touch on modulation and digressivity. Modulation progressively reduces the rate at which subsidies are paid, and digressivity involves progressively increasing the rate at which modulation is applied to farmers. Comparing the figures for other countries in the EU with the equivalent figures in the United Kingdom shows how disadvantaged this country is, especially given the combined affects of modulation and digressivity—it is not an easy word for me to say.

If we consider the bands in the proposals, we see that only 4 per cent. of UK farms fall into the band of farms that currently receive less than €5,000 a year in payments—which is approximately £3,300. Farms in that group would not lose out to modulation. A total of 41 per cent. of UK farms come into the €5,000 to €50,000 band, and a total of 55 per cent. of UK farms are in the overall group receiving more than €5,000. By comparison, France receives €5.82 billion in direct payments, compared with the UK's €3.2 billion. France will do far better than the UK. The figures in the various bands show that France has 7 per cent. in the lowest band, 72 per cent. in the €5,000 to €50,000 band, but only 21 per cent.—as compared with the UK's 55 per cent.—in the overall group receiving more than €5,000. That is where the cuts will be most swingeing. The average figures for current European Union member countries show 18 per cent. in the bottom band, 57 per cent. in the next band and only 25 per cent. in the overall top group, compared with our 55 per cent. That will make a huge difference.

The milk quota regime is obstructive and blocks development and expansion in the dairy industry. A Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food report in 1999 concluded that the quota system hampered efficiency and increased productivity. However, abolishing the regime overnight would not solve the problems. Abolishing the quota system would squeeze all small farms out of business, and small and medium-sized firms would find it increasingly difficult to sell into the bulk market. Individual farmers have little marketing strength. They need to form alliances to influence policy. In particular, investing in the production of their own milk, either individually or as part of a co-operative, would mean that they would have to have more control over the milk price and over the profits between farm gate and store.

When the proposals of the mid-term review were announced, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), said rightly:

"The CAP is in need of reform. It is right to move to a world where farmers are free to respond to the demands of their customers rather than of governments."

He also said that, without profitable farming,

"both the wider rural economy and the landscape that we all cherish will suffer."

The importance of the figures that I read out at the beginning may have escaped the hon. Members who are sitting behind the Minister. Because of the nature and efficiency of UK farms, and because our farmers are the best in the world, we will now be penalised by the change in the regime. That is extremely serious.

I urge the Government to consider the wording of their own motion, which ends:

"'with the aim of allowing the present quota arrangements to run out after 2006'."

However, the Minister will know that those arrangements will go on to 2014.

That cannot be good for Britain. It is especially damaging for our dairy industry, which is the largest part of agricultural production in this country. It is beset by problems such as bovine tuberculosis. That is especially evil because some farmers are dependent on the compensation cheques that they received for having beasts destroyed, and there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. The Government have to address the issue of vaccination. I sincerely hope that the Minister will consider that before he comes before the Select Committee.

I urge the Government to reconsider the wording of their own motion and to ensure that it will be possible for quotas to end in 2006.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams), I ask him to respect the fact that the Minister requires five minutes to wind up the debate.

8.14 pm

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire): I declare my interests in agriculture that appear in the Register of Members' Interests.

I am pleased to take part in this debate. Agricultural reform and CAP reform have been a continuing process, albeit one that has not been radical enough or fast enough to benefit British consumers or farmers. We have seen the McSharry proposals and Agenda 2000, and now we are going on to decoupling. They have led progressively to less market distortion and have therefore been advantageous to agriculture.

Many farmers, especially those in the livestock sector, are desperate to escape from the morass of form filling and record keeping. One of them told me that, when the last census was conducted, the Government found that there were several hundred thousand people fewer in Britain than they thought. However, farmers have to

keep a record of every single animal that is on their farm, the day it was born, the details of its sire and dam and so on.

Matthew Green (Ludlow): We know more about animals than people.

Mr. Williams: Exactly.

Even the smallest livestock farmer will be involved in a number of support schemes that have different retention periods and retention dates. We need to move away from that, so that farmers can exploit the inherent entrepreneurship and business acumen that systems have so stifled over the past few years.

I want to say a few quick words about modulation. *[Interruption.]* I will not go into digressivity as that is a bit too complicated for this time of night. We must have a system of modulation that does Britain more justice. Under the present system, only 3.5 per cent. of the total of modulation money will be returned to Britain, and that has resulted from the reluctance of successive Governments to apply for money for rural development under the second pillar.

Although I commend the Minister for his bravura performances in the House, I must say that farmers are concerned about the weak role that the Secretary of State has played in looking after our interests in Brussels. For that reason, we will not be able to vote for the Government's motion.

8.16 pm

Mr. Morley: With the leave of the House, I note that we have heard contributions from the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright) and the hon. Members for St. Ives (Andrew George), for South Antrim (David Burnside), for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), for Leominster (Mr. Wiggin) and for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams).

I welcome the overall support that we have received for the main thrust of the Commission's proposals. Indeed, there has been almost unanimous agreement on where the weaknesses lie and where there is a need to press harder on the issue of modulation. It disadvantages UK farming and the UK system and, as the hon. Member for South Antrim rightly said, we need to drive forward the move for radical reforms. I am glad to say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been very much in the vanguard of arguing that case and linking it to the need for change in the Doha agreement.

I want to correct a couple of points that were made in the debate. The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings said that the reference years of 2000 to 2002 were poor years for UK farmers' incomes. That is true but, in future, the reference period that will count for future entitlement relates not to income but to the area farmed or the number of livestock held multiplied by the EU-wide rate. Therefore, UK farmers will not be disadvantaged in relation to net income, because the figure will be linked to what they receive under the EU schemes.

The hon. Member for St. Ives referred to the projected fall in milk prices of 38.5 per cent. Our economists do not accept that figure; we think that it will be much lower. The predominant effect will be on milk powder prices, which influence world prices.

Mr. Hayes: Will the Minister answer one point about incomes? In response to a comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), he suggested that 1995 was an unrepresentative year for British farmers. However, he will know that in Finland, Greece, Italy, France, Germany, Austria and Belgium incomes are higher now than they were in 1995. That is the truth of the matter. It may be unrepresentative, but it is undeniable.

Mr. Morley: I would not deny that for a moment. One of the reasons for the increase in farm incomes in those countries is the fact that they are part of the euro. Perhaps this is a bid from a euro supporter in the Opposition for early entry into the euro. However, at the right increase, that would immediately add about 25 per cent. to the bottom line for British farmers. Perhaps he is making an early pitch for a new direction from the Conservative party; that is very interesting.

Important points were made about bovine tuberculosis. Although that subject falls slightly outside the terms of this debate, it is important. We are financing vaccine research, and I shall be only too pleased to give more details when I appear before the DEFRA Select Committee, which is quite rightly looking into the issue.

I turn to the questions about compulsory set-aside. The Government are not enthusiastic about compulsory set-aside. It has some nature conservation advantages, but with decoupling and cross compliance the arguments for it are quite weak. We shall take that into account in future discussions on the matter.

I was also pressed by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) to say what was the Government's vision. We set out a strategy for agriculture, following on from the farming and food commission. We have also implemented proposals to the England rural development programme, put forward a White Paper on rural development and set up rural forums, all matters which have been widely welcomed as showing the Government's commitment to the countryside.

In relation to what we have heard from the Opposition, I would repeat that the reason why we receive a pathetic 3.5 per cent of the rural development fund is that in the years of Conservative Governments it reflects a historic—

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16.*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—
The House divided: Ayes 141, Noes 258.

Division No. 90] **[8:21 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burnside, David
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, rh Francis
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Wilshire and Mr. Mark Francois

NOES

Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Drown, Ms Julia
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Andy *(Rugby)*

King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Nick Ainger and Joan Ryan

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 137.

Division No. 91] **[8:33 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donaid *(Swansea E)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Drown, Ms Julia
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy *(Clydesdale)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen

McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, rh Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Nick Ainger and Joan Ryan

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burnside, David
Burstow, Paul
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mates, Michael
Maude, rh Francis
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and Mr. Mark Francois

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of European Union documents No. 10879/02, Commission Communication on the Mid-Term Review of the Common Agricultural Policy, No. 10896/02, Commission working document containing a report on milk quotas and No. COM (03) 23, draft Council Regulations on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy; supports the Government's objective, to work for a sustainable Common Agricultural Policy which contributes to prosperous rural areas, enhances the natural environment, and provides high-quality, safe food and high animal welfare standards, a fair and competitive

environment for farmers and better value for money for taxpayers and consumers; welcomes the European Commission's proposals on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, in particular the proposals to decouple payments from production, to move from production-linked subsidies to wider agri-environment and rural development measures, and for further market reform, while lessening the adverse impact on trading opportunities to less-developed countries; but regrets that the proposals in several areas did not go further, that they include a complex and potentially unfair mechanism for transferring funds towards agri-environment and rural development measures and, on dairy reform, that they do not meet the requirement of the Berlin agreement that there would be a mid-term review 'with the aim of allowing the present quota arrangements to run out after 2006'.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): We now come to motions 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11, which, with the leave of the House, I shall put together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

ANIMALS

That the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2003, which were laid before this House on 14th January, be approved.

AGRICULTURE (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS)

That the draft Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Pigs, which was laid before this House on 9th January, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 14th January, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 110) (HC 320) on 2002–03 Special Grants in connection with Local Public Service Agreements, which was laid before this House on 23rd January, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 23rd January, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Budget (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 28th January, be approved.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Manchester Airport

8.44 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I wish to present a petition on behalf of many of my constituents who live in the villages of Plumley, Lower Peaver, Chelford and Lostock Green against the Government's plans to expand Manchester airport.

The petition states:

The Petition of the Residents of the villages of Plumley, Lower Peaver, Chelford and Lostock Green declares

That the villages are being seriously affected by the ever increasing levels of aircraft noise pollution; that the Department for Transport has published projections, which indicate that aircraft movements will increase dramatically in future years and will considerably increase noise pollution in the area; that there is also a proposal to build a third runway and turn Manchester airport into a hub airport larger than Heathrow.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons do urge the Secretary of State for Transport to stop the mass expansion plans at Manchester airport.

And the Petitioners remain, etcetera.

To lie upon the Table.

Health Inequalities (Hemsworth)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

8.46 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): I am grateful to the House authorities for allowing me to lead this short debate. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is in her place on the Treasury Bench.

All sorts of studies over many years deal with health inequality. I was interested to read the Wanless report, which examined premature death in some detail. Derek Wanless used the expression PYLL—potential years of life lost. He suggested that, as a nation, we have not done well historically in relation to our comparator countries. According to the Wanless report, we have the worst record on premature mortality. That is disturbing.

For example, we are 25 per cent. worse off than Sweden when we compare the potential years of lives lost in both countries. The Government are doing a great deal to tackle the problem through their emphasis on financing, reforming and modernising the health service. However, although the statistic is worrying, there are variations in the nation. A statistic that covers a nation perhaps conceals as much as—or more than—it reveals.

The Wanless report drew our attention to major health inequality in our society. The report states:

"Major killers are linked to socio-economic inequality. The key risk factors are much higher among people in deprived areas."

Premature mortality is not the only feature of the class system that unfortunately continues to exist to some extent in our society. Limiting, long-standing illness is also prevalent among what Derek Wanless describes as the "lower social classes". He does not use that term pejoratively. Of those suffering from limiting, long-standing illness, 32 per cent. are manual workers, whereas only 17 per cent. are in social class 1. The figure for the former category is almost double that of the latter.

My constituency consists of several mining villages and small towns, where deprivation is a major feature. It is possible to identify the character of my constituency in some detail. The Government produced an index of multiple deprivation, which shows that four wards in Hemsworth constituency are among the most deprived communities. Approximately 50,000 people live in the wards of Featherstone, Hemsworth, South Kirkby, South Elmsall and Upton. Figures for employment, income, housing conditions, literacy and numeracy or any other factor show acute and widespread problems of deprivation.

As Wanless and many other students of the matter predicted, along with general deprivation goes health deprivation. Sadly, when I examined the deprivation figures relating to my constituency along with the health deprivation figures, the same four wards—more or less contiguous—containing 50,000 people proved to be the most health-deprived as well as the most deprived in general. Two of them, Hemsworth and South Kirby—inhabited by probably 25,000 people—are among the worst 2 per cent. in the country. I doubt that there are many other constituencies, if any, that feature both such acute health deprivation and such a chronic spread across such a large area.

I do not want to bore the House, but I could produce a string of statistics relating to, for instance, coronary heart disease, mental illness, drug abuse and deaths from cancer. I shall confine myself to some particularly troubling figures relating to premature death from certain illnesses—troubling because I find them inexplicable.

It could be considered predictable for the incidence of lung cancer in a former mining community to be 22 per cent. higher than the national average, although that is a frightening statistic. It is hard to understand, however, why our cervical cancer rate should be 47 per cent. higher than the national average. That suggests that something troubling is happening in the constituency. And why should the figures relating to mental health problems be so high, particularly among women?

As the local Member of Parliament, I felt very dejected on discovering the high rate of male suicides. An alarming number of young men commit suicide between the ages of 15 and 34. Something must be going badly wrong with communities that were traditionally so strong and stable when they were mining communities.

In a mining community, respiratory diseases might be expected. What troubles me is that, according to the statistics, the problem is much worse than could ever be imagined. Deaths in Wakefield as a whole—and the problem is particularly acute in my constituency—from chronic bronchitis and emphysema are 400 per cent. of the national average. Four times the number of people who would be expected to die from those diseases are dying from them: that is twice the average of 200 per cent. in what is described as the coalfield cluster. Why should women be dying from asthma at 253 per cent. of the national average rate? Women did not work on the ground; they were not exposed to coal dust as the men were.

No doubt the Minister will want to make some general comments, but I look forward to further correspondence on the specific issues of cervical cancer, suicide rates among young men, the alarmingly high rates of death from chronic bronchitis and emphysema, and female deaths from asthma. I feel that they require some analysis and some understanding.

It is possible to argue that some of the statistics—which I think will alarm anyone who looks at them—are part of the heritage of the mining industry, and also of the way in which that industry collapsed overnight and the immense social deprivation that followed. I believe that some things at least are beginning to change, and that some hope is being offered. The money that the Chancellor is investing in the health service is starting to feed through, which is welcome.

The modernisation of the health service is, of course, to be generally welcomed, although I should sound a note of caution. The population that I represent is very sparsely distributed, and not many people have access to cars. In the minds of some, modernisation might mean centralising services so that they are further away. I ask health service managers in my constituency, which is suffering from these particularly acute and chronic problems, not to do that. I fear that there is a sense of drift towards the centre in respect of specialisms, which I would deplore.

At the same time, the health authority in Wakefield did leave substantial deficits. My noble Friend Lord Lofthouse, who is chairman of the acute trust, and his colleagues are doing everything that they can to reduce that deficit, but I implore the Minister to look carefully at the perhaps overly draconian way in which certain servants of the health service, and of Ministers, are pressing for reductions in the budget. They will be difficult to achieve in the short term, although I am assured that we can achieve them in the long term. The question of whether, given the problems that we face, Wakefield is badly underfunded by the formula is another issue, which I should like the Minister to reflect on in due course.

There are signs of new hope in the coalfield communities, given the beginnings of economic regeneration—fragile though that still is, I am sorry to say. The money that the Government have made available through the single regeneration budget and other special exercises is beginning to feed through into the coalfield communities. The Government's intention to tackle child poverty is a major step forward, as is the statutory minimum wage. All of those measures—which attempt to tackle inequalities, and in particular the most acute deprivation—are beginning to feed through and to bring some hope to our communities. However, those who, like me, live among mining communities that continue to collapse—in fact, they are imploding—would have to say that in some areas the hope of regeneration remains extremely fragile. I encourage the Government to do everything that they can to help with the regeneration of coalfield communities.

I know that the Deputy Prime Minister secured from the Chancellor a very large sum of money to help coalfield communities, which was made available to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. The CRT understands the extent of the health problems in constituencies formerly based on coal mining, and I have discussed with its chief executive and officials on many occasions the problems that we face. The chief executive has said that, on the CRT's behalf, he would like to make a strategic intervention in the health of the Hemsworth constituency, which he acknowledges constitutes a particularly serious problem. In fact, he has described Hemsworth as a black hole that funding has yet to penetrate. The CRT has accepted that health should be one of its key ways of alleviating the problems in coalfield communities, but it has yet to find the possible solutions to some of the health problems that I briefly described.

On re-reading the Wanless report, it becomes clear that many of the factors that produce acute ill health, especially among manual workers and deprived communities, are susceptible to changes in behaviour. Smoking, obesity and lack of exercise are all factors that can be found in the communities that I represent. However, Wanless also says that a public health agenda always seems to come down to what we might loosely describe as the middle class. Often, it is the most deprived communities that are more resistant to the public health message and to changes in behaviour that might bring about some improvement in health conditions in the medium term. The Government need to be more imaginative in ensuring that their message is understood so that change can come about in deprived communities such as those that I described.

I want to suggest a partial solution. Many of the people whom I represent have a particular interest in sport and exercise so, rather than trying to reach people through television advertisements or literature that they may not notice, we should use things in which they are interested as motivating factors. I am fascinated by the Department of Health's physical activity pilots. We are putting together an exciting and innovative pilot that will involve local general practitioners and the primary care trust. There will probably be between £60,000 and £70,000 from the private sector and a large amount has been promised by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, as a strategic intervention.

We are still at the bidding stage. I realise that my hon. Friend the Minister has to treat all applications equally, but I hope that she will consider our application, which has several innovative features, and respond to it. Some of the best private sector practitioners are involved, spearheaded by the Fitness Industry Association, which has indicated that it will make available equipment and specialised coaching.

My vision is to create the partial regeneration of the health of the community by latching on to people's interest in sport and exercise. We already have some facilities, provided from lottery funding and supported by mainstream Government funding. They will be well used. We have some innovative general practitioners who are more than keen to work on physical activity pilots and the GP referral schemes, with which my hon. Friend is probably more familiar than I am. I encourage her to look into those schemes.

I wanted to draw the attention of the House to communities that were formerly powerful and strong and which created the wealth of this country through the coal mining industry. The country depended on such communities but they have been left derelict. I shall not go into the partisan reasons for that. Villages continue to die. People are still dying from the effects of the coal industry and from the deprivation in their communities. On average, people born in the UK may live for a shorter time than people in comparator countries, but the life expectancy of people born in Hemsworth is substantially less than average. As the MP for the area, I am sorry to have to say that.

We need to tackle the problems intelligently, rationally and urgently. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister understands our problems and the depth of the health crisis that faces my constituency. I realise that she has a full diary, but I invite her to visit my constituency to look at our physical activity pilot and to tell us what she can do to help to alleviate the problems. Although it may be beyond her brief, will she ask her ministerial colleagues to consider the funding for Wakefield health authority? We are doing everything possible to correct the financial crisis; much effort and time is being devoted to solve that problem. However, I want the health services to be fully engaged in alleviating the health problems from which my communities suffer so badly.

9.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing the debate, and welcome the opportunity to respond to the points that he has made. He painted a graphic picture of the problems that his constituents face, and he is right to make us aware of them.

[Ms Hazel Blears]

Health inequalities are avoidable; they are fundamentally unfair and the whole Government are committed to tackling them. This matter is not just for the Department of Health; it involves everyone in the Government. It involves housing, transport, the environment, employment and all the issues that my hon. Friend highlighted. There are good personal, social and economic arguments for improving the nation's health. Good health is fundamental to communities. It is good that people in general are living longer since the advent of the national health service, but progress is not the same for everyone and there are still too many dramatic inequalities. The blunt truth is that in the Wakefield local authority area, life expectancy at birth is 74.6 years for men and 79.4 years for women—which does not compare well with Chelsea and Kensington and Dorset, where people enjoy much better life expectancies. Men and women in my hon. Friend's area live within the 20 per cent. of local authority areas where life expectancy is shortest.

Reducing health inequalities is a big challenge for any Government. We have not just described health inequalities; we have taken action and are determined to make a difference. Almost one of the first things that we did in government was to institute the Acheson inquiry into the extent of health inequalities and to gather evidence about their causes and the effectiveness of possible solutions and remedies in trying to close the enormous health inequalities gap.

Sir Donald found that inequalities in health status ranged across geographical areas, social class, gender and ethnicity—and that many of those differences had widened over the previous 20 years. Such a picture, he said, highlighted the need for the Government to act on a very broad front.

The findings of that inquiry have helped drive our work within the NHS and across government. Action on inequalities featured strongly in the NHS plan. In February 2001, we announced the first-ever national targets to reduce the health gap in life expectancy and infant mortality. We have tried to approach the problem right across government, looking at action on poverty, education, employment, housing, environment and transport.

My hon. Friend was right to highlight the biggest killers. There are inequalities in relation to cancer and coronary heart disease in terms of excess deaths and inequity of access to basic health services. We are trying to target specific help for key risk factors, launching the most ambitious programme ever to tackle smoking in the UK. Every primary care trust now offers world-class smoking cessation services. Since April 2001, nicotine replacement therapy has been available on prescription to help people to stop smoking. The cancer plan has ambitious targets to reduce smoking among manual groups from 32 to 26 per cent. by 2010, which will have a significant impact on excess deaths from cancer and coronary heart disease.

Diet is also important. The national school fruit scheme represents the most ambitious and dramatic programme to improve child nutrition since the second world war. By the end of July, 1 million children will receive a free piece of fruit each school day. The new opportunities fund will provide £42 million to scale up that scheme over the next two years, and from 2004 every four to six-year-old will be eligible for a free piece of fruit each school day. We are also beginning to trial free carrots and tomatoes, which I understand are going down extremely well in pilot areas. The five-a-day community pilot initiatives will try to improve affordability and access to fruit and vegetables, particularly in disadvantaged communities. That scheme will be supported by £10 million from the new opportunities fund over the next two years.

I know from a previous Adjournment debate and my hon. Friend's comments tonight that he has a real interest in exercise referral schemes. There is substantial evidence to support the role of physical activity in promoting good health. The LEAP programme, jointly funded by the Department of Health and national partners, aims at testing different evidence-based community approaches to increasing the numbers of adults and children in deprived areas who take regular, moderate-intensity physical activity. Some 36 primary care trusts have submitted formal bids to nine regional panels. My hon. Friend highlighted the bid from his area with the support of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and other partners. Those bids are being examined and the nine successful pilots—one in each public health region—will be announced in early March. I certainly undertake to consider all the submissions carefully, including the scheme in my hon. Friend's area.

We must try to act nationally as well as locally when tackling health inequalities. The Government are doing a great deal, through the national minimum wage and the various tax credits, to increase family incomes and improve education. For example, the sure start programme gives children and young families a decent start in life, and the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal has regeneration programmes through single regeneration budgets. We also have the new deal for communities.

We have now had the cross-cutting spending review on health inequalities, with every Department lined up to tackle the problems together. Indeed, the spending review settlements are partly predicated on Departments' contribution to combating health inequalities. It will be interesting to see what each Department can do.

My hon. Friend will be aware that over the next three years the allocation made to Eastern Wakefield PCT will grow by more than 32 per cent. That is a significant level of investment and it should deliver real benefits and results. I know that the allocation still falls short of the target, but the significant investment will help to tackle the health inequalities that he mentioned.

The NHS in the Hemsworth area is part of a regional initiative to ensure that both the capital investment and revenue spending by the NHS achieves maximum value. That includes employing local people and procuring goods locally to regenerate the local economy at the same time as providing health services. That work is supported by the regional development agency, Yorkshire Forward. That innovative approach to spending NHS money will improve not only people's health but their chances of employment to bring hope back to the coalfield communities about which my hon. Friend spoke so eloquently.

Through "Shifting the Balance of Power", we are trying to put the vast majority of the NHS's budget into the PCTs on the front line, so that they can do what is important to local communities. The Eastern Wakefield PCT, which covers my hon. Friend's constituency, has been very proactive in the area of public health and has a very good record. It works closely with the local strategic partnership. The Hemsworth Partnership has a range of initiatives, including a public health road show in November, which was attended by more than 1,000 people. The event focused on issues such as diet and exercise, smoking, sexual health, teenage pregnancy and domestic violence. Those issues are important to all my hon. Friend's constituents, and a similar road show is planned for this year to heighten awareness further.

The West End Project is involved in the regeneration of former pit houses and an environmental clean up of the area. My hon. Friend mentioned the problem of substance misuse in the area. I know that the Wakefield Accord is a mentoring, advice and employment service for people affected by substance misuse. The area also has GASPED, a support service for the parents of drug misusers—something that is not always at the forefront of provision. The outreach service known as the Hemsworth van goes out into communities to try to support people there. The health action zone has provided a good foundation for the whole prevention agenda, including the Hemsworth parenting project, the integrated family centre in South Elmsall, and the promoting positive health project, which is also based in Hemsworth.

Much is being done, but it is clear that there is much more to do. My hon. Friend highlighted some deeply troubling statistics on coronary heart disease, cancer, mental health and suicide. I am happy to enter into further discussion with him to see how we can discover the underlying causes for those problems in his community. I am also more than happy to continue to work with him to support local people as they start to take control of the agenda and begin to feel more empowered in looking after their own health.

My hon. Friend mentioned the important issue of long-term chronic diseases in his area and the difference between the social classes. He will be interested in the expert patients programme, which helps people with chronic diseases to become experts in their own care and partners in improving their health. Ensuring that local people are in charge of that agenda is key to its success.

We are also pressing on with the improvement of primary care facilities, with the local improvement finance trust—or LIFT—project starting to refurbish primary care in areas such as Hemsworth. The personal medical service pilot scheme will also provide better GP services.

Tackling health inequalities is a long-term programme that is a top priority across government. Poorer people get sick more often and die sooner than the better off. It is as simple as that. We are determined to close the gap so that everyone, whatever their background or class, has the chance to live a longer and healthier life in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fifteen minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 13 February 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rural Post Offices

1. **Gregory Barker** (Bexhill and Battle): What recent representations she has received regarding the future of the rural post office network. [97616]

The Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness (Mr. Stephen Timms): We regularly receive representations about postal services and the network, and the recent announcement of additional funding for rural post offices has been particularly warmly welcomed.

Gregory Barker: Does the Minister understand the huge damage that the Government's imposed changes to the way in which benefits and pensions are paid at post offices will do to the rural post office network? Only this morning, I spoke to the postmaster in Robertsbridge, who told me, "I can't see us surviving—we will die on our feet." What is adding insult to injury and making matters even worse is the fact that the Government have delayed the marketing of the new Post Office card account until 24 March, just one week before the new system is launched on April fool's day. Will the Minister instruct those responsible to bring forward the marketing scheme to help at least to mitigate some of the damage that their proposals will do?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman might take the view that it would be a good idea to maintain ration book technology for benefit payment, but if so he is in a very small minority. Our view is that up-to-date technology is the way in which to assure the Post Office of a successful future. The Post Office card account is on track to be in use from April, as was always intended. It will be phased in over a two-year period, as we always said that it would be, and we will manage the migration carefully to ensure that the new arrangements do not inconvenience benefit recipients. The availability of that technology will mean that rural post offices, as well as post offices in urban areas, will be able to offer modern services in a way that meets the needs of today's customers. That is very good news for the Post Office.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I accept what my hon. Friend says, but there is clearly something of a shortfall in terms of the information that is going out, and we need to communicate how the new system will work. One of the ways in which we could set about that is to work through the parish and town council network to ensure that those bodies are fully informed about the Post Office account and encourage their constituents to consider its opportunities and, more particularly, that they work closely with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses to ensure that those services are in place not only now, but in the future.

Mr. Timms: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to do everything that we can to communicate accurate information about how the new arrangements will work. I believe that new information will be in post offices from next week, and that once it is widely available people will recognise the benefits of the new arrangements.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Millions of vulnerable people will have heard with dismay the Minister's contemptuous reference to ration book technology. It comes ill from a Minister who has pretended to be concerned about the way in which benefits are paid to dismiss the anxieties felt by people in constituencies all over the country. Is it not the case that the best way to help rural post offices and their customers, including benefit claimants is, first, to make it clear that anyone who wishes to continue to receive their benefit in cash can do so and, secondly, to reverse the ridiculous policy of effectively preventing those Post Office customers who wish to open a card account from doing so? Only a Government who know nothing about business and care nothing about vulnerable people or rural communities would behave in such a disgraceful manner.

Mr. Timms: The requirement that people who wish to obtain their benefit in cash at the Post Office without charge should continue to be able to do so has been central to all the arrangements that we have put in place, and that will be the position once the change to automated credit transfer—ACT—happens from April.

As to the difficulty of obtaining a Post Office card account, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take some comfort from the fact that, on the latest figures, almost 40 per cent. of Veterans Agency benefit recipients have chosen to opt for a card account, so it is not impossible, as he suggests. We are ensuring that everybody can make the choice that is right for them.

On rural post offices, in the last quarter of last year, the most recent period for which we have data, there was no net reduction in the number of rural post offices. It is probably the first time that that has been the case for at least 30 years, and it shows that the steps that the Government are taking are working.

Women Entrepreneurs

2. **Mr. Wayne David** (Caerphilly): What recent measures have been taken to encourage women entrepreneurs. [97617]

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): A national strategic framework on women's enterprise is currently being developed by the Small Business Service, in conjunction with Prowess—Promoting Women's Enterprise Support—and a cross-Government policy group. That strategy will provide a cohesive, co-ordinated and long-term approach to women's enterprise in the UK.

Mr. David: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is an urgent need to tackle sexist bias in the media? *The Western Mail* yesterday included a feature on Welsh entrepreneurs. It stated that Welsh business "men" were more positive and looking to build on their current success. It contained seven photographs of men but none of women.

Alan Johnson: I agree that treatment by the media is a barrier that women have to surmount. However, the media probably take their lead from other political parties, which have a small representation of women. Perhaps they could do their bit to help the media enter the 21st century.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): To prevent bias such as that displayed by *The Western Mail* and in the spirit of equal opportunity, will the Minister confirm that the same measures will be made available to male entrepreneurs?

Alan Johnson: I can confirm two things. The Government introduced maternity allowance for self-employed women for the first time. Many women entrepreneurs experience difficulty because their partners work and cannot find time to help with child care. From April, the Government will introduce measures to ensure that people's right to apply for flexible working allows the man in the relationship to help the woman entrepreneur better to fulfil her objectives and ambitions.

Credit Card Regulation

3. **Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk): If she will make a statement on credit card regulation. [97620]

The Minister for Energy and Construction (Mr. Brian Wilson): Credit cards are regulated under the Consumer Credit Act 1974, which provides protection for consumers taking out an agreement. A review of the Act was announced in July 2001. As part of it, we will publish a consultation on the simplification of the credit advertising regulations in the summer.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister for that reply. Earlier this week, MasterCard was exposed for ripping off retailers to the tune of hundreds and millions of pounds, and especially for discriminating against small retailers. The consumer ultimately bears the cost.

The spotlight now turns on the misleading annual percentage rate figures, which make it impossible for consumers to calculate the cost of credit. I appreciate that a review is being conducted, but what is the time scale for it? It has dragged on endlessly. When will the Government act to give consumers the protection that they need?

Mr. Wilson: This is not normally my territory, but I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's comments. The best way in which to deal with the unsolicited conflicting and confusing offers that come through our letterboxes is to file them in the bin.

The outcome of the review will be published in the summer. I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman's point that consumers must be protected and that having no consistent base of information confuses rather than protects. The industry is good at exploiting that trick.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): Can my hon. Friend do something in the review about the outrageously high rates of interest that many leading stores charge for their in-store credit cards? Some charge interest of 30 per cent. APR, which is absurdly high at a time of historically low interest rates.

Mr. Wilson: Again, I have great sympathy with those comments. If consistent information were published, people would be better able to read across. Every trick in the book is used to inveigle people into costly agreements. There is a fine line between the nanny-state approach and providing decent protection from such misinformation or, at best, confusing information. That is the purpose of the review, and I shall convey hon. Members' views and their desire for urgency to my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Melanie Johnson), who normally deals with those issues.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): Does the Minister agree that the individual must take some responsibility for personal credit card debt?

Mr. Wilson: That is precisely why I tried to establish a balance. We cannot offer individual protection to everyone who should understand the information but chooses not to. Many people are the authors of their misfortune. We are trying to strike a balance. People should be able to get information that allows them to compare different offers, see the interest rates that will be charged, and work out what they will end up paying. However, at the point where the state intervenes to ensure that that information is available, I would agree with the hon. Gentleman that we cannot protect people from their own misjudgments.

Manufacturing Advisory Service

4. **Mr. Michael Foster** (Worcester): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Manufacturing Advisory Service. [97621]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): The Manufacturing Advisory Service is now up and running in England and Wales. It

has been enthusiastically received by industry. Early progress reports are encouraging, and I shall publish details of that progress shortly.

Mr. Foster: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State knows that the west midlands has for years been the engine driving the UK manufacturing industry. Will she give the House more details on how the Manufacturing Advisory Service has benefited the west midlands and, in particular, on the 100 companies that have used the service in the past seven months?

Ms Hewitt: More than 100 companies have received full-scale visits from the Manufacturing Advisory Service, and many others have received briefer advice. As a result, most of those companies have gained substantial direct improvements to their bottom line. I shall publish fuller details in the report. I agree with my hon. Friend that all MPs with manufacturing constituencies can help their manufacturing companies enormously by encouraging them to use this new, effective and practical service.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): On the subject of effectiveness, the Secretary of State will be aware of the new target announced by Mr. Prodi last week—that of reducing the European Union law rule book by 25,000 pages from its present 90,000 pages by 2005. What useless and moronic EU red tape would she cut to achieve that target?

Ms Hewitt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been at the forefront of encouraging the EU to commit itself to the better regulation discipline that we have in our country—

Mr. Ruffley: What cuts?

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the Secretary of State answer.

Ms Hewitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I intend to take advantage of President Prodi's initiative, but I shall continue to work with as many member states as possible to ensure that we get a sensible and satisfactory conclusion to the current discussions on the agency workers directive. In addition, I shall continue to ensure—through the new Competitiveness Council—that the new framework for the chemicals industry does not damage the competitiveness of our world-class chemicals industry.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State accept that many businesses and industries still do not know where they can get help and advice? The new advisory service will clearly do a welcome job, but many people do not know of its existence. What can we do to publicise it better, to make people aware of where they can get help and advice before it is too late and they go out of business?

Ms Hewitt: The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), has already written to all hon. Members to inform them of the work of the Manufacturing Advisory Service. The manufacturing centres and the regional development agencies are all sending out mail and advertising the new service in their own regions. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will help by contacting manufacturing firms in his constituency to draw their attention to this new and excellent service.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Perhaps out of a naive belief that the Secretary of State's Department could offer an advisory service to manufacturing, I wrote an urgent letter to her three months ago on behalf of a delegation of trade unionists from Northern Ireland whose fertiliser factory had closed down. I asked her to work with her Cabinet colleagues and to approach the principal shareholders—the Irish Government and ICI. Is the Secretary of State aware that people from her office wrote to me this week to say that, after three months' careful consideration, they had decided to transfer the matter to another Government Department? If that is a measure of the quality of service on offer, the service should be closed down. What has happened leads me to question the effectiveness not only of the service, but of her whole Department.

Ms Hewitt: I am extremely sorry if we have not acted as promptly as we should have done on that particular matter. I shall check exactly what has happened, and shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

Let me make it absolutely clear that that case has nothing to do with the new Manufacturing Advisory Service and the regional centres for manufacturing excellence, which, as I said, are operating throughout England and Wales and which we know from the earlier reports are delivering an excellent service. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support them.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Will the Secretary of State confirm that more than 600,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost since May 1997? That is an average of more than 2,000 for every week since Labour came to power. Has she discussed with the Manufacturing Advisory Service the need to improve Britain's deficit in traded goods, which is now at its worst level for 305 years? Has she discussed with the service how to improve business investment, which fell last year by more than any amount since records were first kept in 1966? Has she discussed with the service the slowdown in productivity? Productivity is now rising at only half the speed it was under the last Government. Does she recognise that, whatever the Manufacturing Advisory Service does, it cannot rectify the damage to Britain's manufacturers that Labour's policy of high tax and over-regulation is still inflicting?

Ms Hewitt: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about job losses and closures in the manufacturing sector. I do not remember any such concern when manufacturing was being destroyed under the Conservative Governments in two disastrous recessions.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the trade gap, but it is absurd to compare today's gap with the state of the economy under William of Orange, when it was about 100th the size of today's economy. I notice that the hon. Gentleman does not refer to the fact that world trade has been falling very fast because of the downturn across

the world. He does not refer to the fact that the United Kingdom economy—both this year and forecast for next year—is growing faster than almost any other major economy. Instead of talking the British economy down, it is high time that he supported British business and British workers. If he is so concerned about them, perhaps he would like to explain to the House how his proposals for scrapping the regional development agencies—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State should not do that.

Fair Trade

5. **Vera Baird** (Redcar): What steps the DTI is taking to promote the take-up of fair trade products by UK businesses. [97622]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I strongly support the aims of the fair trade movement. The Government have provided £500,000 to help the Fairtrade Foundation with its marketing campaigns. My hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness recently held a meeting with business leaders to encourage greater take-up of fair trade goods. I have ensured that fair trade tea and coffee are available throughout the DTI, and I have encouraged my other Cabinet colleagues to do the same.

Vera Baird: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does she agree that the major advantage of fair trade is to give a steady income to producers who would otherwise be totally hostage to the volatility of the commodity market? It will be fair trade fortnight from 3 to 18 March, which is why I am asking whether she intends to introduce any further steps to mark that occasion and further to stimulate and galvanise British business, which does not now immensely support fair trade throughout the world.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for those remarks. I entirely agree with her about the small but none the less significant part that fair trade can play in stabilising the incomes of some of the poorest farmers around the world. Just a few months ago, I brought together industry, other Departments, voluntary organisations and international institutions to consider how we could act more effectively on the underlying problem of low and volatile commodity prices. A working group between Government and industry is considering how we can do more on that.

The other crucial action that we shall take, not only during fair trade fortnight but throughout the year, is to step up our efforts, as part of the Doha negotiations, to persuade our colleagues in the European Union to cut the tariffs that we put up against imports from developing countries. Those tariffs apply not only to raw materials but, crucially, to the value-added materials into which those countries now need to diversify.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Can the right hon. Lady explain why the Mediterranean partners of the Euro-Mediterranean trade partnership do not enjoy the principle of regional cumulation that the European members enjoy? Surely that is a fair way to promote trade and, therefore, peace in a difficult part of the world.

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He will be aware that in a recent speech in Brussels I set out—I hope clearly—the case for reform within the European Union, both of the common agricultural policy and, more broadly, of our tariff barriers. There is a great deal more that the European Union, and also the United States and other parts of the developed world, can do to ensure that very poor countries enjoy greater prosperity. That is, of course, good for them, but it also happens to be good for us.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The House should find the Secretary of State's complacency on trade in her answers to my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) alarming. The United Kingdom trade deficit is widening. The overall value of trade is falling. In the fourth quarter of 2002, the deficit in goods reached £10.7 billion. Given that desperate situation—[HON. MEMBERS: "The question is on fair trade."] How can it possibly be right, given that desperate situation for British exporters and British businesses that want to take up fair trade products, for the Government to increase employers' national insurance?

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman seems to jump from one subject to another.

On the trade gap, the current account deficit in the United Kingdom in 2001 was 1.7 per cent. of gross domestic product. In 1989, under the hon. Gentleman's Government, it was more than 5 per cent. We will take no lectures on trade from the Conservatives, who did very little to promote fair trade.

On national insurance contributions, there is widespread support among the business community and the public for the sustained increase in national health service spending that we propose and the Conservative party would cut. The issue for the hon. Gentleman is which hospitals he would shut, and how many doctors and nurses he would sack, with his refusal to match our investment in the NHS.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Minister aware that the fairest trade I can think of at this time, with a balance of payments of about £34 billion, is to increase the amount of coal produced in this country so that it offsets coal imports? Will she accept that that fair announcement for coal yesterday was sound as far as it went, and will she take another look to see whether we can save that wonderful fair place of Selby to ensure that we keep those three pits open? If we do that, it will be in sharp contrast to the lousy trade that resulted in every single pit in Derbyshire closing when the Tories were in power.

Ms Hewitt: I absolutely understand and share my hon. Friend's anger about the brutality of what was done to the coalfield communities during the Conservative years. He knows from statements that I made to the House that last year we secured within the European Union framework the possibility of investment aid to the coal industry, which has always

been excluded from regional selective assistance. I can confirm that we are making good progress on that and will make an announcement in due course.

Public and Employee Liability Insurance

6. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): What representations she has received on the impact of increased premiums for public and employee liability insurance on small businesses. [97623]

The Minister for Energy and Construction (Mr. Brian Wilson): The Department has received a number of representations from companies and their representative bodies concerning increased premiums for liability insurance. In response to the concerns raised, we have set up a review of the employers' liability insurance system, and the Office of Fair Trading is conducting a study of the liability insurance market.

Mr. Smith: I warmly welcome that reply. The Minister will be aware of the letter that I received from Mr. Marco Camilleri of Camilleri Roofing, a highly respected and very successful family business in my constituency. Despite having an unblemished safety record and investing substantial sums in health and safety training, it faces massive increases in its liability insurance. Given the lack of any correlation between the risk posed by the company and the amount of insurance it has to pay, I am delighted to hear that the matter is to be referred to the Office of Fair Trading—especially in the light of public concern over the possibility that insurance companies are exploiting the current security environment.

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend is right to raise that case study. Many companies are in the same position.

There are clearly genuine reasons for increases in insurance costs. They are probably part of the price we pay for the litigation culture into which we are increasingly moving, and there have been substantial extraneous factors as well. Nevertheless, we should try to help businesses overcome the problem, and make sure that the insurance industry distinguishes between companies with the unblemished record described by my hon. Friend and those with no such record.

The construction industry can help itself. Part of the problem is that the industry does not have a good health and safety record. We must reward companies that do well. I hope that the various inquiries that are taking place will prove helpful; in the meantime, the company mentioned by my hon. Friend can consult a reputable trade association or the British Insurance Brokers Association.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): A review is all very well, but what assurance can the Minister give Mackay Boatbuilders of Arbroath, in my constituency? Seeing what was happening in the fishing industry, the company sensibly diversified into maintenance of vessels such as oil supply ships. Despite having made no claims for 12 years, it has incurred a 400 per cent. increase in liability premiums. It has managed to pay this year, but is fearful of what will happen when the insurance must be renewed at the end of the year. Will the Minister undertake to meet the insurance companies immediately, and impress on them that increases of such magnitude are unacceptable in the case of small businesses?

Mr. Wilson: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have been doing exactly that for months. I am pleased that he has discovered this issue from a letter from a firm in his constituency.

As I have said, it is often possible for companies to obtain satisfactory terms through trade associations and the British Insurance Brokers Association, especially if they can demonstrate that they have a good health and safety record. There is, indeed, a potential advantage if the problem makes companies aware that such a record will secure beneficial premiums. It is necessary to separate the sheep from the goats, particularly in the construction industry, which can unfortunately be stigmatised by the existence of some very bad companies.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): My hon. Friend mentioned the investigation being conducted by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Office of Fair Trading. Bearing in mind the problems faced by British manufacturing companies—including some in my constituency—in obtaining liability insurance, will he use his good offices when discussing the matter with other Departments to ensure that the study is completed without delay?

Mr. Wilson: I take my hon. Friend's point. The issue is urgent for many very good companies, which is why the Government as a whole have responded in the way I have described, and why it is particularly important to involve the OFT. I am acutely aware from the sectors with which I deal—I think construction has been the worst hit—of the need to secure answers. As has been said, many companies have managed to deal with the hike in employers' liability insurance this year, but would be in difficulty if the same happened next year. I hope that through their good offices the Government can help to establish stability in a market that is normally extremely competitive. We would not normally intervene, but we recognise the problems and are trying to find solutions.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Minister aware of the case, highlighted on 31 January this year by my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham), of the specialist small construction firm on the south coast that last year obtained £10 million-worth of insurance cover for £12,000? This year, it requires a minimum of £5 million-worth of cover simply to secure contracts from its regular customers, but can secure only £1 million-worth—a tenth of that which it previously enjoyed—for £8,000, two thirds of the previous cost. Given that 99.6 per cent. of businesses in this country employ fewer than 100 people, but employ a large number of people central to our economy and generate two fifths of our national output, does the Minister accept that on a cross-party basis—this is not a partisan matter—action is urgently required?

Mr. Wilson: If the hon. Gentleman keeps making speeches like that, I might invite him to come and join us—but perhaps not.

I do not think that the issue is party political, and I accept the validity of what the hon. Gentleman says. I assure him that, through the measures that I mentioned, we will continue to work with industry to facilitate a solution. For smaller companies in particular, the issue is extremely significant. Fortunately, the construction industry is experiencing a boom phase in most parts of the country, but that will not always be the case. We have to sort out the problem while conditions are good, so that it will not become an additional burden when conditions are more challenging.

EU Enlargement

7. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): What analysis her Department has conducted of the opportunities for UK businesses from EU enlargement. [97624]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): British business has already benefited from the removal of trade barriers with the fast-growing economies of central and eastern Europe, and we expect that to continue with the expansion of the EU to create the largest single market in the world. My officials are completing a more detailed analysis of the opportunities and impact, and I intend to publish it as soon as possible.

Dr. Starkey: Given the current benefits of markets in eastern and central Europe, as well as the potential increased benefits and the fact that many of our European Union competitors are aggressively expanding into those markets, will the Secretary of State detail the specific ways in which she is trying to encourage British businesses to take advantage of those opportunities?

Ms Hewitt: About 14,000 British firms—mainly, I am glad to say, manufacturers—are already exporting goods to central and eastern Europe, and those opportunities are clearly growing. I have asked British Trade International, in its work in the regions, to ensure that when supporting more of our small and medium-sized enterprises to become exporters it draws their attention to those growing markets.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): Enlargement of the EU is wholly welcome, but does the Secretary of State agree that it should not be accompanied by further enlargement of her Department? Will she explain why, when the Government do not own a coal, steel or car industry, it is still necessary to have eight DTI Ministers, a few of whom have joined us today? Is it a make-work scheme for Government drivers and private secretaries, or is there some nobler purpose?

Ms Hewitt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that extremely serious question. I can assure him that all my Ministers are enormously busy. Indeed, the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson), who has ministerial responsibility for competition and consumer affairs, is currently in central and eastern Europe exploring with Government and business there the opportunities for closer investment and trade. I will continue to ensure that my Department operates as efficiently as possible, and delivers an even better service to business and consumers.

Broadband

8. **Brian White** (Milton Keynes, North-East): What steps her Department is taking to increase the take-up of broadband services. [97625]

The Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness (Mr. Stephen Timms): Competition is proving an effective driver for the broadband market, as the UK now has the second largest number of broadband connections in Europe after Germany. In addition to providing for a competitive market environment, the Government's contributions include the new UK broadband taskforce, support for the broadband stakeholder group and the UK online for business advice programme, and the £30 million UK broadband fund.

Brian White: I am sure that the House will welcome the work of the broadband stakeholders group, and I am sure the Minister will endorse its recommendations. He knows, however, that there are areas such as mine, where every exchange is enabled but technical difficulties prevent take-up. There are other areas with other problems. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that Government Departments, agencies such as English Partnerships and regional development agencies, and the regulator will use innovative ways forward and not be hidebound by bureaucratic rules that prevent the take-up of broadband by various groups?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is right. It is important that we encourage imaginative public-private partnerships and do not impede them. The changes introduced by the Communications Bill, with which my hon. Friend has been helping in Committee, will contribute. A growing number of initiatives are being taken forward, especially by the regional development agencies. The South East England Development Agency, for example, is giving grants to help small businesses in Hastings access satellite broadband and plans to extend those arrangements throughout the region. It is important that such initiatives be supported.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): What assessment has the Minister made of the number of small businesses, potential domestic users and others who are denied access to broadband cable in areas such as Birchington and Westgate in my constituency, simply because of the roll-out thresholds? Does he regard that as acceptable?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman has also played an important part in the Committee considering the Communications Bill, as its Chairman. We estimate that about 30 per cent. of UK households are currently not within reach of a terrestrial broadband service. Satellite broadband is available almost everywhere, which is why SEEDA's arrangements to help businesses access satellite broadband, which is more expensive, are

potentially very important. As SEEDA rolls out those arrangements throughout the south-east region, the hon. Gentleman's constituents and businesses in his constituency may well be among the beneficiaries.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): In any discussions that my hon. Friend has with broadband providers, will he champion the cause of rural areas, where modern communications are so important? Broadband roll-out appears to be based on a set target of the number of people who register. That is inevitably more difficult to reach in a sparsely populated area such as the Isle of Axholme in my constituency.

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is right. It is important that we extend broadband to rural areas as fast as possible. BT has been reducing some of its thresholds recently. That is good news, but we also need to look at some of the more imaginative ways of extending broadband into rural areas. I was in Canada a couple of weeks ago, and heard about the way in which social enterprises are helping to deliver wireless-based broadband services to rural areas. Of course, in Canada the geographical challenges are much greater. It is important that we make progress in that respect.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Given the Government's welcome stated aspiration to make the United Kingdom the most competitive and dynamic communications market in the world, and the role that Government Departments have to play in that by encouraging broadband connection, what target have the Government have set for broadband connection for schools? How many schools currently have broadband access, and when does he expect 100 per cent. of schools to have broadband access?

Mr. Timms: The Prime Minister announced last November that we expect every school to have broadband access by 2006. I believe that the current proportion is about 25 per cent. In all, we expect the public sector to spend about £1 billion on broadband over the next three years. Once the school in a rural community has broadband, at least in principle there is the possibility of spreading access to other users, so the public sector contribution will be important.

Aerospace Industry

9. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the prospects for the aerospace industry. [97626]

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): The UK aerospace sector's prospects are good, despite the many challenges that the industry faces. The aerospace innovation and growth team published its interim report recently, which suggested that there are real opportunities for future growth.

Helen Jackson: My hon. Friend will know that the high-grade steel produced by the Corus plant at Stocksbridge in my constituency is significantly dependent on the health and well-being of the aerospace industry for its markets. Its orders dropped by about a third following 11 September, and the effect is still working its way through the steel capacity of the plant. What further action will my hon. Friend take, especially in the South Yorkshire region, to promote aerospace and the markets in order to restore the health of that core manufacturing sector?

Alan Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of the very specialised steel production in her constituency. I am advised that, although there is cause for concern, the sector is not suggesting that major difficulties will be caused, partly because there has been huge investment on the defence side. In particular, the joint strike fighter is a huge investment made jointly with the USA.

My hon. Friend will know about the development of the advanced manufacturing park, as the site is very close to her area. Significantly, Boeing is making a major investment to encourage and develop innovation in aerospace manufacturing. That is one of the most important developments that we have seen in this country for many years.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): The Minister may be aware that the aerospace industry is very important in my constituency, although a number of jobs have been lost in it over the years. The industry tells me that the best thing that the Government can do is ensure that it can compete on a level playing field. Fair trade was mentioned earlier, and it is extremely important that companies in Europe do not get help from their Governments in meeting start-up costs and winning orders when such help is not available to companies in this country. Will he ensure that we can compete on a level playing field? Will he also make sure that companies involved in joint projects get paid on time when they do the work?

Alan Johnson: I agree that aerospace, of all industries, needs a level playing field. That is fairly obvious. In terms of the issues that the sector faces, the innovation and growth team is very important. I stress that that is a body not of politicians but of the industry itself, and it is considering all the problems that it faces with a view to the future 20 years hence.

On the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentions with regard to assisting our aerospace industry, Governments of all persuasions have seen the need to support aerospace because of the particular problems that it faces. The innovation and growth team has a very important role in that respect and its report will be published in May. Since 1997, £1 billion of launch investment has been put into Rolls-Royce and Airbus. From talking to aerospace companies, I find that they are very appreciative of the efforts that we have made in this country—this is not merely a party political point because they have made our aerospace sector second only to the US in the world. While we should look at our difficulties and consider how to resolve them, we should not downgrade the successes that we have had in this country.

Social Enterprise

10. **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): What support she is giving to social enterprise. [97628]

The Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness (Mr. Stephen Timms): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I launched a three-year strategy for social enterprise in July. We are now working on the delivery of that strategy and the co-ordination of its delivery across government.

Mrs. Ellman: Will my hon. Friend ensure that the support given to social enterprise by his Department, including the Phoenix fund, works together with support from other sources, including the Merseyside special investment fund, which has recently set up a special section devoted to community businesses? Will he support the Co-operatives and Community Benefit Societies Bill, which is currently being promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), as a very important way of supporting social enterprises?

Mr. Timms: I agree that the Bill is important. Social enterprises are making very good use of the support provided from the Phoenix fund. That includes a number of enterprises in my hon. Friend's constituency; I have noticed the Cats Pyjamas and Train 2000 projects in particular. She is absolutely right that that support needs to be allied to support from other sources. Let me also draw her attention to the community investment tax relief, which was introduced a few weeks ago and which I think will be significant in tilting the playing field in favour of commercial viability for investments in some social enterprise projects that would not otherwise be viable.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Does the Minister accept that socialism and enterprise are mutually incompatible? If the terms being used are new Labour speak for not-for-profit bodies and charities, why is his Secretary of State not campaigning for the removal of the evil congestion charge, which is undermining the work of charities in central London?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman is wrong about that. The great attraction of social enterprise is that it combines the creativity and energy that characterise the entrepreneurial private sector at its best with a strong commitment to public service. Bringing those two together creates a powerful combination from which the whole country can gain.

MINISTER FOR WOMEN

The Minister for Women was asked

Social Enterprises

18. **Tony Cunningham** (Workington): What steps she is taking to support women in setting up social enterprises. [97608]

The Minister for Women (Ms Patricia Hewitt): We are already supporting women as well as men to set up and run social enterprises through a variety of activities. This will be strengthened through the implementation of the social enterprise strategy, to which my hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness referred a moment ago.

Tony Cunningham: I thank the Minister for that reply. I have some very successful social enterprises in my constituency, which are fully supported by my local council, Allerdale borough council. What additional support can be given to women establishing social enterprises in rural areas? These women suffer not only from the normal problems of access to finance but from peripherality, rural isolation and general access to support mechanisms.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am glad to say that there are already successful social enterprises in rural areas, such as Rascals, the after-school care club in Northumberland that was set up by a group of mothers to provide child care in that rural area. More generally, the Small Business Service is already delivering—through the business links network—the farm business advisory service, which is funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Countryside Agency. This is helping women and men in rural areas to move into new enterprises—both social enterprises and for profit.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): The fact that we have just dealt with the subject of social enterprise during Trade and Industry questions and that we are now dealing with it again underlines the point that having the important cross-cutting role of Minister for Women shackled to departmental questions is not working. It allows me, however, to comb through the Government's document, "Social Enterprise: a Strategy for Success", which states that social enterprise can contribute to "socially inclusive wealth creation". Women are not mentioned once in this document. Nor are they mentioned in the social enterprise strategy work plan for July 2002 to October 2003—very inclusive, that! Will the Minister admit that women and social enterprise were just an afterthought?

Ms Hewitt: No, of course not. I am disappointed that the hon. Lady seems to be suggesting that she does not think that Women's questions are useful. Perhaps she would like to join me in discussions with the House authorities to create a longer Question Time on women's matters. I would be delighted to do that. Our business support strategies and our social enterprise strategy are, of course, designed to support women as well as men. The variety of examples in the social enterprise strategy includes a number of companies—I have just referred to one that provides child care services—developed and run by women.

Mr. Chris Mole (Ipswich): Given the important role that women can play in social enterprises, will my right hon. Friend explain how the business support services for which the Department of Trade and Industry is

responsible can provide support to ensure that social enterprises have the management and financial skills and other capabilities of mainstream businesses?

Ms Hewitt: We have looked particularly at the needs of social enterprises. In some respects—access to finance, for instance—they are pretty much the same as for any other business. In other respects, such as the legal framework in which they operate, they have quite different needs. Through the regional development agencies and through business links we are ensuring that business advisers have the necessary specialist knowledge to support entrepreneurs who want to set up a social enterprise. I am glad to say that a number of the regional development agencies are already creating support networks designed to encourage social enterprise.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): Social enterprise, according to the Minister,

"can free people to become enthusiastic participants and owners of public services."

I totally support that sentiment. The latest figures clearly show, however, that women are not becoming enthusiastic participants in managing public services. The number of public appointments of women has remained disappointingly static, at 34 per cent. over the last year, which shows a failure on the part of the Government. Will the Government give their full attention to this issue, or shall we continue to see part-time results from a part-time Minister?

Ms Hewitt: Oh dear. I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware that in 1991 only 23 per cent. of public appointments were held by women. We succeeded in increasing that to one in three by March last year, but change takes time. Unless we take positive action, it will not happen fast enough. That is why, last year, my hon. Friend the Minister for Social Exclusion and Deputy Minister for Women and I launched a series of seminars and programmes to encourage thousands of women to put themselves forward for public appointments. The hon. Lady will understand that only about 15 per cent. of public appointments fall vacant each year, but I have no doubt, given the hugely enthusiastic reception we received at those events, that many more women will come forward and be appointed.

Women Entrepreneurs

19. **Ms Meg Munn** (Sheffield, Heeley): What progress has been made towards creating a strategy for increasing the number of women entrepreneurs. [97610]

The Minister for Women (Ms Patricia Hewitt): As my hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness said a few minutes ago, a national strategic framework on women's enterprise has been produced by the Small Business Service and is currently out for consultation. This strategy, which will be launched in April, will strengthen business support for women who want to start and grow a business.

Ms Munn: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. Will she take this opportunity to congratulate Yorkshire women, who are not only the most entrepreneurial women in the country but are more entrepreneurial than Yorkshire men? Are there lessons to be learned from Yorkshire women's businesses, such as the Sheffield-based public relations company, diva, which recently won three awards, that could be included in the Government's strategy?

Ms Hewitt: I readily congratulate Yorkshire women generally, and diva in particular, which is a business that I know, on their great entrepreneurial success. I also congratulate my colleagues in business links, in south and west Yorkshire, who are developing successful networks of women entrepreneurs. The fact remains that if we could get women in the rest of the country to set up new businesses at the same rate as men, we would have an extra 100,000 new businesses in Britain every year.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): Does the Minister agree that entrepreneurs—whether men or women—are, by their very nature, highly self-motivated, imaginative and problem solving, and that those traits cannot be created by a Government strategy?

Ms Hewitt: I am afraid that it is typical of Conservative Members to imagine that Government can have no effect on that. We find from the entrepreneurs and small businesses that we help that—as with the Manufacturing Advisory Service we discussed earlier—they welcome that support and want more of it. We are delivering it.

UK Companies (Women Employees)

20. **Mr. Colin Challen** (Morley and Rothwell): What recent discussions she has had with UK companies who employ women in developing countries. [97612]

The Minister for Women (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I have regular meetings with British companies that have operations overseas. Promoting corporate social responsibility both at home and abroad, including ethical employment practices, is a high priority for this Government.

Mr. Challen: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. I am sure that she would agree that an expansion in free trade should not lead to an expansion in sweatshops and the exploitation of women in developing countries. Sadly, in many cases, the reality does not match the rhetoric. One example is the Gina Form Bra Company, which operates in Thailand and has been condemned by that country's National Human Rights Commission. The company oppresses trade unions, but it employs 1,100 women. It also supplies a major, well known British high street retailer, as do many other such companies. Will she have a talk with British retailers about where they source their materials from and about eradicating the practices that I have mentioned?

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I am aware of the situation that developed at Gina Form Bra Company in Thailand and I know that the Labour Minister in the Thai Government has already taken action on it. Once I have received more

information, I will certainly discuss it with the British retail companies concerned and with my opposite number, Dr. Adisai, the Minister for Commerce in Thailand, whom I had the opportunity to meet recently, and agree with him on the need for free and fair trade across the world.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The right hon. Lady said earlier that she has introduced Fair Trade tea and coffee in the Department of Trade and Industry, on which I congratulate her. Is she aware of the John Lewis Partnership initiative of encouraging trade in Fair Trade wine, and will she undertake to meet Steve Esom, managing director of Waitrose, and Sir Stuart Hampson, chairman of John Lewis Partnership, who have done so much to encourage Fair Trade retailing in the UK, and the fair employment of people overseas?

Ms Hewitt: I am delighted to congratulate John Lewis and Waitrose on that initiative. I have great admiration for those companies, which are, of course, owned by their employees. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness recently met the organisation to discuss corporate social responsibility.

Airport Security

12.30 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (*Urgent Question*): I hope that the Home Secretary might be willing to make a statement to describe his assessment of the current situation at Heathrow, and the Government's response to it.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): Since Tuesday, there has been an enhanced level of security throughout the capital. As the Metropolitan police said in its statement, which was made on behalf of all those engaged in the operation, this was likely to be most visible at Heathrow airport. At the request of the operational services, it was agreed that, as in the past, the armed services could be called on for preventive and protective measures.

It may help the House if I set the events of this week in the context of what was said in my statement of 7 November, and if I recall key points. As I made clear, we face a real and serious threat. We know that al-Qaeda will try to inflict loss of human life and damage upon the United Kingdom. That is why we have explicitly pointed to some of the most obvious risks, such as to transport infrastructure, and why the Government have taken a range of measures to improve public protection. In doing so, we have been mindful of the importance both of keeping the House informed, and of keeping continuity of operational policing and security measures.

The House will forgive me if I quote the most relevant passages of the statement of 7 November. I said:

"Aviation security measures remain at an enhanced level following the attacks on September 11th and the government keeps these measures under constant review. From time to time additional protective steps are being taken, and will continue to be taken as the situation demands."

The statement continued:

"Where threats are specific, we seek to thwart them. Where they are general, we seek to analyse them, and take whatever responses we believe to be necessary to ensure the protection of the public."

This is precisely what we have done this week, and will need to do from time to time in the future. If the situation were to change, I would inform the House. If there are specific incidents—as tragically occurred in January, with the death of Detective Constable Oake—I will come back to the House. However, I do not believe that it is responsible to provide a running public commentary from the Dispatch Box on every end and turn—any more than previous Governments did during the past 30 years, when facing the threat from Irish terrorism.

As with those Governments, our view is that we must do nothing to undermine the work of the police and the security services. We have to make fine judgments, which must ensure the safety of sources of information. The terrorists must not be able to assess what we know and how we know it.

We must give the public the information that they need to protect themselves and others. We did precisely that with the statement last Tuesday morning. However, we must also avoid frightening people unnecessarily or causing the sort of economic and social damage that does the work of the terrorists for them. The public must be alert but not alarmed. That is why I have consistently—and again this week—facilitated confidential briefings for the shadow Home Secretary and the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

Finally, I again pay tribute to the work of our police, security and armed services. We owe them our deepest gratitude for the continuing vigilance, courage and professionalism that they have shown.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for coming to the House and making a statement. I join him in the tribute that he pays to those who put themselves at risk to protect us.

In his statement, the Home Secretary repeated the sentiment expressed in the letter that he sent me this morning. The right hon. Gentleman wrote:

"I do not believe that it is responsible to provide a running public commentary from the despatch box on every turn and development in the operational measures taken to protect the country's security."

I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that it is far better to set the precedent of measured and comprehensive statements in the House than to allow a "running public commentary"—to use his words—to be provided by confused and conflicting signals given by other Ministers, on the airwaves and in press briefings.

As far as the substance of the Home Secretary's statement is concerned, the right hon. Gentleman has, as he knows, the full backing of the Opposition. On the basis of what he has said today, and of other information that has been vouchsafed to us, we believe that the actions taken by the Government, the security agencies, the military and the police are justified, responsible, appropriate and proportionate. However, I remain concerned, as I have been over the past nine months, that the level of general preparedness to deal with and contain the effects of any major terrorist attack is not yet fully adequate to the task.

There is worrying evidence, whether we look at the protocols governing inter-service co-ordination at local level or at the level of equipment and training of personnel in key positions, that, although preparations are being made, the pace of action is too slow. When those signs of lack of preparedness are allied to insufficient levels of prevention—for example, in relation to the security of ports and nuclear power stations—one begins to have the uncomfortable feeling that there is a degree of inertia in Whitehall. *[Interruption.]*

Labour Members may tut; they are ill advised so to do. It is the Opposition's duty to ensure that pressure is applied to the Government to ensure that the Government do everything necessary to protect the British public. I fear that we may still be at the stage where no one wants to upset the Whitehall apple cart, and where no one in Whitehall wants to offend anyone in the nine Government Departments with responsibility for the various aspects of civil protection.

I ask again, as I have asked for months, whether it can possibly be right for there not to be a senior Cabinet Minister who attends to these matters from early in the morning till late at night and whose remit is to galvanise Whitehall into action. Would not the existence of such a Minister also ensure that the Government were able,

[Mr. Letwin]

in the proper way and through the House of Commons, to speak with one clear and unwavering voice about matters that affect us all?

Despite Labour Members, we in the House today are ultimately all on the same side of the same barricades. We all share the desire to protect the public and ourselves properly. We look to the Government, in what may be troubled weeks and months ahead, both to instil an appropriate sense of urgency in the official machine and to ensure that public trust and public confidence are engendered by a flow of accurate and timely information.

Mr. Blunkett: It is clearly the right of the Opposition to question the Government when the Government are clearly at fault. It is clearly the job of the Opposition to raise immediate issues, as they have today, briefly, as part of the shadow Home Secretary's statement. I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman has chosen this private notice question to raise issues that are not relevant to the immediate situation and that were not put to you, Mr. Speaker, in the terms of the question.

I am happy to answer to the House on the wider issues of preparedness, general security and resilience. As I indicated, we have regularly made statements to the House on those issues, as we will again in a few weeks' time, when we debate the renewal of part 4 of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001.

This afternoon, I want to rebut those critical elements that have divided the House in a way that was never the case during 30 years of Irish terrorism—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I did not grant this urgent question to give hon. Members the opportunity to shout across the Chamber. This is a very, very serious matter and I will not tolerate shouting. If the shouting continues, the urgent question session will cease. I say to hon. Members: do not shout across the Chamber at a time like this.

Mr. Blunkett: I seek entirely to refute the allegation that our security and policing services are not prepared, or are not in a position, to secure our well-being, and are not securing our well-being, because patently they are. The exercise being undertaken this week is precisely to achieve that goal. It is to ensure that evidence provided is acted upon, that measures are proportionate and that the work being done secures the population against the danger of threat at this particular moment. The security services for which I am responsible and the policing and anti-terrorist branch for which I am responsible are not only acting in a responsible and accountable way but, as I indicated at the end of my statement, are doing their job with great professionalism and courage.

I shall deal with two of the issues raised by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). First, I believe that it is right to report to the House on what is correctly the role of politicians. I am aware that, in opposition, it is sometimes difficult to get one's case across, so constant reiteration of a requirement that someone should come to the Dispatch Box is an understandable tactic. We had 18 years in opposition so we are aware of the frustrations. However, for a Cabinet Minister—me or anyone else—to come day by day to the Dispatch Box to answer for the operational activity of our security and policing services would be unnecessary and dangerous, in terms both of the alarm that it would cause and of the unnecessary hype that it would inevitably involve.

Secondly, to detach the responsibilities of a Minister from the security services and policing, including the anti-terrorism branch, would clearly be responsibility without power. It would mean someone having to answer on areas for which they were not responsible and would detract from the accountability that we all carry as Ministers, including my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Health, who are on the Treasury Bench today.

The allegation of confusion or mixed messages is entirely due to the misreporting—*[Interruption.]* I hear calls in relation to my right hon. Friend the Labour party chairman, who was entirely misquoted, and who said absolutely nothing that has not been said before in terms of the raising of consciousness of danger consequent on what happened on 11 September 2001. It is precisely because of what happened then that the measures we have taken have been put in place, and the operations, which will have to continue when necessary and will have to be repeated from time to time, will be put in place.

If every time we take measures to protect the public, enhance our level of preparedness and engage our security police and where necessary our armed services, there are calls for debates in the House or statements at the Dispatch Box, we shall damage rather than enhance the chances of catching those who threaten our lives and those who would put our nation in danger.

I appeal to the official Opposition, who have done nothing but shout throughout this statement, to act with a degree of responsibility and to continue the consensus that we have had—until their party leadership has clearly instructed their spokesmen to do otherwise.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): We are very grateful that the Home Secretary has made his statement, and I am very grateful for the briefings I have periodically received, which I respect, and whose confidentiality I respect.

I entirely agree that it is not the Home Secretary's job to provide a running commentary on such important matters, and that it is of course of paramount importance that nothing be said that compromises the intelligence and other activities we need to carry out as a nation. I do not doubt the right hon. Gentleman's judgement or his integrity in the decisions he takes. I hope that that shows that there is a common basis on which we are willing to proceed.

Given that it was exceptional to see troops deployed on the mainland of the United Kingdom, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that it was appropriate—exceptionally—to describe such exceptional measures by coming to Parliament, because that gives him the opportunity to make the authoritative statement that is proper to his office on behalf of the Government, both to avoid confusion and to allow any appropriate questions to be answered?

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that any decision as to what military provision is made is a matter operationally under the control of the military rather

than the Government, that the military will respond as it thinks appropriate, and that it is a matter on which it does not take direction from politicians?

Can the right hon. Gentleman also confirm that the Government—he and his colleague the Secretary of State for Transport, in this instance—are taking in hand the recommendations of the Lord Carlile report about increasing security at all our ports, our airports and seaports, and are taking on board suggestions, including that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), about improving airport security, which everyone agrees is of paramount importance?

Lastly, could the right hon. Gentleman have urgent discussions with his colleagues in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, so that arrangements can be made—arrangements which I know they are thinking about—both to give the public in written form in the next few weeks clear information about how they should respond, or where they should seek further information, and to assure us that at local government level the necessary resources and finances are in place for any necessary civil response to the exceptional situation which is, sadly, threatening our country at present?

Mr. Blunkett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the measured way in which he presented his questions and his case.

I can confirm that the operational responsibility for calling upon the armed services rests primarily in this case with the police. It is for them to determine whether they think that would be appropriate, and that will be the case in the future.

The armed services have been brought in from time to time on the British mainland when requested operationally. It is precisely because of the split between political and operational responsibility that I made my earlier remarks about appearances at the Dispatch Box or anywhere else. That must be understood unless we are to change the relationship with the police and armed services in such circumstances. Not all those in the House, because of the time they have been here or the responsibility they have held here, will understand that, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does.

Yes, we do believe that it is necessary—and it will be from time to time—to repeat the kind of exercise that has taken place this week, including exercises to establish precisely the preparedness to which the shadow Home Secretary referred. That will occur over the months and weeks ahead, and I think that people will welcome it and treat it with responsibility.

Yes, we do need to ensure that there are means to inform the public well and for them to be able to make contact, and we will put that in place. Yes, we are taking seriously what Lord Carlile has suggested. As with the Wheeler report on airports—we referred to this in the House not so long ago—we are taking additional measures to ensure security, as we are doing this week.

Yes, we will need to enhance and work with local government on its civil contingency roles, and we will return to that in debates in the House. We readjusted the funding to £90 million, as the hon. Gentleman will know, precisely to ensure that we reflected the concerns that he has raised.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I point out to hon. Members that I require questions, not statements, and those whom I call should ask one question.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): May I tell my right hon. Friend that, when my constituents awoke earlier this week to find 2,000 police officers and military around the site of their biggest employer, they would have been as disgusted as I am today to see that this matter has been dragged into party political point scoring? May I ask him, please, bearing in mind the exigencies of the circumstances that he describes, to realise that the rumour mill has started to grind and in the vacuum, without information, rumours will spread? Will he please assure the House that when he is able to give us the information he will do so?

Mr. Blunkett: Statements are put out by the operational commanders. That has always been the case is incidents of this sort, precisely to avoid politicians getting embroiled in second-guessing or directing the operational activity. The information will be, and always has been, put out. At 6 o'clock on Tuesday morning, an agreed statement was put out by the Metropolitan police, and that statement stands. Of course, when there is further information, they will release it, as they always do, including when any measure is taken that involves arrests. I have always reported to the House when those arrests have involved the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): My constituents who live adjacent to Manchester airport, or those who work there, are already concerned not because of anything said in the House, but because of the pictures of a military presence at Heathrow airport that they saw on their television screens. What they want from the Home Secretary is reassurance that appropriate security measures are being taken at and near Manchester airport and other regional airports, and that the concentration is not just on the highest profile target, particularly given that, by increasing security at Heathrow, it must surely be possible that softer targets elsewhere might be sought.

Mr. Blunkett: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has ensured that there is enhanced security and continues to keep that under surveillance. May I lighten things a little? I do not want to do what might be described as a Suffolk, Coastal—a Gummer—but one of my sons flew from Manchester airport at breakfast time this morning. So I would certainly assure everyone that it is safe to use our airports—that was the thrust of the question—and that they should not be fearful of doing so, precisely because the measures have been put in place and the security has been provided to ensure that they can go about their business free from fear.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not absolutely essential for the Government, the Opposition and,

[David Winnick]

indeed, all Members of Parliament to get across the point that mainstream Islam—no less legitimate than any other religion—is in no way involved with those fanatics, and that those fanatics are far removed from Islam and the teachings of Islam; and to recognise that, post 11 September, the war against democracy is more likely to be a long one than a short one?

Mr. Blunkett: I welcome what my hon. Friend says. Not only have the Muslim Council of Britain and the overwhelming majority of Muslims, as citizens, provided us with the backing that we need to do the job and the intelligence needed to ensure that they are protected alongside all who live beside them, but they have also been horrified that any of their communities should be engaged at all with terrorist acts.

I want to make it clear this afternoon that those who provided information on the potential for danger used the term "end of Eid" in a way to describe the timing with which they believed action would be taken. All of us deplore the fact that anyone would have chosen the end of any festival—whether Eid, Christmas or any other—to have engaged in threats of that sort.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Will the Home Secretary tell the House whether and, if so, when it was necessary to invoke the formal arrangements for military aid to the civil power? Does he agree that, when military aid to the civil power is invoked, it is entirely appropriate to make a formal statement to the House?

Mr. Blunkett: I made it absolutely clear that the police requested the support of the military.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): Requested?

Mr. Blunkett: I am being queried. Yes, requested—and that request was responded to. That is normally the case, with the consent of the Prime Minister, me and the Secretary of State for Defence to agree to that request. When that request is made again and there is sufficient concern that such measures are required, of course it will be granted. This was undertaken at the beginning of the week. I am sure that the House would respect and understand the fact that chapter and verse are not helpful in these circumstances, nor is it necessary for holding the politicians or the operational commanders to account.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the height of irresponsibility to use an urgent question on the specific subject of airport security to identify alleged gaps in the security of this country in a number of areas?

Mr. Speaker: Order. That question is out of order. I have granted the request for the urgent question, and that should be enough.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) is the least partisan of politicians. This should not be, and is not, a matter of party politics, but it is the duty of hon. Members to question Ministers not just when they are at fault but sometimes to find out whether they are at fault. Although the emphasis is perfectly properly on Heathrow airport, will the Home Secretary give an indication of what steps are being taken at other airports—such as Gatwick, close to which many of my constituents live—to ensure that, as was suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), the attention of any possible terrorist is not diverted to softer targets?

Mr. Blunkett: I agree with the first part of the right hon. Gentleman's question; his right hon. Friend normally is the height of consensuality. That is why this afternoon has been so remarkable. In the second part of his question, the right hon. Gentleman asks me to specify what steps have been taken at Gatwick. I am sure that, having been in government, he will, on reflection, ask himself one question: if I answered specifically, would it help or hinder those who are intent on carrying out terrorist acts there or anywhere else across our country?

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement and, indeed, on the Government's actions, which, by all accounts, have broad public support. Will he tell the House whether any consideration has been given to using military personnel to assist the civilian authorities on the London public transport system?

Mr. Blunkett: It is the same answer: if those operationally responsible put in requests for assistance from our armed services, they will be considered in precisely the way we have responded this week.

Mr. Portillo: May I ask the Secretary of State to accept that the House would like to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Government at this time of intense national danger, but may I ask him and his fellow Ministers to work harder to win the confidence and trust of the House and the British people? The Secretary of State will perhaps accept that the dodgy dossier has done great damage. May I ask him to accept that there should be no further attempts to spin where national security is involved? May I ask him, on reflection, to agree that when a Minister makes a decision such as that made this week on invoking military power a clear statement should be made, at the earliest opportunity, by the Minister responsible to the House of Commons, not by anybody else and not in any other place?

Finally, can I ask him why he believes that it is right for the United States to have a single Minister responsible for the fight against terrorism, but absolutely wrong for the United Kingdom to do the same?

Mr. Blunkett: As the right hon. Gentleman is a former Secretary of State for Defence I am slightly taken aback by his request that there should be a Dispatch Box statement every time there is a request for, or engagement of, the services.

I think that the right hon. Gentleman, who travels a lot, will understand the federal nature of the United States. As Tom Ridge has told me, there is no equivalent

of the internal security service in the United States, there is no direct responsibility for the connection of any such security service to policing—because policing is both federal and local—and the connection that they are now seeking to make precisely replicates the responsibilities that I carry, for the reason that the security services and the police are under one jurisdiction. To separate them out so that they are under separate jurisdictions would achieve exactly the opposite of what the Americans are seeking to achieve. I am absolutely amazed that the right hon. Gentleman, for whom I have the most enormous respect—and, at the danger of upsetting my Back Benchers, long-standing liking—should have got it so appallingly wrong.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): As responsibility for policing and civil defence issues are largely devolved to the Scottish Parliament, whereas matters of troop deployment and intelligence remain reserved to this House, can my right hon. Friend assure me that close liaison is taking place at the highest levels between Ministers at the UK level and Ministers in the Scottish Executive to ensure that constituents of mine flying from Scottish airports enjoy, where appropriate, the same levels of security as those flying from airports throughout the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, I can give such an assurance. Indeed, some of us will be flying into those airports over the next few days. I assure my hon. Friend that in these circumstances the reserve power on security and on security at airports remains with Ministers in this House.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): In wishing the Home Secretary well in the difficult and complex task that he faces, may I ask him to indicate, in view of the experience of al-Qaeda in the use of chemicals and gas, whether there are stocks of protective clothing in different parts of the country that could be made available if required?

If there is a devastating decline in the numbers of people using aeroplanes for travel, will the Government do what they can to ensure that assistance is given to the appropriate companies?

Mr. Blunkett: I am very pleased that the travelling public have responded so well and that there have been no discernible reductions in those using aircraft.

On the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, I, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State with responsibility for CBRN—chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons—and Departments, including the Department of Health and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, are mindful that facilities are and will be made available.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): Will the Home Secretary accept that my constituents who live immediately to the west of Heathrow under the flight path, many of whom work at Heathrow or for the airlines that service it, are deeply concerned about the current security situation? Will he also accept that that was made considerably worse yesterday by the conflicting statements from the chairman of the Labour party? Can the Home Secretary give us an absolute assurance that we will not have further conflicting statements, which only add to the panic?

Mr. Blunkett: I have made the position absolutely clear in relation to the statements that were made and the responsibility that is carried. I say to the right hon. Gentleman's constituents that had we not taken action—had the operational services not taken the steps that were required—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Blunkett: Had we not authorised the steps to be taken, and had the operational services not acted as they did, the right hon. Gentleman's constituents would have had a great deal more to fear than if we had not taken steps to reassure people that the necessary action had been taken. I really do not understand, given that we have sought to protect the public—so far, thank goodness, successfully—why the nature of this afternoon's questioning has been so antagonistic.

Angus Robertson (Moray): While we accept the seriousness of security announcements, does the Home Secretary accept there is still a breakdown of trust between the public and the Government following the comments of the Labour Party chairman and the publication of the dodgy dossier? What does he think will help to restore the public's trust in accurate security assessments, which are of critical importance?

Following the precedent of the confidential briefings that were made to the main opposition parties in Scotland and Wales on the situation in Afghanistan, will he do the same on this important matter, and include the parties in Northern Ireland, so that all of us in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are fully informed on domestic security arrangements?

Mr. Blunkett: Where appropriate, those with responsibility who represent political interests and parties in this House will of course be updated. The one thing that would really restore confidence, however, would be if people did not mislead the public, inadvertently or deliberately, about what has or has not been said, what has or has not been inaccurately reported or, above all, which particular aspect relates to which particular threat. The idea that any reference to a document provided for background on Iraq should be made in this statement on the threat that is now being dealt with by the operational services in relation to domestic security would actually damage that trust and security. So my answer is, "Look at your own responsibility before you ask me about the responsibility of others."

Business of the House

1.7 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May I ask the Leader of the House if he will please give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Industrial Development (Financial Assistance) Bill.

TUESDAY 25 FEBRUARY—Progress on remaining stages of the Communications Bill.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Hear, hear.

Mr. Cook: I am glad that that measure is so consensual.

WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY—Debate on Welsh Affairs on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the Draft Social Security Benefits Up-Rating Order 2003 and the Draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2003, followed by debate on flood and coastal defence policy on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 28 FEBRUARY—Private Members Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 3 MARCH—Motion to approve the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 (Continuance in Force of Sections 21 to 23) Order 2003, followed by debate on the Intelligence and Security Committee report on the terrorist bombings in Bali on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving us the business.

Is the right hon. Gentleman yet able to give any indication when Budget day will be? There is a growing mystery about that. I do not know why the Government are so coy about it, although I think that I can guess, but surely it is now way past the time by which the House should, in all decency, have been told the date of Budget day, to give not only us, but all those with a genuine interest—which, I suppose, includes everybody in the nation—proper notice. I would appreciate that, as, I think, would the House.

The newly established Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department has just announced that it is to investigate the role of the Lord Chancellor. I suppose that it will particularly consider his hybridity, because, as we know, he occupies a unique position straddling the Executive, the legislature and the judiciary.

Michael Fabricant: Like a colossus.

Mr. Forth: I will get my hon. Friend into *Hansard* by saying that he just said, "Like a colossus." I do not think that we should speculate on the exact stature of the Lord Chancellor at this stage—let us leave that to the Select Committee.

When the Select Committee has deliberated on the matter and presented its conclusions and recommendations, will we have the opportunity for a full debate on the Lord Chancellor's role and the Select Committee's views? That would be helpful.

Given the quickening pace of events at the United Nations, NATO and domestically, will the Leader of the House assure us that, were it necessary to recall the House next week during our short recess, arrangements are in place to do that at short notice and keep hon. Members kept fully informed?

Mr. Cook: Let me respond immediately to the last point. I do not envisage that it will be necessary to recall the House, but should such an eventuality arise, the option remains open. We have shown ourselves willing to recall the House on previous occasions. However, I would not wish people above us to take that response out of context as implying that there is any reason for believing that it will happen.

It is to the Government's and the House's credit that we have created a new Select Committee to cover the Lord Chancellor's Department. The right hon. Gentleman drew attention to the Department's many functions, which fully merit monitoring by a Select Committee. I welcome the increase in the ability and the capacity of the House to undertake its task of scrutiny. Of course, we will await the Committee's decisions with interest. It is premature to give an indication of the Government's response before an inquiry has begun, but we are co-operating with the Liaison Committee in determining the Select Committee reports that it would most like debated in Westminster Hall or the Chamber.

I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I take careful note of the fact that the Opposition have again demonstrated their enthusiasm for the Budget and an opportunity to rehearse the Government's success in securing the lowest inflation for a generation, the fastest growth in the G7 and—as announced in the past week—a further decline in unemployment. I shall ensure that the Chancellor is aware of the Opposition's keen interest in debating such matters.

I read yesterday's debate with interest. The shadow Chief Secretary got into difficulties in his interventions on the Chancellor. He appeared to experience problems in describing the way in which the Conservatives would achieve the 20 per cent. cut in public spending without affecting health and education. I am grateful that the shadow Chief Secretary at least agreed that the Government could share in the report when he writes it. It is surely in the interests of the Opposition as well as everyone else that he has adequate time to finish it before the Budget.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I remind the Leader of House that it is important not only to keep hon. Members informed of dramatic developments in Iraq, but to give the House an opportunity to express a view. Does he recall that, last Thursday, I pointed out that the combination of tomorrow's inspectors' report to the Security Council and our absence from this place next week might mean that matters move quickly? I ask him again to consider carefully the timing, in Government time, of a full debate and vote on a sensitive, developing situation, especially the possibility

of extending the time for further inspection or of a pre-emptive strike, with or without United Nations support in the form of another resolution.

Last week, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"there will be an opportunity for the House to consider the matter when we return on the week beginning 24 February if that is necessary."—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 440.]

Many hon. Members found that reassuring. However, the Secretary of State for Defence said in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch),

"I caution him against the insistence on requiring a substantive vote of the House before any military operations are conducted . . . If I may explain: it is obviously vital to retain the element of surprise if military operations become necessary."—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 459.]

Will the Leader of the House give us a cast-iron guarantee that if there is any question of the UK Government supporting a second resolution, making an input into it or taking a different view, supporting American action and putting British troops into the area of hostility, the House will not only be informed but have an opportunity of making a decision? Surely that is the least that a United Kingdom Parliament should ask.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is fair minded and I would not wish anyone to read into my use of the word "informed" anything that suggests that I do not fully understand the importance of the House expressing a view. Any comments that I made in response to the possibility of the House needing to debate the matter in the near future embraces the opportunity and right to express a view. We have always made it plain that we want the House to give its approval, through a substantive motion and a vote, to any action. Should there be a second resolution, I anticipate that we would want to ensure that the House has the opportunity to support it as soon as possible. In return, I ask the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to support any second resolution and its consequences.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend said that it would be inconceivable for British troops to be committed without a vote in the House of Commons. Let me press him on that. Does he accept that many Labour Members believe that going to war using prerogative powers and without a prior vote in the House of Commons to authorise action would be a betrayal and would split the Labour party and finish the Labour Government?

Mr. Cook: Of course, my hon. Friend is perfectly entitled to express his views as frankly and robustly as he wishes. However, he is not entitled to tamper with the views that I expressed. I said that it was inconceivable that any British Government could commit British troops without the support of the House of Commons. That remains the case. We have committed troops on many previous occasions without a substantive vote. I do not imply that we intend to proceed in that way on this occasion, because we do not. We want the full-hearted support of the House of Commons and we want that to be registered in the way that is open to it. I remind my hon. Friend that we held a debate on the previous Security Council resolution, which the House overwhelmingly endorsed. We continue to follow that approach. Should the inspectors' report require a second resolution, we will bring the matter to the House.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On Tuesday, the House of Commons Commission and the Standards and Privileges Committee published their response to the report by the Wicks committee on standards in public life about self-regulation in the House of Commons. I appreciate the many pressing issues that confront the Leader of the House, but will he find time before the Easter recess for a debate on the response?

Mr. Cook: Of course, I am well aware of the report from the Standards and Privileges Committee. I studied it with interest and I fully understand the importance of those matters. I welcome the fact that there was no great contention about our positive response to the Wicks report. Most of its recommendations are welcome and we can respond to all of them. Taken with the report of the House of Commons Commission on the parts that affect it, we have the basis for an important debate. I hope that we can arrange it before Easter and I want the House to make an early decision on those matters.

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly): The Leader of the House knows that, a few weeks ago, an excellent debate was held in Westminster Hall on the role of national Parliaments in the European Union decision-making process. Given that the Convention on the Future of Europe is nearing the end of its work, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the Floor of the House on the role of national Parliaments in EU decision making?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raises an issue about which we shall hear much more in the weeks ahead. It will be some time before the work of the Convention on the Future of Europe is complete and even longer—

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): Good.

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman obviously wants the fullest possible period of reflection on the Convention's work. It will be some time before it is put before an intergovernmental conference for further decision. I am sure that the House will wish to discuss the matter and that there will be opportunities to do that. I welcome the fact that the Convention has provided us with a new innovation in our proceedings—

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): A new innovation?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful for the correction of my pleonasm. The Convention has provided an innovation that is welcomed by hon. Members of all parties. We now have a Committee to which our representative rather than a Minister reports. It may be desirable for it to meet again at some point.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): May we have an early debate on immigration procedures? I ask because my constituency has been devastated by the news that the Government are considering using the HMS Daedalus

[Mr. Peter Viggers]

site in Lee-on-the-Solent as an accommodation centre for about 400 young male immigrants. We had been relying on the Minister for Citizenship and Immigration, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Beverley Hughes), who had said:

"We will be working closely with the local community as we develop our proposals and go through the planning process."

However, the Minister has this morning refused an invitation to attend a public meeting on Saturday or to send an official from the Home Office to explain the position. She is also on record as saying:

"I do believe that an accommodation centre is not a detriment to a local community."

In view of such matters, may we have an urgent debate? I would also suggest that the Minister be replaced by a speak-your-weight machine, because then we might get the truth.

Mr. Cook: I shall overlook that last remark, which was not worthy of an hon. Member of many years standing in this House.

Ministers who apply themselves diligently cannot necessarily be at any particular meeting on a specific date, especially at the short notice to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The Home Office and the Government will want to work closely with the elected representatives of the community and with the local authority to ensure that what is being proposed is fully understood.

We have debated this policy issue on a number of occasions, and there has been broad agreement on both sides of the House that there should be reception and induction centres for those who seek asylum in Britain. I understand that the Conservative party has a policy that all such people should be put in such centres, irrespective of where they have come from or the case that they make for entry. We cannot adopt such a policy—and the Conservatives would make it universal and compulsory—and at the same time object every time a site for a centre is identified.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): On 19 December, in the debate on the Christmas Adjournment, I raised a constituency case about a trading scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), the Parliamentary Secretary to the Privy Council Office, promised to ask the Department of Trade and Industry to respond to my concerns. I am sure that he has done that; however, nothing has emerged from the DTI. My constituent and I have put great pressure on the DTI on this issue, which has been going on for almost three years now. What we are now after is a small deputation to try to sort the matter out.

Mr. Cook: I regret to hear that my hon. Friend has not heard from the DTI. I know that my officials are diligent in pursuing issues that are raised with me during business questions. I assure my hon. Friend that they will pursue this issue as soon as the questions are over.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): May we have a debate on capacity of Britain's jails in relation to the Transport Act 2000? Congestion charges start on Monday and we are all supposed to be able to text our fees to the congestion charging agency. Are you aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I and 800,000 others are receiving error messages? The server has apparently collapsed. If I send my money via a text, I may well be liable to an £80 fine. I will not pay that £80 fine. I will not be present for future debates because I will probably be carted off to jail with another 800,000 people. When may we have a debate on this issue—before I am carted off to prison?

Mr. Cook: In a previous intervention, the hon. Gentleman invited me to visit Lichfield cathedral. It would give me even greater pleasure to visit him in prison.

On the question of electronic communications, I was entertained to see in this morning's press a report of an internal e-mail at the Conservative party, saying that Monday's introduction of the congestion charges would provide

"a golden opportunity to get a few quotes in the papers."

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having anticipated that golden opportunity. However, I hope that one of the quotes in London's local papers will come from a Conservative Green Paper of 1996, which said, in relation to congestion charging,

"Much research . . . has confirmed the Government's view that price signals are a highly efficient way of influencing transport demand."

That Green Paper was introduced by a Conservative Government in which a Minister responsible for transport was the gentleman who is being put forward by the Conservative party as its candidate for mayor. Conservatives should stop playing politics with this and admit that they also contemplated congestion charges.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Given the huge concerns in the country about possible military conflict in Iraq, could some of the business that the Leader of the House has announced for the week after recess be replaced by a debate on that possible conflict? If that is not possible, may we at least have an extended Question Time on the issue, so that some of the scenarios for which military conflict may be ruled in or ruled out would become clearer to the public?

Mr. Cook: We are fully aware of the immense interest in the House in Iraq and in the international events surrounding it. That is why, following business questions, we will hear a further statement on Iraq from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

The business for the week after recess is important. For instance, at last week's business questions, there was demand for a debate on Wales and that is partly why we have included such a debate in that week's business. However, should matters change, and should there be a more pressing requirement for us to address Iraq that week, business is always flexible and that could be done. I do not expect that need to arise, but should it arise we would consider the need for the House to debate such matters.

Mrs. Patsy Calton (Cheadle): Will the Leader of the House explain the legal and historic basis for the royal

prerogative so that my constituents may understand the powers of the Government to commit troops to war without a substantive vote in this House?

Mr. Cook: In British history, troops have repeatedly been committed without a substantive vote in the House of Commons. *[Interruption.]* If my hon. Friends will allow me, I was about to say that, on this occasion, we have already had one substantive vote and it is our intention to have a substantive motion, with a further vote, should the situation require it.

I would say to hon. Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches that, for the past two months, they have pursued the issue of process as the sole issue of concern in relation to Iraq. At some point, they will have to come clean on what they will do if there is a second resolution. They can perpetually ask us what we will do if there is no second resolution, but we are entitled to clarity from them on what they will do if there is.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): The Government have announced their intention to publish within the next two to three weeks the long-awaited energy White Paper. In view of the increasing importance of diversity and security of energy supply—especially in the context of the deteriorating international situation—will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House ensure that a statement is made on the White Paper and that there is an early opportunity to debate it?

Mr. Cook: I understand the considerable interest of the House in energy matters, which have been raised frequently during business questions. I believe that the White Paper will be of fundamental importance to our commitment to international environmental targets. These are matters of great importance and significance and the Government will ensure that they are treated accordingly.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Last week the Deputy Prime Minister announced his intention to allow plans for hundreds of thousands of new houses to be built in the south-east of England. My constituents, not surprisingly, are extremely alarmed. They would like their opinions to be heard in this place. Although I appreciate that this matter cannot take precedence over the security and international matters that have been discussed today, will the Leader of the House please make time—Government time—for a debate on this matter in the near future? A possible title would be "The Concreting of Essex".

Mr. Cook: I am sure that all the hon. Lady's constituents who are seeking a house will have noted that she is opposed to having any more houses in her constituency or locality.

We had a full statement on this issue, followed by lengthy exchanges involving the Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Bercow: But not enough.

Mr. Cook: I agree that one can never have too much of statements from the Deputy Prime Minister. I am sure that he will wish to return in future to keep the House further informed.

It is important that we address what I would have thought all hon. Members from the south-east would acknowledge to be an acute housing shortage that has resulted in sharp rises in house prices. There is a risk that those house prices in the south-east will be beyond the pocket of essential public service workers.

As to concreting over anywhere, I am proud that this Government—ahead of time, thanks to the efforts of the Deputy Prime Minister and others—have hit their target of ensuring that 60 per cent. of new housing is on brownfield sites. We will ensure that we keep a balance.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Given that the House adjourned before 5.45 pm on Tuesday, that it could have adjourned at least an hour earlier yesterday and that this afternoon's debate is on the Adjournment of the House, why does my right hon. Friend find it so difficult to find time for an urgent debate to make true the Prime Minister's statement that decisions whether—not when—to commit British troops are a matter for our Government, our House of Commons and our people?

Mr. Cook: Today's debate is not on the Adjournment, although that is the technical basis on which it will proceed. It will be a debate about education for 14 to 19-year-olds, and I do not think that my hon. Friend should trivialise its great importance to the future of the economy or to the future of our young people. I am very pleased that the Government have introduced new initiatives on the education of 14 to 19-year-olds. I would have thought that she would welcome them and would wish the House to have the opportunity to discuss them fully.

On Iraq, I have made it plain that we have debated the subject before, and we will debate it again. I shall certainly wish to make sure that the House has every opportunity to reach a decision.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does the Leader of the House recall the very large anti-nuclear protest marches of the early 1980s, some of which he may even have supported before he modernised himself? Does he recall that the largest of them, in October 1983, was shown by scientific aerial survey to be only a quarter of the strength of the 400,000 turnout claimed? On the return of the House, may we have a ministerial statement—if necessary a written one—as to what measures will have been adopted to ensure that Saturday's protest is accurately counted so that false claims cannot be made in the way that they are traditionally always claimed for such protest marches?

Mr. Cook: I really think that the time has come to draw the curtain on how many people attended the demonstration in 1983.

As to the forthcoming demonstration on Saturday, it is, of course, part of the tradition of such demonstrations that there should be a variance in the estimates coming from the police and those taking part. I do no not wish to interfere with that tradition.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): Tomorrow marks the 15th anniversary of the start of the P&O seafarers' strike, which started in 1988 and went on until 1999.

[Mr. Gwyn Prosser]

The seafarers were striking in support of safer conditions on cross-channel ferries, and the result was that 2,000 people were sacked simply for taking legal, official industrial action. Will my right hon. Friend find time to debate the plight of the sacked Dover seafarers, who lost their livelihoods, received no compensation and who continue to be blackballed to this day?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for recalling a very worrying period of industrial relations. He is right. Some people will still be suffering to this day because of what happened on that occasion. The Government have introduced legislation to try to make sure that we have fair play for the work force and we continue to make sure that we review it to see what further fresh legislation may be required. I am sure that the matter to which my hon. Friend referred will be of particular significance in his constituency and will, no doubt, be remembered during the anniversary.

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): May we have an early and urgent debate about the cause of free speech, especially because we learned this morning that it is the Labour party—and not the police—that is denying the use of microphones at the anti-war rally in Glasgow on Saturday? Does the Leader of the House not realise that this attempt to silence the views of the overwhelming majority of Scots people does nothing other than undermine the Prime Minister's case? The public see that decision as the worst type of anti-democratic control freakery. Will the Leader of the House now have urgent discussions with his colleagues north of the border and down here to ensure that free speech prevails in Glasgow on Saturday?

Mr. Cook: I am sure that free speech will prevail. The hon. Gentleman raises the question of the ability of megaphone speech to prevail, and the issue at stake is the right of those inside the exhibition centre to hear those who are speaking inside rather than to be drowned out by those speaking outside.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Tomorrow's report by Hans Blix may have as its consequence that the Government and the United States Government think that there has been a material breach. The report would hence be an occasion for war. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that it might be sensible to make plans for an urgent recall of the House next Tuesday?

Mr. Cook: I have said to the House that I will continue to keep under review whether there is a requirement for the House to meet in the event of substantial developments. However, I think that my hon. Friend outlines a timetable that is getting a bit ahead of itself. There will, indeed, be a report from Hans Blix this Friday, but I do not know whether that will precipitate a second resolution. If it does, the nature of the Security Council is such that I am not sure that the resolution would necessarily be concluded in the single week that we are away. We can certainly return to the matter when we come back. As I have said, I will keep the matter under review, but I do not, at present, anticipate a compelling requirement for us to return.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The Leader of House will be aware that, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. Mackay), I have a huge number of constituents who work at Heathrow. I am therefore concerned on their behalf about what happened yesterday. A moment ago in the House, we heard the Home Secretary quite deliberately giving the impression that the questions of the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), were improper. The Home Secretary also sought to give the impression that he had come to the House voluntarily to make a statement and had not been dragged here as a result of the Opposition's request for an urgent question that was granted by Mr. Speaker. The Home Secretary also deliberately ignored every question from any part of the House that made it clear that the mischief yesterday resulted from the fact that we all heard a party official—someone who sits in the Cabinet only because he is chairman of the Labour party—making misleading statements on television and panicking the public. Can we have an urgent debate about the contempt for the House and the misuse of television by Ministers who talk about security when they are not the Cabinet Minister responsible for security?

Mr. Cook: My almost obvious conclusion from that question is that the hon. Gentleman was not called in the previous exchanges.

Mr. Hawkins: I was present as shadow security Minister.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for confirming what I have just said. He did not have an opportunity to make a point on the previous statement, so he has made it now.

I would not be living on the same planet as reality if I were to suggest to my right hon. Friends that, when they appear at a broad-ranging broadcast interview, they should refuse to answer certain questions. I doubt very much whether Jeremy Vine would be terribly impressed if they waved to him a letter from the Leader of the House instructing them not to answer questions on certain issues. Of course, it is in the nature of being a Minister in a Government, who are accountable to the public, that one is asked a range of questions that are not necessarily within one's brief. The comments of my right hon. Friend the Minister without Portfolio have been taken ludicrously out of context.

The evidence is that there was a real risk, and an appropriate response was made. The decisions about what the appropriate response should be were taken by those responsible for operational deployment and they were fully backed by the Home Secretary and others in the Government. That is entirely the right thing to do. However, I deprecate attempts by members of the Opposition to turn this into a party-political argument.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): In the light of the critical report of the rail regulator that was published today and in which he challenges the rail network's costs

and the Strategic Rail Authority's plans to scale down rail investment—including indefinite deferral of the Thameslink 2000 scheme, the cuts in rail freight grants and other serious concerns—will my right hon. Friend make time for a serious debate about the future of the railways? In it, we could discuss, among other things, the desirability of bringing them back into full public ownership.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): That is a good idea. Shall we agree to it now?

Mr. Cook: I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) has at least one supporter in the House. However, I do not advise him to put the issue to a snap vote.

The rail regulator has repeatedly expressed his concern about the mounting costs of carrying through the important renewal of the railway structure. It is important that the rail industry should get costs under control. One of the reasons that we want costs to be brought under control is that there is more investment than at any time in the past decade going into the rail industry. That will continue for the decade of the 10-year plan, at the end of which we will have a better rail industry that is better able to cope with the demands on it. That will take time, but my hon. Friend should not seek to give comfort to the Opposition by suggesting anything other than that record sums are going into the industry, and rightly so.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): Could the Committee on Modernisation undertake an early assessment of the impact that the change of hours is having on the work of Committees? To illustrate that, may I point out what happened in the Scottish Grand Committee yesterday? As a result of the Government timetabling a statement—which was an exercise in reheating yesterday's dinner—and two Divisions, there was little time for Back-Bench contributions to the debate. Indeed, the entire Scottish Conservative group was left with only three minutes in which to put his case. Those who supported the Leader of the House—I am included in that—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Those of us who supported him did not do so on the basis that our views would be cast in stone for the next 200 years.

Mr. Cook: I admire the hon. Gentleman's confidence that his views will be held in stone, or any other form, for the next 200 years. Obviously we will be required to revisit matters that need detailed amendment and adjustment. One of those is the discovery, which I think surprised many members of the Scottish Grand Committee, that the Committee does not have the same Standing Order provision as Westminster Hall to enable the Chairman to prolong a sitting if it is interrupted by a Division. That is a legitimate matter for consideration and we should take account of it.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East): I thank my right hon. Friend for his gracious and tactful reply to my question on sitting hours last week. As he has had a week to sleep on it, has he managed to take 40 winks to consider early-day motion 607?

[That this House regrets the revised sitting hours; notes that the business of the House has been adversely affected; and calls for a review of the arrangements.]

It has been signed by more than 100 colleagues and calls for an urgent review of procedures. Can he tell me how many Members it would take to allow a debate on the new working arrangements?

Mr. Cook: I rather thought that the tact of my reply fully matched the tact of my hon. Friend's question last week. I notice that there are a number of signatures to the early-day motion, although not quite as many as voted against the proposition, which was carried convincingly and comfortably in the House on 29 October.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we please have an urgent debate in Government time on support for enterprise? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that although the Ernst and Young enterprise survey published last month showed that the proportion of entrepreneurs who believe that the Government attach a high priority to entrepreneurship had doubled over the past 12 months, ministerial pride in that fact should be qualified by the reality that the rise is from 1 per cent. of respondents to 2 per cent.?

Mr. Cook: I am encouraged that the trend is in the right direction. We must continue to raise it towards 100 per cent. as fast as possible.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 716 on British participation in a war in Iraq?

[That this House does not believe that British forces should be required to participate in a war against Iraq unless all of the following conditions are met (a) that there is clear evidence that Iraq poses an imminent threat to peace, (b) that there is a substantive motion of this House authorising military action, (c) that there is an express resolution of the Security Council of the United Nations authorising the use of military force against Iraq and (d) that all other policy options have been exhausted.]

Although some names were too late to include on today's printed copy, by last night—in just one and a half days—it had attracted the support of more than 100 Members of Parliament. I suspect that that is just a partial reflection of the grave concern felt by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and probably not just on the Back Benches. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that it would be an appalling denial of basic democracy if we were effectively committed at the UN to pre-emptive war while Parliament was in recess?

Mr. Cook: I understand the continuing interest in Iraq. It may be for the convenience of the Chamber to move on to the forthcoming statement on Iraq so that some of the points can be debated in substance rather than tangentially through me. Although I have the fiercest attachment to the prerogatives and rights of the House of Commons, we cannot tell the Security Council that it cannot debate a matter or take a decision because the British Parliament happens to be in recess for a week. Should any decision be reached in New York, we will, of course, put that to the House at the earliest opportunity. As I said, we stand ready to recall Parliament should that be required, but I do not anticipate that happening at the present time.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): We have just had the regular 10 minutes of questions to the Minister for

[Sandra Gidley]

Women, but their focus is narrow and many submitted questions are transferred. Will the Leader of the House give some thought to supplementing those questions with a regular cross-cutting question session to Ministers in various Departments along the lines of the recently successful questions on youth issues?

Mr. Cook: I entirely agree that the recent experiment in cross-cutting questions on youth issues was a great success. *[Interruption.]* Well, I am sorry that the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) was not there, because it attracted the largest attendance that Westminster Hall has seen.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I was there.

Mr. Cook: Members who attended found it a success. At a time when we are not always held in the highest of regard and esteem outside this place, I was encouraged by the fact that the young people who attended also regarded it as a success and were impressed by it.

On the questions to the Minister for Women, I shall reflect on the comments of the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley). As there is provision for that in the Chamber, it would be more appropriate to continue those arrangements than to transfer them to Westminster Hall. However, I shall convey her enthusiasm to my right hon. Friend to have as many questions as possible and, in particular, not to have questions transferred.

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): May I, too, draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 607 on the change in hours? Does he agree that we would expect working practice changes in, for example, the fire service to be given more than a bare 14 days before firefighters expressed concerns about any problems encountered? Will he counsel hon. Members to have a little more patience with the changes and, dare I say, a little more imagination in resolving the teething problems, which would occur in any organisation that took on such changes?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend expresses herself with great clarity and persuasiveness. Tact suggests that it would be wrong of me to try to improve on such an excellent statement.

Iraq

1.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about Iraq. I thought that it would be helpful, given that the House is in recess next week.

The Security Council will meet in New York tomorrow to hear the latest reports from the executive chairman of UNMOVIC, Dr. Hans Blix, and the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Dr. Mohamed el-Baradei. I will be joining fellow Foreign Ministers for that meeting.

United Nations Security Council resolution 1441, which was agreed three months ago, placed the onus squarely on Iraq to co-operate fully and actively with United Nations inspectors in the disarmament of its weapons of mass destruction. It gave Iraq a final warning: comply with the UN's terms immediately or face "serious consequences." European Union Foreign Ministers expressed clear support for that goal last month when they declared unanimously that

"the resolution gives an unambiguous message that the Iraqi Government has a final opportunity to resolve the crisis peacefully."

It is also worth recalling that at the summit in Prague, NATO Heads of Government—every one of the 19 present—explicitly endorsed resolution 1441. They said that it was a final opportunity and that serious consequences would follow.

Tomorrow's briefing will be the fourth update delivered by Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei. The comprehensive reports that they delivered on 27 January, just over two weeks ago, painted a disturbing picture. Most damning of all was Dr. Blix's observation that Iraq

"appears not to have come to a genuine acceptance...of the disarmament which was demanded of it".

Dr. Blix concluded that the Iraqi declaration submitted on 7 December, in accordance with resolution 1441, was

"mostly a reprint of earlier documents,"

and did not

"contain any new evidence that would eliminate"

unresolved

"questions or reduce their number."

The central premise of Iraq's so-called disclosure—that Iraq possesses no weapons of mass destruction—was, and remains, a lie. Nor was there any admission of Iraq's extensive efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction since the final UNSCOM inspections in December 1998 when it was effectively excluded from Iraq, as the inspectors made clear in their final report to the Security Council in February 1999.

In their update on 27 January, Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei said that Iraq had failed to account for 6,500 bombs, which could carry up to 1,000 tonnes of chemical agent. It had also failed to account for 8,500 litres of biological warfare agent and a large amount of growth media, which could be used to produce about 5,000 litres of concentrated anthrax. They said that the

12 chemical rocket warheads unearthed by UNMOVIC inspectors were potentially, in Dr. Blix's words,

"the tip of a submerged iceberg".

They said that Iraq had failed to disclose the 3,000 pages of documents discovered not in an office but in the grounds of the private home of an Iraqi scientist, relating to the nuclear weapons programme of that country. They said that despite repeated requests from UNMOVIC and the IAEA, in accordance with resolution 1441, all interviews with key Iraqi personnel were being conducted in the intimidating presence of official "minders". They also said that in contravention of United Nations resolutions, Iraq had developed missiles that had been tested at ranges in excess of the 150 km limit specified in UN resolutions.

I remind the House that the British Government drew attention to Iraqi work on such missiles in the dossier that we published last September. We look forward to hearing in detail what Dr. Blix has to say tomorrow, but if media reports are correct, the al-Samoud missile programme is clearly in serious breach of Iraq's obligations. We would expect rapid action to eliminate any such illegal programme.

In drafting resolution 1441, Security Council members took pains to set two clear tests for further material breach by Iraq. In the first operational paragraph, they declared that Iraq

"has been and remains in material breach"

of a score or more of obligations that date back to 1991. That is still the case. As for the two tests, a further material breach would have occurred, first, if Iraq made "false statements" or "omissions" in the declaration that it submitted on 7 December, and secondly, if it failed

"at any time to comply with, and co-operate fully in the implementation"

of resolution 1441. The briefings by Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei, as well as Secretary Powell's presentation to the Security Council last week, leave no doubt that Iraq has failed to meet both tests. The conclusion is therefore inescapable: Iraq is in further material breach of resolution 1441. We shall take full account of the reports of the chief inspectors tomorrow.

The prospect of military action causes obvious anxiety—as it should—here in the United Kingdom, here in the House, among our allies and in the region, and of course among the people of Iraq. I still hope and pray for a peaceful outcome to the crisis, but that will be possible only if we maintain unrelenting pressure on Saddam Hussein, including the threat of force, rather than casting around for excuses to delay. It is only through the pressure we have been exercising that we have got as far as we have in exposing much more of the danger represented by Saddam Hussein's regime, and exposing his lies and deception as well. If the international community lost its nerve now, that would significantly undermine the UN's authority and make the world a much more dangerous place, as dictators got the message that international law consisted of mere words and nothing else.

The Franco-German proposals announced this week to bolster the inspection regime will not deliver the assurance that the world needs about Iraq's weapons. Those proposals, I am sorry to say, are unrealistic and impractical. They shift the burden of proof from Iraq—which is where the Security Council has said it must be—to the inspectors, and they send Saddam the signal that defiance pays. What is the point of sending three times as many inspectors simply for Saddam to deceive them? What purpose is served by that? As Dr. Blix himself said on Monday,

"The principal problem is not the number of inspectors but rather the active co-operation of the Iraqi side, as we have said many times."

Those are the words of the chief inspector, not my words.

If the inspectors were to say that Iraq was actively co-operating, one might see a possible case for more inspectors; but I ask my hon. Friends, as well as Opposition Members, to consider what it is like to inspect anything without the co-operation of the organisation being inspected.

Iraq was found guilty of possession of weapons of mass destruction 12 years ago. The role of inspectors has always been to verify Iraqi compliance—this being based on the premise of Iraqi compliance—and not to engage in a

"game of catch as catch can",

to use Dr. Blix's term.

I am glad to learn that other proposals attributed to the French and German Governments, such as the establishment of a no-fly zone over the whole of Iraq and the insertion of armed blue-helmeted UN troops, have now been officially denied. Had those proposals been implemented, they would have required an even higher degree of co-operation from the Iraqi regime than was required by resolution 1441. The creation of a no-fly zone over the whole of Iraq would have required the complete grounding of the Iraqi air force and its regular inspection to that end, and the insertion of blue-helmeted UN troops in a benign environment would have required all armed troops from Iraq to retreat to barracks. That too would have been the subject of inspection by the United Nations.

Let me now turn to the position in NATO. In mid-January, discussions began in the alliance of the need for contingency planning to cope with possible threats to the security of a NATO ally, Turkey, in the event of military action in respect of Iraq. Sixteen NATO allies, including 14 European nations, supported that entirely reasonable and responsible proposal simply to set in hand some military planning for very limited defensive mutual assistance. France, Belgium and Germany have resisted on the ground that a NATO decision on that very limited mutual assistance would somehow pre-empt any Security Council consideration of Iraq's further material breach. Faced with that deadlock, on 10 February Turkey requested consultations under article 4 of the Washington treaty. The discussions continue, with the United Kingdom fully supporting the efforts of NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson to achieve consensus.

I remind the House again that at the Prague summit, less than three months ago, NATO leaders pledged their full support for resolution 1441.

Given the obvious risks and the possibility that military action may prove necessary, we are keeping under very close review the safety and security of both

[Mr. Jack Straw]

visiting and resident British nationals in the various countries of the middle east. We make assessments on a case-by-case basis for each country in the region, and will make announcements as necessary.

Even at this late stage, armed intervention is not inevitable. A peaceful resolution of the crisis remains in Saddam Hussein's hands. Full Iraqi compliance with the terms of Security Council resolution 1441 will deliver the outcome that the United Kingdom and the entire international community wish to see: an Iraq that no longer poses a threat to its neighbours or to the region. In the absence of full compliance by Saddam Hussein, however, United Nations inspectors will not be able to fulfil their mandate to verify Iraqi disarmament. Resolution 1441 warns Iraq to expect "serious consequences" in that event. By now, even Saddam Hussein must be under no illusions: that can only mean disarmament by force.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): My right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), the shadow Foreign Secretary, is in China, and apologises for not being here today. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and for giving us a copy in advance.

The statement comes at a time when diplomatic relations between the United States and both France and Germany are, to put it mildly, scratchy. Public opinion here suggests that people are losing trust in the Prime Minister, and, crucially, we may be witnessing historic strains on the stability of a number of institutions that we have taken for granted for decades, such as NATO, the European Union and even the United Nations itself. However, we offer the Government our full support in their efforts to enable NATO to send missiles to defend Turkey. While we can understand America's fury at the attitude of France and Germany, we ask the Foreign Secretary to join us in urging our counterparts in Congress not to be drawn into recriminations against them. Whatever their feelings, we surely do not want relations between western democracies to slide into disarray.

The Foreign Secretary has said that we must wait for Dr. Hans Blix's statement to the United Nations tomorrow, and of course he is right. Any decision about Iraq requires an agonisingly difficult moral assessment. Resolution 1441 enshrines a judgment, which we share, that the cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost of doing something. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that if we are on the brink of military conflict, as seems likely, the issue must above all be approached with honesty and clarity? Given that resolution 1441 is fundamentally about Saddam Hussein's arsenal of weapons, and given the doubting mood of public opinion, do not talk of Iraqi links with al-Qaeda and links with terrorism, conflicting comments from Ministers, and the publication of an utterly substandard dossier only divert attention from the main issue and severely dent the Government's credibility?

A fortnight ago, a second UN resolution seemed a dead cert, but now it seems touch and go. The Foreign Secretary made no mention at all of a second resolution in his statement. Is it his intention still to go for one, and if so, when does he expect it to be voted on? If Hans Blix tomorrow reconfirms that Iraq is in material breach of resolution 1441, the Foreign Secretary said that "rapid action" will be taken, apparently, from what he said, by force, but how rapid is rapid? I think the Foreign Secretary and I agree that we respect those who take a principled stand against any military action. We also hope that they respect our shared view that we should not resile from implementing UN resolution 1441. Does the Foreign Secretary not agree that it is impossible to have any respect for a party leader who says that we must wait for Hans Blix, and then announces in advance of tomorrow's statement that he is going to go on the anti-war march on Saturday? After sitting on so many fences at once, it is no wonder that the leader of the Liberal Democrat party finds it so difficult to walk straight.

If Saddam Hussein goes, it is the clear intention of all involved in removing him to replace his regime with a democratic one if at all possible. But is it not a fundamental concept of any democracy that any Government should be accountable for their action to their electorate either directly or through Parliament; and is it not therefore a fundamental right of the British people that any UK military action should be subject to a substantive motion in the House of Commons?

The Secretary of State for International Development has so far refused to reveal any plans she may have for humanitarian aid to Iraq, and in *The Guardian* today she says that there will not be any aid anyway if there is not a second UN resolution. It is therefore doubly worrying that the Foreign Secretary made no reference to a second resolution today. At the very least, will he say what the Government's plans are for humanitarian aid, even if his Cabinet colleague will not? I welcome the news this week that Ariel Sharon has had talks with Abu Ala from the Palestinian Authority. Will the Foreign Secretary once again confirm our shared view that any action in or around the middle east needs to go hand in hand with a revival of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, without which there will never be stability in the wider Arab world?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Of course I understand the absence of his right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Going through the points that the hon. Gentleman made, I accept that it is wise if we want to resolve this matter and ensure the cohesion of those key alliances of which we are members—NATO and the European Union—and, above all, maintain the authority of the United Nations, that we should seek to lower, rather than raise, the temperature of relations with countries with which we have great friendships, both within Europe and across the Atlantic.

On the issue of the dossier, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister dealt with that yesterday. We accept that parts of the document should have been made clearer, but I tell the House and the hon. Gentleman that the document itself was accurate in every particular—the part that was claimed to be from intelligence was from intelligence. As regards the second resolution, the reason why I did not explicitly mention the prospect of one is that we are waiting to hear what Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei say. It is our decision as to whether or not we move a second resolution, and of course one remains in prospect. My view is that, rather than speculate about whether or not we move a second

resolution and about what it says, having heard what Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei said on 27 January, we should wait and see what they say tomorrow, then make our decisions. Subject only to recesses, our decisions will be reported to the House as quickly as possible. I also reinforce the point made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House at business questions—the fact that the Security Council meets at times other than when the House is sitting means that we cannot always ensure that decisions made there coincide exactly with our sittings.

The hon. Gentleman made some interesting remarks about the leader of the Liberal Democrats. It is a matter for the right hon. Gentleman as to whether he goes on this march, but I have read all his statements carefully. The more I read them, the more completely confused I believe he is. For those who believe either that he is against any military action in Iraq or that he believes, as he said on 25 November in the House, that military action can only take place if there is a second resolution, I commend to the House the transcript of his interview on the "Today" programme on 27 January, in which he openly admitted that while a second resolution was his preference—he prayed the Prime Minister and myself in aid of that assertion—he then said that we might have to go without a second resolution—*[Interruption.]* Well, we look forward to further elucidation.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) referred to a substantive resolution. I agree, and always have done. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will acknowledge that we have made a policy of introducing substantive resolutions in the House. That happened on 25 November, when we had a very good debate. There was a clear choice before the House—rather than a choice of whether we went home or not, there was a choice about the policy that we should follow. The Government's policy, which was supported by the Opposition, was backed by a vote of about 450 to 80, which I take to be a mandate on any basis.

As for a substantive resolution on military action, again, we have made it very clear first, that there will be a substantive resolution and, secondly, that it is our earnest intention and hope that that should take place in advance of any military action save in the one circumstance in which we judge that our troops would be put at risk. On such an occasion, the arrangement, as happened with the Conservative Government in January 1991, would take place a few days afterwards. That, too, however, would be very much second best. The overwhelmingly important issue, apart from all the other issues, is that the legitimacy of any action that we take as a British Government should be endorsed by the House, so that if our troops go into any action and place their lives on the line, they do so in the knowledge that they have the support of the British people as represented in the House.

Finally, on the middle east peace process, I entirely endorse what the hon. Gentleman said about the paramountcy of pursuing that process, which is why the Prime Minister and I were determined to go ahead with consultations with the Palestinian Authority notwithstanding the banning by Mr. Sharon of attendance at that meeting. On humanitarian aid, I do not recognise the description of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development. The Department for International Development is already providing millions of pounds to Iraq, and my right hon. Friends the Defence Secretary, the International Development Secretary, the Prime Minister and I had a detailed discussion this morning, as we have done for many weeks, about the nature of further humanitarian assistance and its conditions should military action prove necessary against Iraq.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I start by thanking the Foreign Secretary both for providing prior notice of his statement and for coming to the House in advance of those critical meetings rather than after them. The Government have repeatedly made it clear that the international community can only deal effectively with Iraq if we are united. Does the Foreign Secretary therefore accept the concern that to ignore the vetoes in the Security Council may have serious consequences for that unity and would undermine the Security Council's role? Does he also accept the need to tone down the rhetoric on the part of Government to minimise the damage currently being done in relations with NATO and our EU partners, and with Russia and China? Will he use this opportunity to distance himself clearly from the suggestions being made in America that Germany and France should face economic sanctions or that American troops should be withdrawn from Germany as a result of this week's disagreements?

In his statement, the Foreign Secretary dismissed the French and Russian proposals that were put forward this week. Can he tell the House whether he has sought meetings with the French and the Russians about those proposals, and why he so quickly dismisses the option of further UN inspection and containment?

At the Security Council meeting tomorrow, I hope that Britain will lend its support to the work of the inspectors. If the inspectors believe that with more time, co-operation and space, progress could be made, they should be given more time. Will the Foreign Secretary commit himself to that, and recognise that the vast majority of members of the public who will be marching this weekend support the view, as does the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy, that we should put our faith in the United Nations and allow the inspectors more time?

Finally, may I ask the Foreign Secretary to give a firm commitment that if a UN resolution is tabled next Monday, the House will be recalled on Tuesday for a full debate on that resolution?

Mr. Straw: First, may I say two things about the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), for whom the hon. Gentleman is deputising? I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I say that it is a matter of great pleasure to hear that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is making good progress. I also take the opportunity to record our congratulations to him on having been elected deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats.

The hon. Member for Winchester asked about us ignoring vetoes. We do not want to be in that position. We are asking all members of the Security Council, when they come to assess the report of Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei, to follow through the true meaning of the language to which every single member of the

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Security Council signed up on 8 November. We cannot be in the position where we and other members of the Security Council believe that conclusions following from the true meaning of 1441 are inescapable, but one member, for example, seeks to avoid those conclusions. In the end, the decisions that the British Government make must be a matter for the British Government endorsed by the House, not for another member state.

We want a second resolution if we deem military action to be necessary. That has always been our position, but let it also be clear that 1441 is a sufficient mandate for such military action, because 1441 spells out with complete clarity that there are obligations on Iraq that it must follow through—very straightforward obligations. If Iraq follows them through, there will be—there can be—no military action whatever. If Iraq fails to follow those obligations through, it will be in further material breach, and if it is in further material breach, serious consequences—force—will follow. There was a suggestion in the United Nations when we negotiated 1441 that there had to be written into 1441 a requirement for a second resolution if military force was to take place. That was dropped from the final draft, which is how we ended up with 1441 in its present form.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about discussions with my French and Russian counterparts. We have discussions all the time. I shall be having more discussions with Igor Ivanov and Dominique de Villepin tomorrow. I accept entirely, as I did in response to the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, that we do not want to be involved in recriminations between friendly member states of the United Nations, so we will not get involved in that.

On further United Nations inspections, I said in a speech on Tuesday this week that if the inspectors themselves ask for more resources, of course we will consider that, but we cannot be drawn into the argument from outside the inspectors' ranks, which seeks to imply that, in the absence of co-operation, more inspectors will resolve the matter. They will not. Procrastination is not the solution to the problem; co-operation is.

Alan Howarth (Newport, East): Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that decent and humane instincts cause people to feel revulsion from war? Will he also explain to those who may be thinking about marching for peace on Saturday that there is an accumulation of evidence that indicates the need to deal decisively with the Iraqi regime as an irrational, aggressive, dangerous power in breach of international law, and that deeply desirable as it is that the United Nations should proceed together, if the UN proves unwilling to enforce its own resolutions, those nations that are willing to take responsibility would be justified in undertaking military intervention to disarm Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Straw: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. I do not criticise people who go on this march. That is their democratic right, and I celebrate the fact that they are able to go on the march. I acknowledge that not only they, but people of all political persuasions and none are anxious about military action. We should all be anxious about military action, but most of us recognise that in certain circumstances military action is necessary to save the peace.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that there are many RAF personnel based in my constituency and living there? Quite a few have been deployed to the Gulf already; many are on standby to go. Those brave servicemen and women are prepared to lay down their lives for their country. Surely they deserve nothing less than a totally united alliance and a totally honest Government, who issue no more dodgy dossiers?

Mr. Straw: I have dealt with the latter point. The dossier itself was accurate. On the hon. Gentleman's wider point, yes, I am aware of the important garrisons of RAF personnel in his constituency. We salute their courage. Of course, as I said in my opening remarks, it is extremely important that those people, who are placing their life, their future and that of their family on the line, receive the fullest possible support, not just from this country, but from the wider international community.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Just how will we determine that it is Saddam Hussein and his rotten regime that will face the serious consequences provided for in resolution 1441, and not the Iraqi people generally who suffer the bulk of the destruction? Their conditions have been described poignantly in the House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who spelled out a number of serious humanitarian crises that will arise if an attack takes place.

Mr. Straw: Any military action involves a terrible but necessary calculation that the number of casualties and deaths from that military action should be less than that which would occur without such military action. I say to my hon. Friend that in that calculation we must not only bear in mind the deaths and killings by Saddam Hussein, which will continue into the future unless his vile regime is checked, but draw into that account the fact that Saddam Hussein is already responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslim people in his own territory and in the territory of Iran and Kuwait.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): Does the Foreign Secretary share our concerns about Turkey, particularly in light of the disgraceful decision by France, Germany and Belgium not to fulfil their NATO obligations, and after the pretty shabby treatment that Turkey received from the EU for its application, which was underlined by the racist remarks of the Chairman of the Convention on the Future of Europe, Giscard d'Estaing? May I have an assurance from the Foreign Secretary that he will do everything to underpin Turkey, and that he will tell the Turks that the great majority of people in Europe, in NATO and in this country strongly back their new democracy?

Mr. Straw: The deal that was achieved at the European Union summit in Copenhagen was not a shabby one, but a very acceptable one, which we urged upon Chairman Erdogan and Prime Minister Gul at the time. I accept the wider anxieties expressed by the right

hon. Gentleman. It is somewhat ironic that there is only one member state of NATO that is Muslim, and it is that state whose defence is being denied by three member states of NATO. This is an important matter to weigh in the balance. As for our position, we stand fully behind and in support of Turkey as a most important member of the NATO alliance and as a prospective member of the European Union.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My friend mentioned the September document published by the UK Government, which suggested that Iraq had a fully functioning nuclear programme, but is it not the case that when the weapons inspectors reported on 27 January, they found no evidence at all that Iraq had reactivated its nuclear programme? It is because of the quality of evidence that has been presented by my friend and the Prime Minister that we seem unable to carry public opinion with us. Would it not be an absolute outrage if we went to war without a majority of members of the Labour party, the parliamentary Labour party and the British public endorsing that action?

Mr. Straw: I am sorry to say to my hon. Friend that I simply disagree with him. The evidence in respect of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological weapons and weapons programmes, and its readiness to develop a nuclear weapons programme, is overwhelming. The United Nations itself has said that repeatedly. This is not an assertion of the United Kingdom Government or of the United States; it is the central part of resolution 1441. I know that my hon. Friend subscribes very strongly to the United Nations and places faith in it. The third paragraph of the resolution states that the United Nations recognises

"the threat Iraq's non-compliance with Council resolutions and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles poses to international peace and security."

That is the truth; that is what we are dealing with. It is Iraq that was found guilty 12 years ago and it has to prove its innocence, given the guilt that was plainly found in 1991.

On the nuclear weapons programme, the absence of evidence in a huge country where there are only 100 inspectors does not prove the absence of a programme. What we must then look at is the other circumstantial evidence. We must look at the fact that, in 1991, it turned out that Iraq had a nuclear programme that was so highly developed that it would have been able to launch nuclear weapons within three years.

Mr. Prentice: The evidence?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend says that there is no evidence, but I look forward with interest to hearing what the inspectors say about the 3,000 pages of documents relating, I understand, to a nuclear programme conducted by Iraq. The documents were found not in filing cabinets in an Iraqi Ministry of Defence establishment marked "nuclear weapons programme", but in the private home of an Iraqi scientist. We would have found it odd if that had happened in this country and I believe that my hon. Friend would have found it so too.

Finally, I say to my hon. Friend—I do not believe that he is naïve, but I am anxious to protect him from that charge—that it is also worth bearing in mind the fact that Iraq said for four years that there was no evidence whatever of any biological weapons programme. Saddam Hussein said that it was absolutely untrue that such a programme existed and the inspectors could not find any evidence. As my hon. Friend is not naïve, I know that he would not have stood up and said, "Therefore, the programme does not exist." That would have been very wise, as it took the defection of Saddam Hussein's son-in-law to spill the beans and reveal that Iraq had the most terrifying programme. We know about this man. We know that he is not only a liar, but a man who has amassed terrible weapons to destroy his own people and the region. That is why we have to deal with the situation.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I accept, in general, the evidence that the Foreign Secretary puts forward, but will he accept from me that last week's publication of the dossier, which was substandard at the least, undermined the Government's case, muddied the water and left those of us who broadly support the Government's position somewhat confused about their policy aims? Will the right hon. Gentleman tell me about those aims? He said earlier, "I still hope and pray for a peaceful outcome to the crisis." Can he foresee the achievement of such an outcome while Saddam Hussein is left in power in Baghdad?

Mr. Straw: Yes, and that has always been in prospect. Let us make this clear. It has been anticipated by the United Kingdom Government and by President Bush in an important speech that he made in Cincinnati late last year. I do not think that anybody in the House, on any side of the argument, has any brief for Saddam Hussein, but the objective of resolution 1441 was to secure his disarmament, hopefully by peaceful means. What President Bush said—I endorse these words entirely—is that if there was full and peaceful disarmament by Saddam Hussein, the nature of his regime would change. That is true. In any event, the objective is peaceful disarmament and Saddam Hussein has it in his hands to disarm peacefully and survive. I would not like the latter, but it would be an acceptable consequence of his full compliance with the will of the United Nations. That is why it is absolutely true when we say that he has a real choice. I hope that, even at this late stage, he exercises it.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): I am not a warmonger, and perhaps I should declare an interest: like thousands of others, my son has been called up for active duty. That will be worrying for me and my family, but it will not blur my judgment about difficult decisions that may need to be taken. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if Saddam does not choose the peaceful route—it is still available to him as we speak—we may need to engage in military action, despite the shenanigans of Germany, France and Belgium?

Mr. Straw: I should like to place on record my huge respect for my hon. Friend and above all for his son. Like many other hon. Members, he has somebody in his family who will place their lives on the line if military

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action takes place. It is worth remembering that that is a long and honourable tradition for this country and that the freedoms that we hold dear and take for granted have been protected only as a result of the willingness of British servicemen and women to do what his son is now willing to do.

As for the action that we have to take, we hope and pray that the situation can be resolved peacefully. If it cannot be resolved in that way, we hope and pray for unity in the United Nations and the international community, but in the end, we also have to make our own decisions.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Have not Ministers told us in the past that there should and would be a second resolution of the United Nations? But today the Foreign Secretary tells us that that remains in prospect. Since he likes transcripts, I have a transcript of the Prime Minister's words on "Newsnight" exactly a week ago. The Prime Minister told the studio audience that the only narrow circumstances in which the United Kingdom would proceed to military action outwith a second resolution were those in which there was a majority in the Security Council that was subject to an unreasonable veto. It now seems that even that position has changed. Does the Foreign Secretary realise the hopeless position of going to war in the name of the United Nations without its full authority?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman needs to read the terms of resolution 1441. The full authority of the United Nations is there. We want a second resolution and we have always made that clear. As to whether there will be a second resolution, that remains to be seen.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): May I tell the Secretary of State that his tactics of exaggerating the negative and ignoring the positive in the inspectors' reports fool no one? War based on what we know so far would be totally disproportionate. May I bring him back to the public and the members of his own party? One recent poll showed that 46 per cent. of people in this country would not support a war against Iraq on the basis of what we know now, with or without a second UN resolution. In those circumstances, if he sends our servicemen and women into great dangers without the backing of the country, he will be betraying them and, I also think, disgracing his high office.

Mr. Straw: I do not think that my hon. Friend's comments are justified or worthy of her. I know that she feels strongly about this matter, but others are entitled to take a different view and feel just as strongly. I do my best, as I always have done in this House, accurately to reflect and summarise documents that we are discussing. It is impossible to read the reports of Dr. el-Baradei and Dr. Blix without concluding that they show in terms that I have already quoted that there has not been the active co-operation that was sought by resolution 1441—a lack of co-operation that goes back 12 years. I say to her that no one is exaggerating the problem and no one has invented the fact that Iraq had the programme. Until it proves otherwise—the onus is on it to do so and the evidence suggests the reverse—it looks as though it continues to have the programme. We owe it to our own people, but even more to the people of the region, to eliminate that danger before it is too late.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): What evaluation have the Government made of the latest so-called bin Laden tape? The United States has leapt upon it as proof positive of a link between terrorism and Iraq, but the Foreign Secretary has not even mentioned it today. The British Government seem to be much more circumspect in making this link. Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that there is a substantive link between al-Qaeda and Iraq, or is this an area in which there is some difference between our appreciation of the evidence and that of the United States?

Mr. Straw: The Prime Minister and I have both said on a number of occasions that we have seen no evidence that links al-Qaeda with the Iraqi regime in respect of the events that happened before and on 11 September. I have also added that I would not be surprised if such evidence came forward, but I have seen none. As for other links—again, this has been made clear by the Prime Minister and me—there is some evidence of links between the al-Qaeda organisation and Iraq, in terms of the Iraqi regime allowing a permissive environment for the operation of al-Qaeda operatives, and there is overwhelming evidence of Iraq's active support for terrorist organisations operating in Israel and the occupied territories.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Like every other sane person, I would prefer to have peace, but the prospect of peace at any price frightens me because it probably means war postponed. Is it not the sad truth that the time has come when we must have overwhelming evidence of Saddam Hussein's compliance with the UN? If not, is not the blunt choice that we can either have a controlled, planned and deliberate use of force to disarm him or await the postponed war that will surely come? Such a war would come at the time, and in the place and circumstances, of Saddam Hussein's choosing.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend speaks very wisely on this issue. We will gain nothing by procrastination. Deferring decisions and refusing to face up to the clear evidence will not make this easier to deal with, but very much harder.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Earlier this afternoon, in the other statement, the Home Secretary took issue with my hon. Friends who raised the issue of what has been described as the "dodgy document", and said that it had nothing to do with the threats to Heathrow and elsewhere. Last week, the Prime Minister told us—the Foreign Secretary reiterated this a few minutes ago—that there were clear links between the Iraqi regime and international terrorism. Yesterday, the Prime Minister referred only to the compassionate reasons for dealing with the Iraqi regime, namely to release the Iraqi people from the situation that they are in. Today, the Foreign Secretary's statement has, quite rightly, concentrated on resolution 1441 and the resolutions that have gone before it. Given all this, is it surprising that the British

people are becoming more and more confused by the different messages coming from the Government, and that they do not fully understand the reasons for our being on the verge of entering into a military conflict? It is not that people are wholly opposed to it; they simply do not understand, because they are confused by the messages coming from the Government.

Mr. Straw: I do not accept that. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that the focus of my statement today has been on resolution 1441, because that will be the focus if any action becomes necessary. We cannot, however, exclude other terrible aspects of the Iraqi regime, including its lamentable humanitarian record and the fact that it has supported and continues to support terrorism, in the circumstances that I have already described.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): May I ask my right hon. Friend for a clear statement of principle and intent? If the weapons inspectors report that Iraq is reasonably and fully complying and co-operating with them, and if, as a result of that compliance, matter is found that indicates that the original declaration was misleading, false or—to use the topical term—dodgy, would that be regarded as legitimising war?

Mr. Straw: I will send my hon. and learned Friend a copy of resolution 1441. The test for a further material breach is clearly laid out in operational paragraph 4, and we are subscribing to that.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Foreign Secretary has put before the House today a well argued and well presented assessment for action, but he will realise that many members of the public are still sceptical. Many of them would have liked some real proof from the weapons inspectors. To that end, why was the latest intelligence information presented by Colin Powell to the Security Council—namely, a point at which the mobile germ warfare units replenished their stocks of materials—not made available to the weapons inspectors, so that, as Colin Powell was presenting it to the United Nations, Hans Blix and his inspectors could have found it and linked the assessment to reality?

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand the anxieties of members of the public. I have constituents, as does every other hon. Member, and I make myself fully available to them. I did so last Saturday, when I had a very good and thorough debate in an open-air meeting on Iraq that I organised in the centre of Blackburn. That consultation with my constituents will continue.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): And with your son.

Mr. Straw: That is the essence of democracy, and I fully subscribe to it.

Of course there is no unanimity here, but the public want to hear the arguments in favour of the very difficult decisions that are before the Government and that will, perhaps, be before the House in due course. When they hear the arguments, they are convinced of the need for dealing with the issue in the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) has just spelled out. On the other point that the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) raised, there has been very active co-operation between the intelligence agencies in the United States and the United Kingdom, and the weapons inspectors. I shall not go into detail about that, but there is always a difficult judgment to make about whether any intelligence should be given publicity, because its source could be extinguished immediately. We also had to be very careful, in the initial stages, about the degree of intelligence sharing, to ensure that it was done on a secure basis. It has been there, however, and it continues. I do not believe that either of the chief weapons inspectors has any complaint about the level or degree of intelligence sharing with them.

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I am genuinely saddened at the answer—or non-answer—given to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), because it will only serve to reinforce the public presumption that the Government are seeking a pretext for a war on Iraq, rather than the avoidance of one. I want to ask the Secretary of State a specific question about chemical and biological weapons. On 5 February, in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Secretary Rumsfeld made it clear that America has plans to use what he referred to as "non-lethal" biochemical weapons on Iraqi society. Will the Secretary of State confirm what was admitted in that testimony, and that such weapons are illegal under the chemical and biological weapons conventions? Will he also confirm that the current UK policy is for UK troops not to be involved in any operations involving the use of such weapons? If that is not the case, will he explain why it would be acceptable for such weapons of mass destruction to be used on Iraqi society, if it is unacceptable for them to by used by Iraqi society?

Mr. Straw: I think that my hon. Friend is talking about CS spray, which our own police use.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport): In the Foreign Secretary's statement, we heard the line:

"The central premise of Iraq's so-called disclosure—that Iraq possesses no weapons of mass destruction—was . . . a lie."

Does the Foreign Secretary either know or believe that Saddam Hussein has a working nuclear device?

Mr. Straw: We have not received any evidence to that effect, but we know that he did have working nuclear devices and that he was within three years of being able to launch real nuclear weapons. We also know that the inspectors found—contrary to the disclosure—3,000 pages of documents relating to Iraq's nuclear programme, which were not in the offices of the Iraqi Ministry of Defence but in a private house.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the majority of British people have not been convinced by the Government's case, not because they have lost their nerve or do not take seriously the nature of the Iraqi regime or the problem of proliferation, but because they have not been convinced by the logic that a massive military attack will solve the problem. They see the United States' approach to North Korea and the inclusion of Iran—which is

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currently our ally—in the axis of evil, and they ask questions about double standards. The Government, rather than continuously reiterate the threat from Iraq, should explain to the British people how a massive bombing attack would reduce the risk of terrorism in future. People see—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Foreign Secretary will be able to answer that question.

Mr. Straw: As a matter of fact, I do not accept my hon. Friend's assertion that the British public do not acknowledge the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. Indeed, in the past few months public understanding of the nature of the threat has greatly increased. I accept that public opinion is divided about whether we should back active diplomacy with a credible threat of force and be ready to follow that through. I understand that and I share the anxieties that people have about military action, because it should only ever be a last resort. We must show, as I hope we have, that we are being very patient and following through our obligations under international law by the United Nations route. However, as we know from world history, on occasions it is essential to enforce law by force; otherwise the world becomes extremely dangerous.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): How realistic is it to maintain that Saddam Hussein can be permanently disarmed of his weapons of mass destruction without the removal of his regime?

Mr. Straw: We are following through resolution 1441, which lays out a peaceful pathway for Saddam's regime. I have dealt with the fact that, whether we like it or not, it would still remain in place under the resolution, albeit in very different circumstances. Of course, if that happened, we would need to maintain a continuous presence, with some kind of inspection to ensure continued compliance. However, the fact that we would be willing to accept that is further evidence that we are straining every sinew to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Is it British Government policy not to engage in a pre-emptive strike on Iraq without a second UN resolution to that effect? Would it still remain British Government policy to engage in a pre-emptive strike against Iraq if one or—as seems likely—more than one of the five members of the Security Council veto a second resolution?

Mr. Straw: I have spelled out to my hon. Friend and to the House our great preference for a second resolution, if one proves necessary. However, there has never been the least dubiety that we must reserve our position in the event that a second resolution is not possible. I understand my hon. Friend's anxieties about so-called pre-emption, but the United Nations charter, in article 50 and several other articles in chapter 7, clearly anticipates the use of what is described as "preventative force" to enforce the will of the United Nations.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that one of the reasons why the public are sceptical about the issue is the inherent ambiguity in resolution 1441? The Foreign Secretary today said that the words "serious consequences" could only mean disarmament by force. If that is the only interpretation of that expression, why were the words "disarmament by force" not included in the resolution originally?

Mr. Straw: That would have been better, in a way, but in diplomatic speak the choice was between "all necessary means" and "serious consequences". Everybody in the diplomatic community knows that "serious consequences" means the use of force. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that it would be better if diplomatic speak was more explicit, I agree, but those words mean force.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Many hundreds of my constituents are Iraqi citizens. Can the Foreign Secretary tell the House what consideration the Government have given to the status of those constituents if hostilities break out? He will appreciate that they know better than anyone of the need to disarm Saddam Hussein, because they fled from his regime. It would be a travesty if their lives were disrupted further by this country's engagement in a war against Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Straw: I applaud the courage of many of my hon. Friend's constituents who are Iraqi exiles. Their families may still be at grave risk within the territory of Iraq. This country has a proud humanitarian record and we shall continue to uphold that record in the event of military action against Iraq.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government have been famous for consulting focus groups? A very big focus group will meet on Saturday in London. It is high time the Government concentrated on listening to those voices from rural and urban Britain instead of paying too much attention to that highly motivated clique in Washington.

Mr. Straw: As my hon. Friend knows, I am very much a member of old Labour—*[Interruption.]* I have never consulted a focus group in my life, except the open-air meetings that I hold regularly in the middle of my constituency. I shall continue to do so. We recognise the strength of feeling about the issue and we are listening, but the faith that we have placed in the United Nations system can be sustained only if we do not make the mistakes that the country made before the second world war, when we failed to back that fine diplomatic institution, the League of Nations, with proper means to enforce its will.

Personal Statement

2.47 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make this early response to the report of the Standards and Privileges Committee, which was published this morning, especially in the light of the imminent parliamentary recess and my wish to make my position clear.

I accept unreservedly the Committee's report, which finds me muddled and naive in my negligent understanding of the additional costs allowance. I apologise again unreservedly to you, Mr. Speaker, to the House and to my constituents. I am so very sorry.

BILL PRESENTED

Food Justice Strategies

Alan Simpson, supported by Mr. David Amess, Mr. Don Foster, Dr. Howard Stoate, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. Simon Thomas, Mr. David Drew, Dr. Ian Gibson, John McDonnell, Ms Diane Abbott, Mr. Kelvin Hopkins and Mr. Mike Wood, presented a Bill to require the production and implementation of food justice strategies to eradicate food poverty; to make provision as regards the content of those strategies; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed. [Bill 58].

Education for 14 to 19-year-olds

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

2.49 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. David Miliband): This is an important, timely and, I hope, useful debate. I look forward to contributions from both sides of the House, because education and training for 14 to 19-year-olds needs consensus and common cause, as well as sharp exchanges. The Government recently published their views in response to the consultation on last year's Green Paper, "14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards", which was debated in the House on 21 March 2002. I am pleased to see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor) is here. She made an important speech in that debate, and I look forward to contributions from the Front-Bench teams of the two Opposition parties, the composition of which has remained the same since that debate. They will be pleased to know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) will wind up the debate; I am sure that he will bring his customary élan to that task.

There were 4,000 responses to the Green Paper that was published a year ago, including some from hon. Members. As a result, we have refined some proposals, dropped others, and introduced new ideas to the package. I am grateful to all who have helped fashion the proposals that were published on 21 January. I believe that they represent the foundation of a new and positive approach to 14-to-19 education and training that should command widespread support.

I am encouraged by reactions from the education community, and I thought it noteworthy that Dr. John Dunford, general secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, should say that

"we can look forward to reforms that will be much stronger than those set out in the Green Paper 12 months ago."

That is the purpose of consultation, and I am grateful for the positive and serious submissions that were made.

Today, I want to advance four propositions: first, that our system has strengths, but also the structural weaknesses of a low-status vocational offer and a narrow academic track; secondly, that greater flexibility at 14-plus is necessary over the next few years to promote sustained engagement by those dissatisfied with the current offer at GCSE; thirdly, that in the longer term, structural reform of the curriculum, and of assessment and qualifications, should seek to build a ladder of opportunity for young people, preserving standards and enhancing achievement; and fourthly, that for the immediate future, the Government are making the right choices to ensure safe delivery of this year's A level and AS level exams.

There is much to celebrate in our education system. To celebrate our successes is not a very British thing to do, but I think that we should. Ofsted says that we have the best generation of teachers ever. There have never been so many lessons judged "good" or "excellent". Test and examination results have never been higher. I remind the House that the Government have put their money where their mouth is with the most sustained increases in funding for a century, including in further

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education. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) shouts something about colleges, and in doing so he tempts me to repeat the figures. There will be £1,000 extra for the average school pupil by 2005–06, and an extra £1.2 billion for further education over the same period.

English qualifications are highly valued by higher education and by employers. Advanced level provides intellectual rigour and demanding standards. It is a robust platform for a three-year English university degree course. A levels and AS levels are—to coin a phrase—certainly well worth the paper that they are written on. Vocational qualifications such BTEC, RSA and City and Guilds provide high quality occupational skills and knowledge that are valued by employers.

These strengths should not however disguise the weaknesses that remain. Only half our 16-year-olds achieve five good GCSEs at age 16, and less than half of boys do so. Some 5 per cent. of young people leave school without any GCSEs at all. Participation levels at 17 put us ahead only of Greece, Mexico and Turkey in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development league table of participation rates. One in four of 16-to-18-year-olds had dropped out of education and training at the end of 2000—a rate that is significantly above the OECD and EU averages. Moreover, a young person from a professional background is more than five times as likely to qualify for higher education as one from an unskilled background. So now is the right time to turn our attention to the 14 to 19 phase of education. We have world-class performance in primary schools, key stage 3 reforms are focused on high achievement at age 14, every secondary school is to become a specialist school, and every teacher is to be backed up by high quality support. However, for a high-aspiration, high-achievement system we need reform at 14-plus.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the Minister take this opportunity to deny the story in today's edition of *The Times* by confirming that his proposal for federations of secondary schools will not involve a reduction in parental choice, or a reduction in the exam result information on individual schools that is available to parents?

Mr. Miliband: I am happy to confirm that, but I am tempted to say to the hon. Gentleman not only that he should not believe everything that he reads in the newspapers, but that he should not believe everything that members of his Front Bench tell the newspapers. The proposal for federations of schools is designed to promote collaboration among teachers at local level, which will help to drive school improvement. We want to increase the richness of, and the amount of, data that are provided on school performance. I do not regard the proposal as a threat to either of those things.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the Minister therefore confirm that a federation of schools will not be a single admissions authority?

Mr. Miliband: I am happy to confirm that although we are considering joint governing bodies for federations of schools, we have not proposed that they be single admissions authorities.

I was going to give a short historical discursus on how, for a very long time, politicians have stood at this Dispatch Box and told the House that vocational education is the priority, and that now is the time to sort it out, but given the direction that our debate has taken, I will not go into that.

I shall explain the short-term reforms that we consider necessary, and which were set out in our response to the Green Paper on 21 January. We remain committed to the principle that all young people should experience a broad and balanced education, but we also want to create more flexibility at 14 to 19, so that every young person can choose engaging programmes of study that suit their ability and interest. We need to create this greater flexibility both through releasing time in the curriculum to allow more choice, and through increasing the number and range of subjects that young people can study. To free up time, we are reducing the statutory requirements at key stage 4, so that the compulsory curriculum is reduced to English, maths, science and information and communication technology. Having noted that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) is here, I should also point out that we are seeking to make courses, notably in science, more engaging. Perhaps he will contribute to that subject in due course. It is important to point out that, although we will no longer require every pupil to study modern foreign languages, every school will have to offer them the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Gibb: Is it not odd to remove the compulsion to study a second language and at the same time to propose, as the White Paper does, an international baccalaureate? The French and German baccalaureates both include a compulsory second language.

Mr. Miliband: The hon. Gentleman anticipates a matter that I shall cover later on. We are not proposing to import the international baccalaureate; however, it would be foolish not to look at foreign systems, including the international baccalaureate, and to see what we can learn from them.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): The Green Paper states that

"the international baccalaureate was not designed to meet the needs of a high proportion of young people".

Those who have the ability to profit from a foreign language can therefore do so within that scheme; however, it does not constitute a universal requirement.

Mr. Miliband: That is a helpful point. The international baccalaureate has attractive aspects in terms of its structure and assessment mechanisms, and we want to learn from that. However, wholesale importation is not what we are seeking.

I said earlier that the second leg of our drive to increase flexibility was to make more subjects available. To that end, we have already introduced eight GCSEs in vocational subjects such as engineering and applied science. Early take-up is encouraging across the board, and some two thirds of the young people who are involved in our increased flexibility programme are

taking these new GCSEs. We intend to press forward with more new GCSEs in vocational subjects to promote local choice, not a national blueprint.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I of course applaud the broadening of the available GCSE options, but the Minister will realise that the two subjects that he picks—engineering and applied science—are those that one would expect to be taken by people who are going on to university, or to similar training courses later in life. In fact, the real need vocationally is on the part of those who leave school at 16, and who do not have professional trades to enter. Should not that gap be addressed?

Mr. Miliband: We are trying to address that gap as well. Of course, not everyone who leaves school at 16 wants to remain in education; they may prefer to go on to modern apprenticeships, which I shall discuss later. Such schemes have encouraging take-up rates, but we have concerns about the quality and we want to improve it. The hon. Gentleman's point is that we need a range of options to suit different aptitudes and interests, and that is what we are seeking to provide.

In emphasising choice, it is important that we recognise that a national uniform system will not be the answer: the solution in South Shields will look different from that in Swindon or in Southampton because the nature of our local institutions and labour markets differ. The Government's view is that we should build on local strengths—whether they exist in schools, sixth forms, sixth-form colleges, further education colleges, or local employment—to create a system that gives equal worth to all young people, provides high standards for all, and promotes high quality provision wherever young people study.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The Minister has suggested, rather interestingly, that there will be local provision for local conditions. Does he accept that, if his target is to be met and half this country's young people go to university, many of them will not go to their local university? Is not there a danger of mismatch, in that what is on offer in the Minister's constituency of South Shields, for example, might not be deemed appropriate or suitable to allow a young person to be admitted to a university in another part of the country?

Mr. Miliband: Inadvertently, I may have misled the hon. Gentleman, as I was referring more to where courses might be delivered than to the curriculum that might be on offer. I am grateful to him for giving me the chance to clarify that important point.

I hope that there will be unanimity among hon. Members that policy development needs to be better informed by the experiences and needs of employers. I applaud those companies that are making a success of modern apprenticeships. The most recent figures show that, in July 2002, the programme was supporting the learning of about 220,000 young people in England. We want to promote the programme and raise its quality.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I think that my hon. Friend is to be applauded for his radical approach to the problems that he describes. Only radical solutions will enable us to tackle some of the failures in the system. My hon. Friend mentioned consulting business about the changes, but would not it also be a good thing to consult the young people who are experiencing the system, or who have experienced it, and ask them about the reforms that they would introduce to improve matters?

Mr. Miliband: I am sorry that my hon. Friend is less able to consult young people than he was in his previous role, when he was in a permanent focus group with them, but his point is well made. It is important to involve young people. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South made an enormous effort to ensure that young people were consulted about the Green Paper proposals. It was a model of how Government should be open to young people's views. No doubt my hon. Friend will speak later in the debate, but I think that he would say that young people made a genuine contribution to shaping the proposals. That is a positive thing.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): He is a good man.

Mr. Miliband: The Liberal Democrat spokesman gives my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary a significant commendation. He will be pleased to hear that, but I am sure that he will not be putting it on his election literature.

I can also confirm that the Government are committed to the programme of enterprise learning suggested by Howard Davies, which involves sustained engagement by young people with enterprise and entrepreneurship.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Minister's proper concern about the quality of modern apprenticeships should not be to the exclusion or detriment of their scope. In July last year, the Government understandably set a public service agreement target that, by 2004, 28 per cent. of young people would, by the age of 22, be starting a modern apprenticeship. Is it not a concern that there has been a fall of 36,000, or 20 per cent., in the number of young people on such apprenticeships?

Mr. Miliband: I shall ask my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to reply to the specific statistics cited by the hon. Gentleman, as I do not recognise them from the briefings that I have had.

Mr. Bercow: They are the Department's statistics.

Mr. Miliband: I am sure that they are accurate, and I would never suggest that the hon. Gentleman would use anything other than correct statistics. I am sure that I am not given only the good news in my briefing. To answer the hon. Gentleman's substantive point, of course we must try and push on with quantity as well as equality. The lessons of the current programme must inform the expansion. We must make sure that it is driven by the learning needs of young people.

The Government look forward to the national roll-out of educational maintenance allowances, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and

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Mexborough (Jeff Ennis), in his role as a member of the Select Committee on Education and Skills, has long campaigned. We also look forward to the further development of the Connexions service, which will combine to provide the essential infrastructure of advice and financial support.

These short-term reforms need to be implemented with due vigour, but also with care. Longer-term reforms require proper debate and careful planning. Our aim in the long term is a system that upholds rigour and standards so that those achieving recognition for what they have learned can be clear about its value. However, the system should also promote participation and progression so that it helps fulfil the potential of every young person. That is not a pipe dream. France, the US, Finland and Japan have such a system, and the Scots have a better system than ours. I believe that we can have as good a system as those countries have.

First, all young people must have access to coherent learning programmes. Whatever their chosen paths and aspirations, they should be able to combine sound acquisition of generic skills and knowledge with specialist learning tailored to their own needs and interests. We particularly need to tackle the longstanding weaknesses in vocational programmes. Too many courses and qualifications lack status, clarity and currency in the outside world. We need to strengthen the coherence of vocational programmes in further education, and their partnerships with schools, so that they have a much stronger sense of coherence and progression, and so that they provide a firmer springboard for progress into employment and into further and higher education.

We need also to address the narrowness of some of the programmes followed by our most able young people. Despite the Curriculum 2000 reforms, too many students still follow an over-narrow A-level programme. I have said before that I am struck by the wide-ranging demands of the international baccalaureate—for example, by the 4,000 word essay that is an important part of the assessment—and we need to consider that carefully.

Secondly, we must look at the existing range of assessment arrangements for young people. We must be sure that young people are assessed in ways that match the style and purpose of learning. We need to recognise that all the examinations and assessments that young people undergo should add value to their learning, by helping them to assess their progress, by motivating them and by recognising their achievement. However, we must also recognise the impact on young people and their teachers of the frequency and volume of examinations and assessments.

Ensuring that means looking again at the balance between internal and external assessment, and between one-off examinations and continuous or what the jargon calls portfolio approaches. We must also consider the role of formative assessment, which helps young people to understand their strengths, progress and development needs.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must also look carefully at the number of GCSEs that some of our children take at 16? It is right for them to take a good balance of subjects, but the increasing tendency of schools to present themselves according to the number of children taking as many as 12 or 13 GCSEs has its dangers. That can work against a broader education.

Mr. Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with some authority on these matters, Later, I shall make the case that we should not fall for the old English fallacy that more means worse. In this context, she raises an important point. We want to stretch young people. It is not right that the only way to do that is to do more and more GCSEs.

Chris Grayling: I am listening carefully to the Minister. There is broad agreement that the problem has to do with young people aged 14 to 16 who are not pursuing academic subjects. I am worried that tinkering further with the examination system for those aged 16 to 18, which has not been working badly, is the wrong priority for the Government and for schools.

Mr. Miliband: I shall make it clear later that it is vital that we offer stability and confidence to young people doing A-levels or GCSEs, or who are starting to think about their GCSEs. No Government should ever go in for tinkering for its own sake. However, there is a case for introducing stretch and breadth into the learning programmes of even the most academically able young people. We must try to ensure that the system stretches them to go as far as their talent can take them.

The third aspect, after curriculum and assessment, has to do with qualifications. We must have a long-term qualifications framework that motivates young people to stay in learning, with clear progression routes, whatever their strengths and aspirations. It must be meaningful and credible to higher education, employers and others who use qualifications to make judgements on individuals.

The benefits of a clear ladder of progression to a common qualification or group of qualifications at around 18 or 19 are obvious. Responses to our consultation last year told us that, although most people supported the aims of the matriculation diploma, it risked adding unnecessary complication to the existing system without being radical enough to achieve the degree of change that we should be aiming for.

That is why groups such as the National Association of Headteachers, the Headmasters Conference and the Association of Colleges are increasingly attracted to, and arguing for, what they call an English baccalaureate. Baccalaureate-style qualifications work well in many other countries. They stretch learners, and value a range of achievements. Designed for English circumstances, built on clear commitment to higher standards, such a model could work here.

It would not however be right for the Government to impose those reforms; but I am gratified by the degree of consensus that exists among schools, higher education, colleges and employers. Now is the time to test and refine that emerging consensus. That is why we have appointed the working group on 14 to 19 education and training, chaired by Mike Tomlinson. We have asked

the group to consider, over the next year to 18 months, how to effect longer-term change of 14 to 19 learning, covering curriculum, assessment and qualifications.

Mr. Willis: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the qualification system itself is one of the things that has bedevilled our education system? Our qualification system starts from the top and moves downwards because it is geared primarily to enabling universities to select students in the easiest possible way. Unless we tailor examinations to meet curriculum objectives, we shall simply fall into another trap. How does the Minister square that with what he says about an English baccalaureate? We should simply be creating an examination structure for particular students with the particular objectives of higher education, trade or other vocational avenues.

Mr. Miliband: I respect the hon. Gentleman's views on this as on many other subjects. However, my comments about recognising all achievements in a unified qualifications system cover his point. We should certainly not disparage the need of universities to recognise high achievement; it is important that the qualifications system play that role, but that should not be its only role. Rather than the system being a series of hurdles that weed people out of education and training, I want it genuinely to be a ladder of opportunity that allows them to proceed.

Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): I am interested in what my hon. Friend is saying, but the point that was just put to him is a valid one. Are not many universities moving away from demanding specific grades and adopting a points system? They are asking students to obtain a certain number of points in their A-levels. Does that not show a willingness to consider a wider approach? A credit accumulation system might suit everybody's needs.

Mr. Miliband: My right hon. Friend, too, speaks with much authority on this subject. Universities use a range of techniques and the Government are giving some support for research into the possibility of a credit accumulation system of the sort that she describes.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Miliband: Yes, but this will be the last intervention that I shall take; I do not want to overstay my welcome.

Mr. Chaytor: Is not the beauty of the English baccalaureate concept that it would enable us finally to erode the distinction between the academic and the vocational, if it was based on a credit accumulation and transfer system? Could we not look more closely at the operation of the baccalaureate in France, where rigid divisions between the academic and vocational no longer exist?

Mr. Miliband: I hope that my hon. Friend has the chance to describe the beauty of the new system in a contribution later on. His overall point is well made. I have never understood why in this country we think that vocational qualifications are second class, given that law, medicine or music are all vocations. It is time that we moved beyond that outdated distinction; it is not healthy for the country. Different qualifications should not have a different status. I should like us to move towards general and specialist study, as that would cross the academic and vocational divide.

It would be wrong of me to close my speech without reporting to the House on the reforms being introduced to ensure the safe delivery of examinations this summer. While reform is being considered, stability is essential. For this year's A and AS-level students, for those taking GCSEs and for those who are considering their GCSEs, reform must be long term; it must not destabilise the learning opportunities of young people.

The issues raised by head teachers' representatives and some examiners, in September 2002, about the grading of last year's A and AS-level examinations led to widespread concern about the stability of the A-level system. I repeat my deep regret for the distress that was caused, above all, to young people, but I am pleased by the vigour and efficiency with which the new team at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority—the chief executive, Ken Boston and the chairman, Sir Anthony Greener—are seeking to implement the widely welcomed recommendations of the Tomlinson reviews. They are also following up all outstanding complaints about grading or marking last year.

In consultation with teacher associations, head teacher associations and examination boards, the QCA has now produced simple and clear descriptions for AS and A-Level standards. Furthermore, as recommended by Mr. Tomlinson, the code of practice has been amended significantly. The memorandum of understanding that was recommended is under discussion between the Department and the QCA and will be published in the not too distant future. I can confirm that the QCA is establishing an independent group of experts to report on the maintenance of standards in selected groups of subjects from year to year.

On 3 December, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that we would make available up to an additional £6 million to secure delivery of the 2003 exams. The money will be spent on ensuring that the 2003 examinations are delivered accurately and effectively, with particular attention paid to ensuring that there are sufficient examiners. The examinations taskforce, chaired by the QCA with representatives from the awarding bodies and the teaching profession, will oversee delivery of the examinations.

The Government do not mark exams, but hon. Members should be in no doubt that we in Government are determined to take whatever action is necessary or recommended to improve arrangements for testing and marking so as to ensure the smooth running of public examinations this year and beyond.

Mr. Willis: During the row about A and AS-levels, a major criticism related to the independence of the QCA from the Government. The Minister referred to the memorandum of understanding which was outlined in the quinquennial review, but many of us are still gravely concerned that the Government are too close to the QCA and that unless the authority becomes wholly

[Mr. Willis]

independent we shall not get back the confidence that the system so clearly deserves. Will the Minister think again about that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention must come to a close.

Mr. Miliband: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think I got the drift of the intervention.

The independence of the QCA is absolutely vital in the setting and marking of examinations and in the relationships with awarding bodies. I agree with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) 100 per cent. about that. However, the QCA plays other roles; it is the Government's curriculum adviser, too. Simply to call for the wholesale independence of the QCA does not give due deference to its two roles. When the hon. Gentleman sees the memorandum of understanding, I hope that he will feel that we are doing sufficient justice to the independence required in assessment while recognising the shared interest in curriculum development.

The changes that we are proposing in the 14 to 19 phase are about offering young people greater flexibility to pursue programmes that excite and motivate them. But let us be in no doubt that, to achieve that, we need cultural as well as structural change. We are really talking about greater opportunity and choice, and we have to break the important cultural taboo on the relationship between academic and vocational study that I mentioned earlier and which was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor).

There is a second cultural challenge. As I have said on several occasions, we need to banish the English curse that more means worse—that more choice will mean lower standards and that more achievement means diluted assessment and diluted achievement. Standards are rising, because teaching is getting better and students are working harder. I for one am happy to celebrate that, but I will not rest until we have a system that matches the potential of young people with the opportunities that they deserve. That will take time and it will take ideas, but we are ready for that. I look forward to the views of the House.

3.18 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The debate is welcome, even though, sadly, it has been overshadowed and somewhat curtailed by other events.

We are discussing a crucial phase of young people's education: the possible remodelling of the whole secondary school curriculum, the future of public examinations and much more. It is regrettable that we have only three hours in which to do justice to so much. I hope that we shall have further opportunities in the not too distant future to return to this important subject.

Much in the Green Paper is welcome. We welcome the honest assessment of some of the problems that need to be tackled, some of which the Minister has mentioned today. Nearly half our young people do not achieve five good GSCEs and 61 per cent. do not achieve a good GCSE grade in English, maths and science. Five per cent. of our youngsters emerge from the system with no GCSEs at all. As the Minister knows, that problem is much worse in many of our cities; the figure rises to more than 10 per cent. in Hull, Bristol, Nottingham, Newcastle and Manchester. He and I agree that that situation is not acceptable and that we must work to overcome it.

We very much welcome the attempt to improve vocational education, to regain the interest of those who are disaffected and to improve the skills of our young people. But as the Minister will expect, we also have some concerns and significant differences with the Government over how to approach these matters.

There is a real problem with vocational technical education in this country. It has been a preoccupation of those who make policy for 150 years. The Minister resisted the temptation to give a historical discourse, and I shall resist it as well, but it has long been recognised that we have fallen short in this area. The repeated attempts that Governments have made to tackle it have never been truly successful.

The Learning and Skills Council reported in "Skills in England 2002" a position that is worsening by some measures, stating that nearly a quarter of companies say that there is a skills gap, a measure that was up 7 per cent. on the figure for the year before.

As Ruth Lea, of the Institute of Directors, has written:

"put quite simply, when it comes to overall educational standards and workplace skills the UK is not world class and this damages productivity and economic performance."

She went on:

"We suggested a bipartite system in the UK, comprising an academic pathway (which should be made more rigorous) and a properly developed vocational pathway. (And, no, we do not mean an extension of 'vocational' GCSEs and 'vocational' A-levels that are still quasi-academic)."

This is a route that we hope to explore further. Why cannot England have the kind of excellent specialist technical schools that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) saw in Holland on Monday?

We are worried that the Government may be setting the wrong tone in the way in which they pursue an objective that we share. If they share our objective of strengthening the vocational offer, as the Minister puts it, and achieving higher esteem for technical education, then by setting a costly and unnecessary target of 50 per cent. participation in higher education they are piling financial pressure on to universities and students, when they should be giving more weight to the vital role of the further education sector in bridging a growing skills gap.

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that we should maintain participation at 43 per cent. rather than seek to increase it to at least 50 per cent., is he also suggesting that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not currently going to university can never hope to get there? Or which young people who go currently is he suggesting will not go in future?

Mr. Brady: Absolutely not. What I am suggesting is that entry to university should be based entirely on merit, and that our objective on getting people from less

advantaged background into universities should be based not on messing about with qualifications and the routes they take to get there, or by social engineering in the admissions process of universities, but on improving the performances of schools and ensuring that children come out of schools with the qualifications they need to get into university.

I am strongly opposed to an arbitrary target of 50 per cent., which has no educational or other justification. It has been plucked out of the air. It is causing problems and has no real purpose. We should not set an arbitrary objective for the number of young people going into university. We should allow it to find its own level. The emphasis the Government are giving by stressing the more academic university route runs the danger of pulling attention away from the area where there are real problems in our education sector, the vocational and technical area and the role that the further education sector could perform, which should be expanded.

Chris Grayling: Does my hon. Friend agree that in setting the 50 per cent. target the Government completely failed to explain the connection between that target and the labour market, leaving open the real fear that they are creating university places without knowing what the training will be and what the end product will be in terms of employment?

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I would not want to be pulled too far into a debate on higher education. But there is a danger that pursuing the target for the target's sake will result in an expansion in the number of places, a continuing expansion in the number of young people emerging with ever-increasing levels of debt, and, as my hon. Friend suggests, a disconnection between the needs of the labour market and the qualifications with which young people are emerging. That may mean that those young people do not receive the benefits that Ministers constantly say young people gain from a graduate qualification, because they will not be emerging into highly paid professions. Some will face long periods of unemployment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that modern apprenticeships can lead into higher education, that foundation degrees can lead into higher education, and that the one way in which we undermine the possibility of changing our culture in regard to vocational education is to suggest that we have a sheep and goats approach to our education system? That is why vocational education and training have failed historically.

Mr. Brady: I could not agree more. The Minister is absolutely right: those routes should be ways into higher education and to university. The danger is that if instead all that the Government do is to fix a 50 per cent. target, the target will be to increase the number of places, not to find more people coming in through those routes or through the more traditional A-level routes. That is a mistake.

Mr. Chaytor *rose—*

Mr. Brady: I shall give way once more, before I make progress.

Mr. Chaytor: Would not the hon. Gentleman accept, in respect of his point about raising standards in schools, that if the current trends in performance at both GCSE and A-level continue, the 50 per cent. target will automatically be met over the next seven years?

Mr. Brady: I do not accept that. I shall come to some comments on qualifications. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are very real concerns about the rigour of qualifications. I welcome some of the remarks that the Minister made in opening, because those concerns need to be addressed. We cannot automatically assume that the improvement in exam performance is always a sure indicator of an improvement in standards. As the hon. Gentleman takes a great interest in education, he will know, as I do, that there are universities that are now, for instance, giving remedial coaching in mathematics to students who have A-grades in maths A-level.

Mr. Willis: Name one.

Mr. Brady: I could name one, and it is not that far from the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I shall not do so, but I had that conversation with a professor of computing at a particular university only a few days ago. Hon. Members who take an interest in education know that there are real concerns and that universities and employers are encountering difficulties sometimes with apparently well-qualified students, where the substance of their qualifications does not seem to meet the apparent qualification level. So I do not accept the point that the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) made.

In suggesting that everybody should aim for university, which is not really the right route for everybody, in pursuit of egalitarianism the Government risk falling into the trap of giving a message that is elitist and is focused on the academic.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) *rose—*

Mr. Brady: I shall not give way. I want to make progress.

If we want to increase opportunity, the Government say, ever more people should go to university. If we want to raise the esteem of vocational qualifications, they say, we should call those qualifications "GCSE" or "A-level". That is not the right route for vocational qualifications. It risks a further loss of rigour in our academic qualifications.

Helen Jones *rose—*

Mr. Brady: The hon. Lady, whom I know well and respect, knows that I have given way a good deal. I am happy to give way when more time is available.

I welcome the fact that the Minister indicated that a baccalaureate-type qualification falls very firmly into the category of longer-term possible reforms set out in the Government's response, because it is essential that

[Mr. Brady]

we now focus on restoring the rigour and reliability of our A-levels. The discussion of replacing the whole examination will do nothing to tell people sitting A-levels in the next few years that the exams are fair and credible. A baccalaureate may bring more breadth to the curriculum, but if breadth is at the expense of depth, it is the last thing that we want. We saw a loss of rigour in exams when we moved from O-level and CSEs to GCSE and to modular A and AS-levels. We must not allow that to happen again in moving to baccalaureates from A-levels.

One of our strongest concerns about the impact of Curriculum 2000 and A-levels is that, in all too many cases, the pressure of time put on students at that point in their education removed the opportunity for those in the lower sixth year to engage in other activities, such as sport, drama and music. That is one of the reasons why we have argued for scrapping the AS-level, which was, in any event, introduced so incompetently. AS-levels have not only caused a reduction in the breadth of the educational experience—the Minister raises his eyebrows, but I stress that that experience goes much wider merely than the academic courses of study on offer—but have put in place a round of public examinations in the lower sixth year.

Ms Munn: The hon. Gentleman has obviously not been informed by his Conservative colleagues on the Select Committee on Education and Skills that we could find no witness who would scrap AS-levels.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Lady should try harder. I am sure that, if she were to follow the Under-Secretary's example of talking to young people, she would find many people who deeply regret the experience of the implementation of Curriculum 2000 and the damage that it caused.

Putting in place an extra round of exams in the lower sixth year has led to young people being over-examined, and we also saw the confusion about the proportion of marks accounted for by the AS-level modules—modules were accorded 50 per cent. of the marks when they merited only 40 per cent. of them. That was one of the main factors that led to last summer's A-level fiasco. If, as the Government's response says, our first priority is to ensure the smooth running of A-levels this year and beyond and if the Government are serious about restoring the credibility of A-levels, they should look again at withdrawing AS-levels.

We welcome the idea of some children spending a significant amount of the post-14 education learning in the workplace, but, again, we have some real concerns; we welcome it only if they have a high-quality learning experience. That proposal was first mentioned some time ago by the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett). He was then talking about a fairly small percentage of children—the disaffected and disengaged, persistent truants and those who cannot be kept engaged in the traditional educational route—but the proposal has now grown into a major plank of the Government's policies for 14 to 19- year-olds.

That initiative gives rise to some serious worries. First, quality may suffer; kids must not make the tea for the local employer. I know that the Minister does not want that to happen—it is not what we want to happen—but I hope that he will recognise that, in trying to offer such a massive provision of workplace training for children throughout the country, there is a danger that quality may not always be maintained. Secondly, there is a concern that sufficient priority will not be attached to guidance. If children are to be channelled into vocational routes at 14, we must ensure that they are the right ones. As the Guidance Council says,

"the delivery of a universal service by qualified Personal Advisers with career guidance skills needs to be a reality for all young people, not just those at risk of dropping out."

The Minister will be aware that serious concerns are being expressed about the way in which the Connexions service is being implemented; the focus is too much on those who may drop out, although many others need the guidance and support that ought to be made available.

The Guidance Council goes on to pose some questions to the Government:

"How will the quality of"—

careers education and guidance—

"provision across all schools, colleges and work-based learning be guaranteed, in the absence of a statutory framework for careers education and guidance? Will it guarantee entitlement to one to one support from a qualified Personal Adviser with career guidance skills for all young people, to enable them to make the best possible choices from the expanded curriculum?"

[Interruption.] I am glad that the Minister seems to have a copy of that briefing note, so I hope that he has prepared some good answers.

How will the Government monitor consistently high quality in the development of individual learning plans at the start of key stage 4, when crucial decisions need to be made? How will the development of initial teacher training and leadership programmes reflect the need for tutors and other staff to play an enhanced role in the career planning and review process? The Government's plans put far greater emphasis on the need for good guidance for young people. If there is more flexibility, there will be a greater diversity of routes from the age of 14. We have to ensure that young people take those choices and make those decisions with the proper guidance and support.

We also welcome the proposed greater flexibility in the curricula, but that, too, gives rise to concerns. One of our most serious worries relates to what the future will hold for language teaching in our schools. We are prepared to accept that the compulsory teaching of a modern foreign language up to 16 is not appropriate for everyone, but we are worried that language teaching beyond 14 will decline under the Government's proposals before adequate provision is in place to fulfil their pledge that all school children at key stage 2 will have the opportunity to study a modern foreign language by 2010. The Minister believes that that will be achieved with the help of an army of language assistants, but he told me in a written answer on 21 January that in our 25,000 schools we have only 29.5 full-time-equivalent language assistants. We wish him well with his pledge, but at present it looks very much like pie in the sky. Even if he meets his target, we will be replacing compulsory languages post-14 with optional languages in junior school. The Government risk leaving the next generation even less able in foreign languages than those generations that have gone before. It also seems odd,

I might add, that citizenship classes will be compulsory, but the study of history, geography and languages will not.

We have one overriding concern—that schools that have coped with a state of constant change and reform over 15 years or more are now to be faced with yet another upheaval: more uncertainty, more curriculum changes and more changes in the exam system. Schools that have worked hard to accommodate the birth of the GCSE, the national curriculum, local management of schools and curriculum 2000—the latter being unfunded and, sadly, bungled—are now to take on a whole new 14 to 19 approach, the funding and direction of which will itself be split between the local education authority, which will, at least for now, pass on funding for 14-to-16 provision, with the Learning and Skills Council funding 16-to-19 provision. I should be interested to hear further comment from the Minister as to whether that will be the long-term picture, or whether he envisages that the role of the learning and skills councils will expand towards the start of the 14-to-19 phase of education.

All this comes at a time when teachers and heads in even the best schools are struggling with ministerial red tape and interference. As the head of an outstanding local school in my constituency told me on Friday,

"I have no problem with accountability but it has now gone far beyond that; the amount of red tape is forcing me to devote all my time to management where I should be concentrating on leadership."

I hope that the Minister will take on board the fact that if these changes are to succeed, it will be because of strong leadership in schools, not micro-management by the Department for Education and Skills.

In conclusion, we welcome the Green Paper and the debate that it invites, but urge the Government to proceed with caution and to look for quality in vocational and academic education. If they proceed with the haste that accompanied the introduction of AS-levels, the education of a generation will suffer.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind all hon. Members that Mr. Speaker has imposed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

3.38 pm

Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): I intend to be brief, and therefore shall not take up all the points that I would wish from the speech by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady). I must say, however, that I completely reject his contention that there is a lack of rigour in the examination and assessment structure and, by implication, that today's youngsters are not as well qualified as they appear to be. I believe that we have the best qualified youngsters coming up through the education system that we have ever had, and that our responsibility is to try to build on that and to improve it for the future. If I agree with him on one thing, it is his concern about foreign language teaching and the pace of change, which I hope Ministers will keep in mind throughout the next few years.

I agree with the basic analysis presented by my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards. He is right that structural weaknesses remain in the education system, especially in relation to the low status of vocational education and the narrowness of academic education. That has been a problem for many years, and we must address it. I am glad that we are having a grown-up discussion about what should happen post-14, because it is important to tackle that problem now.

In such a short debate and with such a brief time in which to contribute, I simply want to mention three aspects of post-14 education and use my constituency experience to try to give a flavour of the necessary changes. I welcome the changes to the GCSE—for example, the ability of young people in future to do a GCSE in engineering. It is good to increase the range, although doing that is not problem free.

It is difficult to attract the right teachers for engineering. However, the teachers are there if we can lure them back, and perhaps the greater problem is getting the right facilities. Many further education colleges opted out of subjects such as engineering after their incorporation because of high overheads. If we are to encourage schools to provide a more adventurous range of GCSEs, we must deal with such problems and help them to have the quality facilities as well as the quality teaching that they need.

There is much scope for co-operation between schools on the post-14 curriculum. That has not happened in the past, and it has become more difficult, especially during the time when schools were almost asked to compete for grant-maintained status. We can redevelop some co-operation and use the fact that not all schools will be able to offer the same range of GCSEs to get them to work together more closely.

In Dewsbury, we mainly have high schools for 11 to 16-year-olds. Some have specialist status and others have beacon status. They all have different strengths and they are not a million miles apart. For vocational GCSEs—I appreciate that we are not to use the term, but I am trying to convey the concept—some schools could specialise in specific subjects and co-ordinate their timetables. For example, pupils from Thornhill high school in my patch could go to Earlsheaton high school for engineering lessons. Wednesday afternoons could be designated for switching schools. Some imaginative thinking would benefit everybody. I volunteer Dewsbury for any pilots that the Minister deems appropriate to test that further.

We need to ensure that we have quality post-16 provision throughout the country. It must be provided where people want it. I welcome the fact that more youngsters are doing AS-levels and I reject the comments of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West about those qualifications. I welcome the fact that more youngsters go on to study A-levels.

However, in Dewsbury, almost all our academically minded youngsters are exported for post-16 education. As I said, our schools are mainly for 11 to 16-year-olds. There are extremely good sixth form colleges in neighbouring towns, especially Greenhead college and New college in Huddersfield. There are also good colleges in Leeds and Wakefield. Although Dewsbury has one school that caters for 11 to 18-year-olds, the town does not have quality AS-level and A-level provision. It is wrong that youngsters have to travel outside their area for such education.

[Ann Taylor]

Dewsbury college is good at what it does. It offers a wide and increasing range of courses, but it deals with part-time and mature students in particular. Not many 16-year-olds who want to do AS-levels and A-levels go to that college for the limited number of courses on offer. We could build on co-operation between institutions. My ideal solution—which I think could also work elsewhere—would be to have a new sixth form college working in collaboration with existing high schools. Somebody from those high schools could be on the governing body of the sixth form college, and staff could be shared because not every school has every speciality. Such a solution could enhance the education on offer to 16-year-olds. We have to consider this urgently, because the number of 16-year-olds who get five or more good GCSEs and want to stay on in education will increase. We have an opportunity to provide better education and to consolidate the co-operation that should exist, and will increasingly exist, between schools. Again, if the Minister is looking for areas for pilot studies, I volunteer mine.

My third point touches on something that the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West said, but also on other issues. The hon. Gentleman talked about vocational routes as if they were rigid—once people were on such a route, they were on that and nothing else and could never get off. Some people are concerned that, if we are not careful, we may—despite having ended the 11-plus—be introducing the 14-plus. Nobody wants that; nobody wants a sudden divide into one route or the other at age 14. It is very important indeed to get the structure of qualifications right.

Hon. Members have mentioned an English baccalaureate and one or two hon. Members have mentioned credit accumulation. I remind my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards of a Labour party document of many years ago entitled "Opening doors to a learning society". That document said that credits for GCSEs, BTECs or GNVQs could build into one overarching qualification that could become an English baccalaureate, although perhaps under another name. We have to incorporate that concept into our education system. I urge my hon. Friends to treat this issue, which has been around for a long time, as urgent.

This is an exciting time in education for this age range. They are impatient for more opportunities and the time is right for us to push the boat out and be more adventurous. We should do so not to create turmoil but to create greater and better opportunities for youngsters who are achieving but could achieve even more in future.

3.47 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor). She makes a powerful case for what is a fundamental philosophy of Liberal Democrats—that of decisions being taken locally rather than at the centre. Her former colleague Baroness Williams of Crosby, in a discussion that I had with her last week, made exactly the same comments about Labour's past policy documents on credit accumulation. It is nice to see that some people remain faithful to their beliefs, even though they may have moved about the House.

We welcome the strategy paper on education for 14 to 19-year-olds and we thank the Minister for making time for a debate. We are not often given the chance to debate policy papers, and it is important that we debate this one. We also broadly welcome the thrust of the proposals. Anyone reading through the document and the Green Paper would find it hard to disagree with the stark analysis of system failure going back not just a few years but many decades.

We are pleased that the Government are prepared to take a measured approach to their proposals for system reform, especially on qualifications structures. Despite the rather sad comments of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), it is clear in the document that there is to be a measured approach to many issues. A knee-jerk reaction to a new qualifications structure would be absolutely disastrous for young people who are just starting year 10.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: Of course, I would be more than excited to.

Mr. Brady: Has the hon. Gentleman not just said exactly what I said?

Mr. Willis: With respect, that is not what I heard. Perhaps I should be terribly disappointed.

Despite the fact that some things need to be taken slowly, we cannot simply allow them to go on as they are at the moment. There has been a lack of progress over many years. I spent most of my professional life working with the sort of youngsters for whom the Green Paper and reports such as "Bridging the Gap" and Helena Kennedy's wonderful "Learning Works" raised expectations and hope. The Minister provided his expertise to the social exclusion unit for many years. At least, he certainly offered his advice when he had a more important job as a political adviser.

"Bridging the Gap" identified the fact that, in 1988, 170,000 16 to 19-year-olds were not in work or training of any sort. Another 280,000 were in work but received no training. Most of them had no skills. That is a damning indictment of the system but, five years after the report was published, we are in exactly the same boat. Doing nothing for the next five years is therefore not an option.

In 1988, we created a post-grammarian curriculum for all. I am not overly-critical of what happened then and in the Education Reform Act 1988. The post-grammarian curriculum has been a real success. The fact that in 1988, 35 per cent. of young people got the equivalent of five good GCSEs and that the figure is more than 50 per cent. today is testimony to what has happened since then. It is also testimony to the success of the comprehensive system, which has delivered those results.

That curriculum approach coincided with the decline of craft, practical and laboratory work in schools. Such work was squeezed by the curriculum. Furthermore, between 1988 and 1997, we saw virtually the end of apprenticeships in the workplace and the end of most industrial-based training schemes. All that has come home to haunt us.

Since 1988, the temptation has been to have a more academic education for all that is intended to serve individual and societal needs. The obsession with GCSEs, performance tables and competition between schools and colleges was the hallmark of the previous Government, but it has severely distorted the education market for 14 to 19-year-olds.

Mr. Boswell: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that, in 1986 and the following years, we introduced a comprehensive system of national vocational qualifications for the first time and that, from 1992 onwards, we introduced a comprehensive structure of GNVQs? The system was not without its faults, but it was at least a sign of our commitment.

Mr. Willis: The hon. Gentleman has always been committed to this issue, and I particularly commend the 1992 reforms. The introduction of GNVQs led to a reversal of trends in schools. Unfortunately, however, the academic curriculum has dominated schools since 1988, and that is causing major problems today. It has had two effects.

The first effect is the massive skills shortage in the workplace, for which we must all take some responsibility. The second, and more important, effect is that the education system has significantly failed a large number of young people, especially in terms of the curriculum that it has delivered. When I think about the problems with young people—the antisocial behaviour and disaffection, the exclusions from school and the creation of an underclass—it is clear that we cannot simply ignore what has gone on in our schools and the fact that the curriculum has not engaged them. It is important that we start to address that problem.

I was just starting my teaching career back in 1963 when Newsom's "Half our Future" was published. Many hon. Members will have read that report and no doubt remember it. Newsom made the same analysis of the situation as the Minister made today: his response was to divide people into sheep and goats. He said that for 50 per cent. of our young people, the secondary system was doing well—hence the title "Half our Future"—but that the other half needed a different approach. We have still not made the necessary progress.

I was disappointed by some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West. I am delighted that he has been to Holland yet again. I do not know what he does in that country, but Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen seem to have a real affection for its attractions.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): The hon. Gentleman likes tulips.

Mr. Willis: The hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) is trying to distract me, but it will not work.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West mentioned modern language teaching. The Minister is right to say that it should be optional at key stage 4. However, he is fundamentally wrong not to make it a compulsory component of key stage 2 because only those schools in relatively middle class areas will offer modern languages to their children. That will put other areas at a greater disadvantage, especially in some of our inner cities where the basics of a modern language are important.

I was disappointed by the Tory response and the comments of the leader of their party. I suppose they can say what they like because they will never be in government. *[Interruption.]* Well, we are optimistic about our chances. Tory rhetoric reflects a pursuit of elitism—the very thing that has bedevilled our education system. If hon. Members read the debate in 1944 when Butler introduced the tripartite system, they will see that Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen are describing the same situation today. Perhaps that is a move forward from free schools, but it is hardly an agenda for the 21st century.

Chris Grayling: I am intrigued that the hon. Gentleman argues that Conservative policies are elitist when he advocates the downgrading, or possibly even the scrapping, of GCSEs, which risks creating the old two-tier structure between AS-levels and GCSEs that we once had between O-levels and CSEs. It is his policy that is elitist.

Mr. Willis: I am terribly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking such an interest in our policy. Unfortunately, he is wrong. I have a great deal of respect for him, however, and he does not usually make party political comments.

We will never reform the 14-to-19 agenda unless the individual, rather than institutions, is put at the heart of those reforms. We can never satisfy the needs of individuals unless institutions offer a comprehensive menu of options from which students can choose, as the right hon. Member for Dewsbury said earlier.

Despite the changing focus that the Department's strategy signals, core issues remain unaddressed. I hope that the Minister will consider those issues following the debate, and that the Under-Secretary will refer to them when he winds up. The issue of independent advice and the Connexions service is very important. At present, the only students receiving such advice are those who will not acquire five good GCSEs. All our youngsters need advice. Moreover, it is not good enough to provide it when they are 14. We must start engaging much earlier with students who, at 14, will be choosing courses that will affect not just their key stage 4 but their 14-to-19 progress. I think that throughout key stage 3 they should be introduced to the idea of what constitutes the world of work, and receive proper guidance.

Unless we can break free of institutionally dominated advice, we shall not give young people the service that they require. At present schools and colleges, especially schools, have a financial incentive to keep youngsters on the programmes that they can offer. That is fundamentally wrong: young people themselves must be at the heart of the agenda. It is tough for schools now. When I was a head teacher, it was much easier to create a menu and say, "Kids, you must choose". Looking back, I think we did them a great disservice.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West mentioned the division between the Learning and Skills Council and local education authorities. He was right to do so, but he did so for the wrong reasons. Of course we

[Mr. Willis]

must find a solution to the funding problem. The present situation is farcical: if someone between 14 and 16 wants to do some work in a college, there is confusion over whether the LSC should pay by means of a special grant, whether the LEA should pay, or whether devolved funding should be involved. We want a single funding stream for more than one reason, however, be it LEAs or the LSC—although we must have a proper grown-up debate about that, and not just hide behind traditional loyalties. If we are truly committed to taking a new look at vocational education, we must bring employers in. We must not assume that only schools and colleges can deliver education and training; places of employment can do that as well.

The Minister seems to be shying away from the subject of 14-to-16s and employers, who are hardly mentioned in the document. We should be giving employers incentives to deliver part of the curriculum in the workplace. They should have access to resources in the same way as schools and colleges.

Chris Grayling: I am intrigued by what the hon. Gentleman said about finance. Has he considered the possibility of a voucher scheme, which might provide the interchangeability for which he is arguing?

Mr. Willis: No. I am always happy to consider these issues, however. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman, who is so obsessed with the way voucher systems work in America, should go to Cleveland and Milwaukee and see the disastrous effects of introducing a voucher system throughout an authority. I merely suggest that he could do that rather than going to Holland.

One of the key groups whom the proposals need to target consists of young people who drop out of our system at 14—the 9 per cent. who leave school without any qualifications at all. If we are to engage them we have to offer something significantly different from 14 onwards. It is important to involve employers but, to return to the point made by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), the real difference will be in the curriculum. We are pleased that the Government have rightly dropped the ludicrous division between vocational GCSEs and vocational A-levels. We have no objection to the widening of the GCSEs or A-levels on offer to include more practical or vocational courses, but we should not pretend that that constitutes the provision of a vocational education curriculum, because it does not. I hope that the Minister will reject the absurd proposition that more students pursuing vocational GCSE studies will result in far greater number of students achieving the five A* benchmark, as that can only be achieved by dumbing down the quality of GCSE studies, which no one in the House wants.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman has just made an important point about vocational GCSEs. Does he agree that the introduction of GCSEs or vocational courses alone will not tackle disaffection?

Mr. Willis: Of course it will not. We need to offer young people a plethora of opportunities. If the reforms simply keep everyone inside a GCSE framework they will fail miserably. On the 16-plus barrier, if the reforms continue to provide a 10 GCSE diet for all, because that is how schools can perform well in the league table, we will fail. In the White Paper, the Minister contradicts himself by saying that he wants to slim down the courses on offer to a core of English, maths, science and IT but, at the same time, he wants to keep league tables, success in which depends on doing at least five GCSEs and a few more to make sure that five are passed. Schools will continue to compete on their league table ratings and the GCSEs that they offer instead of trying to offer young people what they need.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) is right. I recently visited a Sara Lee factory in Slough that has taken a group of disaffected youngsters out of school for team building. Those young people have since dramatically re-engaged with education. The huge success that Skillsforce and the Ministry of Defence have jointly achieved in co-operation with the Department shows how young people who would otherwise not be engaged can be engaged. Unless we abandon the nonsense of every student having to do GCSEs when they are 16 and schools having to compete in league tables, the reforms are not worth the paper they are written on, as they will sadly create by default a two-tier system with the kids who can going on to do one thing and the kids who cannot going on to do something else.

This is an interesting debate, and hon. Members will wish to make other points. We have a short period in which to engage our young people. There is great support for the Government reforms. Five years ago, I said that we had all the evidence that we needed to make changes, but we did nothing. In five years' time, if we have not moved forward, everyone in the House will have failed.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been informed by some Iraqis who live in this country that relatives in Baghdad have just contacted them, saying that the weapons inspectors are preparing to move out. Given the statement by the Secretary of State today, which seemed to some of us very warlike indeed, and given that Hans Blix reports back tomorrow on the inspections, would it be possible to get a Minister to the House to confirm or deny the rumours that are circulating?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members are aware that the Foreign Secretary was in the House just over an hour ago to make a statement on Iraq. I have had no indication that any further statements will be made today.

4.10 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I associate myself with the point of order. The issue is serious and puts our debate in perspective.

I am heartened that we have having the debate, nevertheless. For some time, I have thought that science education in this country could do better. I am pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Minister say that the Government are addressing the problem. The need for that has been obvious to me as a chairman of governors at various schools in the Norwich area, and from informal discussions with teachers, technicians and

students in my constituency, as well as from the report of the Science and Technology Committee, which rigorously examined science and technology education for 14 to 19-year-olds. I see that two of my colleagues on the Committee who participated in that report—the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter)—are present. We toured the country, talking to young people about their thoughts on the matter, so the issues that I am about to raise come from the grass roots.

It was clear that teachers were extremely frustrated with science teaching, technicians were demotivated, and students were bored to death. No wonder: the curriculum is far too prescriptive, the assessment is quite inflexible, and resources are lacking. The Government have recognised that all is not rosy in the world of science education, but I wonder whether they know what to do about it. We have had a ragbag of initiatives recently—a science year, Planet Science, a key stage 3 strategy, an applied science GCSE, science and engineering ambassadors, new professional development initiatives, one-off investment in science labs, a consultation on the roles of support staff, and a pilot of a new science GCSE. What is the strategy behind all these initiatives, where are they leading and where do we aim to be?

For all that, we produce some very bright young people who go into higher education, win Nobel prizes and succeed in developing great new ideas, which contribute significantly to the world of science and technology. My remarks may seem critical, but they are intended to show that we can do better if we sort out some of the problems at the grass roots.

My hon. Friend the Minister appeared before the Committee and participated in a debate there which made an Arsenal-Tottenham derby look like a vicar's tea party. I hear my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead laughing. When we asked about the Government's ideas about science teaching for young people, the answer was that we just have to give them the facts and everything will be all right. We said that about history some time ago, and history teaching has moved on quite a bit in the past 30 years.

Science is not about knowing facts. It is not about answering Jeremy Paxman's "University Challenge" questions on science, although I am very tempted to join the team so that I can be extremely brilliant and give all the answers about Ohm's law and equations. But that is not what science is about. It is just one peripheral aspect of science. Science is more properly about engaging in experimentation, getting the facts and knowing what questions to ask.

Science is a key part of our culture in this country. As Front Benchers on both sides of the House have pointed out, it is essential for our economic competitiveness and quality of life and it is part of our history and culture. It is just as important as Booker prizes, Nobel prizes and all the other prizes that demonstrate excellence in this country.

The problem is that we must consider other aspects of science teaching. It is essential that people be literate about science. There are no issues of more importance on today's front pages than genetically modified crops, triple MMRs—measles, mumps and rubella vaccines—and nuclear power. I do not want people to understand all the equations, but I want them to have some sort of understanding so that they can engage with the questions that are raised. I do not want them to react in an emotive way because *The Sun* and *The Mirror* tell them what the questions should be. They should have some sort of confidence and understanding. When we talk about public understanding of science, it often involves an arrogance about science and technologies on the part of those who say, "If only the public understood our language and what we are talking about, it would be all right." Those days are long past. I am talking about engaging at a level at which we can talk to each other and in a language that allows us to put the facts in front of the people and say "This is what we think is happening; we are not quite sure, but this is how it might develop."

When the space disaster occurred the other week, I was struck by all the science involved and how all the wonderful work that is done can go down in the public's estimation because of such a tragic event. The work must go on and we must engage people's brains throughout the world in ensuring that we make progress for humanity. That is not just about learning facts.

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I very much enjoyed my time working on the Select Committee on Science and Technology. One of the messages that I got from our discussions with teachers and pupils—he may be aware of this issue—was that our fact-driven approach to science teaching reduced the time that was available to debate the issues and gain an understanding that did not necessarily include every scientific issue, but enabled people to talk about such issues sensibly and rationally.

Dr. Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. What he says is absolutely true. The young people to whom we talked said that they were put off when the headline news was all about issues such as GM and human cloning, but they could not talk about them. Instead, the teacher said, "There's no time; we must get on with the curriculum and pass exams" and so on. What a tragedy that is. Is it any wonder that that approach puts young people off carrying on and developing their ideas? Their being put off does not mean that they are not interested. Young women in particular were put off by such an approach. On asking young people what experiments they liked doing best, one saw that they did not want to cut up buttercups. We have all cut up buttercups in our time; it is dreadfully boring. Instead, they wanted to cut up a heart. They wanted to see how their bodies functioned and so on. I understand that. There are many hearts that I would like to cut up—*[Laughter.]* But that is for another time.

One of the other problems is the demands of the examination syllabuses. The awarding bodies say that they are constrained by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's requirements. The QCA says that it must safeguard standards. A great deal of buck-passing goes on in this area. Where will all the impetus for change come from? We need more flexibility in the assessment system. Coursework can provide students with the opportunity to show initiative and follow their interests. Last week, with the grace of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), I opened a science laboratory in Clarendon grammar school in Ramsgate.

[Dr. Gibson]

Seeing the young women in the school engaged in experiments was stimulating and made me feel that it was worth banging on about the issues that they were concerned about, as we in government can contribute and make life better for them.

Jumping through hoops should happen not only in PE lessons, but in many other areas where we can engage young people to achieve excellence. I have always been against examinations. Having taught in university and continually assessed people day in, day out, I can say that exams were a boring process, as I could have predicted what 90 per cent. of students would get in their final exams. We had seen all the coursework, but we put the students through that dreadful wringer of higher exams and three or four days of trauma. Very few people move on from the marks that they attain in the coursework system. Although the Minister of State and I may share an office, and seats at the same football ground, we certainly do not always agree about what should happen in higher education. We do agree, however, that many of the higher examinations that produce the upper seconds, the first classes, and all that, are for the rubbish bin.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, although I am aware that he knows that he will get extra time for a second intervention, so I am intervening partly for the thrill of listening to him for longer. Is he saying that one of the results that he would like to see from this initiative is that science in some form—it has a huge number of forms, as he has said—should be present throughout the system all the way through to a qualification to be obtained at the age of 19?

Dr. Gibson: Of course, we cannot deny that. I noticed this week in the debates on hunting, for example, that at least two and a half days were spent on the science of hunting deer, and on whether the experimental work that had been done on behaviour was bona fide. It is just as important for a politician to have an understanding of that as it is for a five-year-old, a 12-year-old or a 15-year-old. Science runs through all our lives, and we must have some confidence in the subject and not just trust the experts to tell us what we should think.

Science is based on evidence, and hands-on skills are very important in that regard. We can still go into laboratories today and see "Tony loves Cherie" scrawled on those awful brown-topped desks and remember how we spent boring afternoons watching the teacher doing the experiments and demonstrating to us how something worked, when what we wanted was to get into it ourselves—to make mistakes, perhaps, but to learn using hands-on skills. It is important to be able to do that. The Government have respected that need by providing a certain amount of money to develop the laboratories, but there are still many laboratories that turn young people off. It does not excite or engage young people to walk into a laboratory and see an old Kipps generator in a cupboard in the corner, caked in dust and chemicals, and all the other poor equipment there. Going out and taking part in field studies and seeing what happens in nature is also important. Because of the accidents that have happened, we must also address the health and safety problems involved.

Someone once said to me that we would never get a Charles Darwin out of the current system in this country, and I fear that that is true because we do not give young people the time to engage with nature or to look at what is happening. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister does things like that, but I remember him telling the Committee that he had failed some subject in the science field dreadfully—I forget which stage he had reached. He might have been a greater scientist than he is a politician. Who knows?

We spoke to many inspiring and dedicated teachers, and there is good science going on in our country. We could really make it better, however, if we respected the technicians and the teachers, and made the young people who are enthusiastic and excited about science engage in the process—which is about the real world that we live in—of putting the science facts in, but also allowed them the facilities for gaining hands-on experience, finding out what is happening, questioning, arguing and not accepting. That is what science is all about, and we should be doing that in our schools.

4.23 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), whose scientific expertise is appreciated in all parts of the House. In opening the debate, the Minister said that the Government's policy was for every secondary school in the country to be a specialist school. I have no difficulty with specialist schools and, as I shall go on to illustrate, one of the earliest specialist schools—a technology college—was created by the previous Conservative Government in my constituency. I have concerns, however, about one aspect of the Government's policy, and that is the limited number of specialisms—even after the announcement of additional specialisms by the Secretary of State this week.

I am concerned about whether the existing specialisms are adequate for all types of school. I believe that, in one category of school, they are not. That is the category of schools with exceptionally high all-round academic ability. I am fortunate to have at least one such school in my constituency: the Judd school in Tonbridge, which is a voluntary-aided grammar school. It is undoubtedly one of the top-performing academic state secondary schools in the country. Its performance rests on all-round attainment. However, under the present categories of specialist school, there is no specialist category for all-round academic ability. The Government have placed an impossible dilemma before the Judd school. It is told that if it does not become a specialist school, it will lose out substantially—by around £150,000 next year—but if it becomes a specialist school in one of the limited categories, such as maths or languages, it will have to skew its curriculum and staffing, and will cease to have the all-round capability, at least to the same extent, that it has at the moment.

The Government need to consider the position of those state secondary schools that have high all-round academic ability, because there is no adequate specialism for them. The headmaster of the Judd school has written to me with two pertinent questions. He asks: "Does the Government really want us to become a Specialist School if in so doing we are forced to jettison much of our expertise? Do we have to choose a distorting specialism to be given proper funding?"

I hope that the Minister will reflect on that point and see whether it is possible to create a specialist category of all-round academic attainment for such schools.

My comments on the curriculum for 14 to 19-year-olds relate to those parts of the country, such as mine in Kent, where we still have grammar schools. I do not regard the grammar school issue as a party-political one, because for me, it is an educational one. I recognise that in the 1960s and 1970s several Conservative authorities decided to introduce comprehensive schools. Equally, I am well aware that any number of Labour Members have given grammar schools the clearest possible personal endorsement that an individual can give and have sent their children to one. I respect that choice and, as far as I am concerned, it is not a cause for criticism of any individual who has done so.

I trust that the Government will reflect on the fact that the remaining grammar schools enjoy profound support in their communities. They have been truly tried and tested by parents in those communities. The remaining grammar schools are the survivors. They have survived attempts at abolition by local education authorities, when so many introduced comprehensive systems in the 1960s and 1970s; abolition by Government coercion under the Labour Administration of the 1970s, when Baroness Williams was Secretary of State for Education; and abolition by ballot, under the present Government. It is a striking fact that since the introduction of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, almost five years ago, sufficient signatures to precipitate a ballot have been collected in only one location—Ripon, in Yorkshire—and when it took place, two thirds of the parents voted in favour of retaining the grammar school. We should not forget that the parents whose children go to grammar schools are in a clear minority in the areas concerned. In Kent, just under one third of children go to grammar schools, with the remaining two thirds going to non-selective secondary schools. Yet parents in those areas have wholly rejected the possibility of precipitating ballots, and the House knows what the answer was in the one area in which a ballot was held.

Like the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor), I should simply like to give to the House the experience in my own constituency. The town of Tonbridge has six secondary schools, of which no fewer than three are grammar schools: Tonbridge girls grammar school, the Weald of Kent girls grammar school, and the Judd school, to which I have referred. There are three non-selective secondary schools: the Hugh Christie school, the Hayesbrook school, and Hill View school.

Labour Members might think this a classic example of children who do not go to grammar schools suffering a lesser education than they should achieve. However, the Hugh Christie school, because of its performance, was one of the first to be singled out for technology status. That was achieved in 1994, under the previous Conservative Government. The current Government have singled out Hill View school by awarding it arts college status as a specialist school. They have also singled out the Hayesbrook school by awarding it sports college status. Even more significantly, all three of the non-selective secondary schools to which I have referred were deemed sufficiently good—with a sufficiently good academic performance—to receive approved sixth forms from the previous Conservative Government.

So notwithstanding the existence of three grammar schools, under two different Governments all three non-selective secondary schools in the Tonbridge community have achieved the status of specialist schools, and of schools with approved sixth forms.

Mr. Brady: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Stanley: Very briefly.

Mr. Brady: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so close to the end of his remarks. I am anxious that he be aware that what he says applies not only to secondary schools in his constituency. A written answer that I received from the Minister just the other day shows that of the 180 remaining secondary modern schools—or high schools—in the country, a quarter are achieving better results than the average result for all-ability comprehensive schools.

Sir John Stanley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that—what I am saying does indeed have a very much wider application.

I hope that the Secretary of State, notwithstanding the somewhat hostile remarks that he made about grammar schools since taking his post, will reflect closely on the fact that the remaining grammar schools enjoy huge, if not overwhelming, parental support in the areas in which they still exist. They are tried and tested, and they produce outstanding educational performance alongside non-selective secondary schools, which also do extraordinarily well by their own children. I put it to the Government that simply to ideologically remove the remaining grammar schools would be an act of sheer educational vandalism.

4.33 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate on what is, as my hon. Friend the Minister said, a crucial phase in the education of our young people. Fourteen to 19 is an age at which people set the course of their future life, and at which, we hope, they become aware of the opportunities opening up before them. However, during that phase it is vital that we keep their interest in, and enthusiasm for, education, and we do that best by making sure that they achieve success.

It is fair to say that, as the White Paper sets out clearly, some progress has been made under this Government. More children are getting five good GCSEs, and numeracy and literacy standards are rising. However, the White Paper also sets out clearly the problems that we still face. We are far too low down the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's league table of people who stay on in education after 16. There is too much variation between schools. As has been said, in some schools fewer than 10 per cent. of children get five good GCSEs. It would be a sorry failure for the nation if we allowed that to continue, and a tragedy for the young people involved. They would fail in school and not acquire the habits of lifelong learning that they will need in the future.

[Helen Jones]

I suggest to Ministers that we should take a far more radical look at what our young people need to learn to equip them for the society in which they grow up. That will not necessarily be what we needed to learn. I hope that we will not be afraid of asking what education is for.

We must also be careful about defining education purely in economic terms. Of course, schools should equip young people to earn a living. That is basic, but they should do much more. If we fall into the trap of thinking that we should provide a purely utilitarian education, we shall fail—economically, culturally and spiritually.

If education is about more than jobs, however, it is also about not doing what we used to do, simply for the sake of it. When we design an education system, we are always influenced by our own values, by the education that we wanted to receive, and by our history. My hon. Friend the Minister of State did not want to give a history lesson, but one historical fact has bedevilled English education. In the 19th century, the Taunton commission decided that there would be three types of secondary education for three different social classes. Ever since, we have thought of subjects in those terms.

My plea is that we stop doing that. We must start thinking about what young people will need for the society in which they grow up. They will need high qualifications for employment, and they will have to change jobs rapidly. Increasingly, they will spend part of their working lives abroad. Many people will live away from their families, with all the lack of support that that entails. Also, people will be deluged with information all the time. We must equip them to cope with that.

The White Paper rightly sets out some of the minimum standards that all young people should achieve in English, maths, science and ICT. I support that proposal, and I hope that the House can agree about it. However, I want to go further. We should provide young people with choice, but we should also be talking about a minimum level of education that goes wider and which all our young people ought to achieve. Some of that could be delivered through traditional subjects, but some would be part of the wider curriculum. I want to set out some suggestions for discussion. It is important that we reach some consensus on the matter. Chopping and changing is no good for students, parents or teachers.

First, I echo the plea made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), that people should acquire scientific literacy, regardless of the other subjects that they do. People need a basic understanding of science, its history and how it has shaped our culture. My hon. Friend was right to note that they also need a means of assessing risk, and pointed to the number of scare stories that have to do with scientific facts. People cannot assess risk. We would be missing out a major part of our young people's education if we do not teach them how to do it.

We must not fail to teach young people how to deal with the deluge of information. They are growing up in the internet age. We must make some effort to teach them how to distinguish fact from opinion, good information from bad information and well researched information from mere speculation. If we do not, we will not be training them to cope with the world in which they are growing up.

Dr. Pugh: Does the hon. Lady agree that an inherent weakness of the current A-level system is that it inclines students to think of themselves as either scientists or non-scientists at the tender age of 16?

Helen Jones: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; that can be a weakness of our system, if young people are given the wrong advice. It is partly due to the university entrance system, so perhaps we should be encouraging young people to study a much broader swathe of A-level subjects.

All young people should grow up with some knowledge of the history, customs and institutions of the country in which they live, but they are also citizens of the world and they need to know about the problems and opportunities in the world in which they will grow up. They should have knowledge of at least one other country and its culture.

I have grave doubts about our post-14 language teaching. I cannot believe that most of our young people are not capable of coping with learning a foreign language. I support the Government's attempts to introduce foreign languages earlier, in primary school. Although some children cannot deal with learning a foreign language at that age, many more could do so if the teaching was right. German or Swedish workers can give television interviews in English and I refuse to believe that our young people are inherently less able than them.

I support the introduction of more practical and vocational subjects in schools, but it must be carefully done. Used properly, such subjects can be a way of engaging and maintaining young people's interest in education. However, we must not divide young people into sheep and goats at the age of 14; there must be pathways between practical subjects and higher vocational or academic education. The Labour movement, in particular, should remember that categorising people at the age of 14 does not always work, any more than it always worked at the age of 11. If such categories had been fixed, Ernest Bevin would never have been Foreign Secretary—there are many similar examples.

An important aspect of the Green Paper was not included in the White Paper. The Government are rightly introducing citizenship classes, but we need active citizens. Some form of community service should form part of the final leaving qualification in whatever leaving certificate we eventually introduce. There are several reasons for that.

First, we need to help our young people to grow up by learning to accept responsibility and to help others. There are several good voluntary schemes and we need to make wider use of them. Secondly, there is an increasing generation gap, because there are fewer extended families and people are moving away from their families. We can narrow that gap through voluntary service. For example, in my area, there are many older people who worry about keeping their gardens tidy and many young people who could help them and benefit from that contact. Finally, we need to

show our young people that being a member of society carries obligations as well as rights. We must assist them to learn about their obligations at an early stage.

I raised an important point in my earlier intervention. Some of our children sit far too many examinations at the age of 16. That has two dangers. First, it squeezes some important subjects out of the curriculum. Secondly, it can lead to children being spoon-fed for their exams, which means that they do not develop the necessary research skills, which are essential for learning in later life. They cannot read around the subject or undertake projects that are not exam-related. I hope that we can help schools to develop other methods of improving and assessing students' work, which can be used alongside public examinations, because both are equally important.

4.45 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): It is a privilege to take part in this debate. I was going to apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) for missing part of his speech, but he is returning the compliment by missing part of mine, having left the Chamber for a short while.

I wanted to make a brief contribution because I believe that there is a need to concentrate on many education issues, and I am not confident that we are quite getting the response right. It is not necessarily a matter of party politics. In some ways the problem is a lack of understanding of what is going on in the country.

I should like first to speak generally and then to talk about children and young people who are losing out—perhaps one or two in my own constituency.

My constituency is very mixed; it is agricultural, but it also has a great deal of industry. Like many others, it requires many skills, including those needed in the health services. I find that there is a great skills shortage. There is a shortage of teachers, for example. Every time I meet head teachers they tell me how difficult it is to recruit. It is not that they have a great number of vacancies, but the quality of applicants is not what it should be. One head told me openly last week that if he had the choice he would not employ a number of teachers now in his school if he could find others who were better. He thinks that they are substandard. That is not a very good situation.

We know that in the health service there is a shortage of doctors and nurses, but less talked about is the shortage of scientific staff. People are not training to go into that kind of work.

Part of the aerospace industry is in my constituency. I was able to ask a question about it earlier today. There is a shortage of people entering the industry, of people wishing to go into what might be perceived as a dirty job. Being an engineer is perhaps not as glamorous as certain other types of work.

We have skills shortages in so many walks of life, yet we are apparently educating many people to degree level. I am the first to acknowledge that the party I support, when in Government, considerably increased the number of people going to university. I think that that was a good thing. I did not have the benefit of a university education. I wish I had.

Something, somewhere, is going wrong when more and more people are entering university but many leave as graduates with no job to go into or enter jobs that do not require degrees. I am not saying that one should go to university only in order to obtain a better job. The value of the education must also be taken into account. But there is something wrong when so many young people find themselves in jobs for which they are over-qualified or have no jobs at all. We must question, therefore, whether the Government's 50 per cent. target is necessary.

As I have said, while there are graduates who have no jobs or who are doing jobs that do not require degrees, we have many skills shortages throughout the country. So something, somewhere, is not working. We need to address that problem, and I am not convinced that we are doing so.

I turn to the second part of my speech, in which I want to concentrate on the children we are leaving behind. As several hon. Members have already mentioned, there is a problem of children and young people missing out. Statistics from the last century show that most people have become more prosperous and that health services and housing have improved. Yet we seem to have developed an underclass of people. It is an awful phrase, which was used earlier, but I cannot think of a better way of putting it. We have a class of people who miss out completely. They miss out on better health services; they miss out on better housing; they miss out on prosperity. One of the reasons is that they also miss out on education.

At least 50 per cent. of the prison population, and possibly nearer 60 per cent. now, are illiterate or semi-literate. I would not for one moment say that illiteracy is an excuse for committing a crime. Somebody who is illiterate and commits a crime must be punished. There is a question about what that punishment should be, but they must comply with the law just as the rest of us do. However, we also have to accept that there is an obvious link between no education and crime. Our education system has been developing for an awfully long time, so we have to question why so many children leave school without the basics of education.

Hon. Members have rightly concentrated on GCSEs, international baccalaureates, A-levels and degrees, but the other side of the issue is that a lot of our young people are leaving school without even being able to read and write. That is a tragedy. It is a waste for them, and it is a tragedy for society, because those people often go on to commit crimes. The statistics show that 40 per cent. of street crime, 25 per cent. of burglaries, 20 per cent. of criminal damage and a third of car thefts were carried out by 10 to 16-year-olds when they should have been in school. Not only are they missing out on the education that might get them good jobs, but they are causing an awful lot of problems for society. We must ask ourselves why that is happening.

I want to touch on another issue that is linked to that problem: special educational needs, which is a subject very close to my heart. There is a very good special educational needs school, called Alderman Knight, in my constituency. Its pupils are frequently physically handicapped, but they also have learning and behavioural difficulties. That school does an excellent job. My hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing)—who also declines to hear my speech at

[Mr. Laurence Robertson]

the moment—visited that school not long ago, and she was very impressed by what she saw. I ask the Minister to visit that school, too, because it is under threat of closure. Gloucestershire county council is not Conservative run. I do not seek to make a party political point, but it is run by an unholy Lib-Lab pact.

Dr. Pugh: Was that not a party political point?

Mr. Robertson: It was not a party political point at all. Gloucestershire county council wants to close that school. It has already closed one special school in Gloucestershire—Bownham Park, Stroud—and it has two further schools on the agenda for closure. A former Minister who dealt with special education told me that the Government's reforms and proposals should not be seen as a green light to the closure of special schools—okay—but why is it happening?

I ask the Minister to come to Gloucestershire to visit Alderman Knight school and to look the teachers, parents and, more importantly, the pupils in the eye and tell them that he thinks that that school should close. I do not believe that his heart is cold enough to do that. I know a number of Labour Members—perhaps I have had a drink with them downstairs, gone on trips with them and perhaps even gone horse racing with them—and I know that they would not want that school to close, so why has Gloucestershire county council got that agenda? Why is it allowed to get away with that?

Special educational needs is a big issue in itself, but the wider point that I want to make is that such closures will not help to reduce the number of people who are missing out on education. The Government said that they have an inclusion policy. Yes, a lot of people with special needs can be included in mainstream schools, but very many cannot. I ask the Minister to consider that very important point.

4.53 pm

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this very important debate. There is no doubt that 14-to-19 education is being increasingly portrayed as the missing link in extending access to higher education. I say that because currently 90 per cent. of students who gain two or more A-levels go on to higher education before they are 21. However, only 19 per cent. of them come from the lower socio-economic groups, as opposed to 43 per cent. from the higher groups. Additionally, for generations now, the prevailing attitude in education has been "academic good, vocational bad." That attitude must change, and I am delighted that the White Paper advocates how that can best be achieved.

I am sure that the Minister will recall the Adjournment debate on education in the coalfields that I initiated just before Christmas, in which I quoted the report, entitled "Patterns of educational achievement in the British coalfields", produced by Sheffield Hallam university in 2000.

The four main findings of the research that I drew to the House's attention were as follows. First and foremost, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C is 7 to 10 percentage points below the national average. Secondly, educational achievement in the coalfields tails off badly in the mid-teen years between the ages of 14 and 16. In primary schools, the gap between performance in the coalfields and the national average is relatively small and has tended to narrow over time. Thirdly, there is no evidence that performance in the mid-teen years relative to the national average is getting any better. Lastly, even among those staying on in full-time education beyond 16, performance in the coalfields still lags behind the rest of the country. That coalfields case study underlines exactly why we need to get a firm grip on the 14-to-19 agenda.

One of the major initiatives that the Government have embarked upon to improve attainment in secondary schools has been the development of specialist schools status. I am glad about the recent announcement that will give all secondary schools the opportunity to apply for specialist school status. This week, I was even more delighted with the news that Ridgewood school in Scawsby, in Doncaster in my constituency, has become one of the first four engineering specialist schools in the country. I am also delighted that the Government are creating two new specialisms of humanities and music as from October this year. It is also good news that rural schools will be allowed to incorporate a rural dimension into their chosen specialist bid.

Another important Government initiative that has been extremely successful in my constituency is the Barnsley education action zone. The Barnsley EAZ, which was set up in 1998, was one of the first 12 in the country. It contained 21 schools—three secondary schools, 16 primary schools, one special school and one nursery school. In the EAZ, the number of seven-year-olds who read to the expected standard has increased by 12 per cent., compared with the national average increase of 4 per cent., in the past three years, and there are similar figures for 11-year-olds. There has been a 16 per cent. rise in the number of young people doing well at that age, although the effects are less marked at secondary level than at primary level.

That brings us back to why we must positively address the 14-to-19 issue. What we need to do can be showcased by my experience as a governor at Willowgarth high school in Grimethorpe, which is part of the EAZ. I declare an interest in that context. Although Willowgarth is a very deprived school—36 per cent. of the pupils are entitled to free school meals—its improvement has been greater than EAZ average. It has moved from a dismal record of 13 per cent. of pupils gaining five A to C passes in 1998 to 35 per cent. gaining five good passes in 2001—a remarkable increase of almost 200 per cent. in its success rate in less than four years. Before the EAZ was established, Willowgarth never came higher than 12th out of the 14 secondary schools in Barnsley in its record of achievement. It is now fifth out of the 14—an incredible performance that speaks for itself.

Another important feature of Willowgarth's success is the fact that 35 per cent. of pupils who left the school last year were accredited with work-related key skills. Some 90 per cent. of pupils leaving in 2001 did so with an accredited information and communications technology—ICT—qualification, in the form of a GCSE pass or a GNVQ, which helps better to equip

children for the world of work. In my opinion, the main reason why the EAZ has been so successful at Willowgarth is the broadening of the curriculum to include more GNVQs and the extension of the school day to support targeted students. The EAZ staff have provided that support, which is vital to continuing educational success in the coalfield communities. The excellence in cities initiative, which now largely supersedes many EAZs, is especially important. Willowgarth intends to bid for technology school status, and I commend the school to the Minister.

Barnsley and Doncaster have benefited in recent years from education maintenance allowances, which have made a difference to the staying-on rates. I am pleased that the Government have decided to provide them nationally from September 2004. I want to make a positive suggestion about them. We should track the students who qualify for EMAs to ensure that the allowances have the desired effect. I should also like the Government to consider extending the EMA to higher education instead of the maintenance grant. That would mean seamless movement from the junior to the senior EMA. We should pitch it at £1,500 rather than £1,000.

It is great news that we are going to discard the unhelpful distinction between vocational and academic GCSEs and A-levels, and that more vocational GCSEs will be created. I am also pleased about expanding the modern apprenticeships, which have been successful in Barnsley in the past.

If we are to achieve the aims that the document on education for 14 to 19-year-olds sets out, the agenda must be partnership driven. No school is an island. Each school and every partner organisation must work together to bring out the best teaching from schools, colleges and work-based learning provision. It will require local education authorities to play an enhanced role, working in tandem with all secondary schools and the local learning and skills council. The role of LSCs has not been mentioned sufficiently.

In areas of high economic deprivation such as Barnsley and Doncaster, it is also essential to involve the local economic regeneration forums to ensure that local vocational courses accurately reflect local business requirements. Learning and skills councils have a major co-ordination role to play with local schools, further education colleges and universities. A more collegiate approach should be established between specialist and non-specialist schools.

To overturn the inadequacies of our secondary school system, we must create educational opportunities for all. The new specialist school system needs to be part of an overall network of educational provision in a local education authority. Every school should have a distinctive part to play, and schools should complement rather than compete with each other.

To achieve such inter-school co-operation, the Department must make school transport a greater priority. For too long, the Department has adopted the attitude that transport is the sole responsibility of the LEA. It must play a much more positive role in assisting LEAs to develop imaginative school transport policies, such as those that Select Committee members witnessed in Birmingham last year.

Before I finish—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman will not be able to finish because he has had his 10 minutes.

5.3 pm

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis). My family is rooted in the coalfield communities of east Durham and I therefore know the importance of education for the self-improvement and advancement of those who live in such areas.

I was enticed to speak in the debate through a series of conversations in the past six months with constituents and employers about the importance of vocational and technical education. The evident lack of skills in south-east Hampshire shows the need for enhanced skills. For example, the director of a listed company in Hampshire who is approaching retirement has chosen to do plumbing at a night class. That is not because he wants a second career, but because he wants the skill to do his own plumbing work. Hon. Members might have thought that we should be training younger people to do those jobs.

To echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), there is clearly a relationship between a lack of numeracy, literacy and technical skills and problems in communities. My hon. Friend mentioned the educational attainment of people in prisons. Last summer, I spoke to people who worked in a jobcentre in Fareham. They said that many young people—especially men—who were coming on to the job market but were finding it difficult to find a job had poor literacy and numeracy skills. I also spoke to people at a local housing association who had found that, among their tenants, it was the young men who were the most in need of skills training but the least willing to receive it.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) mentioned the 9 per cent. of people who leave school without qualifications. Some young people are disaffected with schooling, resulting in high levels of absenteeism or truanting. They are missing out on the skills training that they need if they are to play a part in society.

Part of the problem lies in the way in which we present education to our young people in schools. There is too great an emphasis on the merits of academic education, to the exclusion of other skills in other areas. The Government make great play of achieving 50 per cent. participation in higher education among 18 to 22-year-olds. To those who are not academically able, that gives the impression that vocational training is second rate. No parity of esteem exists for academic and vocational education—which reminds one of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities, which the Conservative Government abolished. We have to have that parity of esteem so that people acknowledge the value of vocational education and so that people who are disaffected with education, or disengaged from it, can see the point of it.

To improve vocational education, we must have greater co-operation between the school sector and the further education sector. As the Minister said earlier,

[Mr. Mark Hoban]

we must ensure that local provision of training matches the needs of the community. It was therefore disappointing to read in the Ofsted report that came out earlier this month that

"Area-wide inspections are showing that it has so far proved hard to establish a clear strategy,"—

in further education—

"based on a detailed analysis of local need, for offering a coherent range of courses across the attainment range".

A great deal of work clearly needs to be done within the further education sector to improve the provision of courses. The needs of the local business community must be considered before it is decided what vocational training should be offered. People who finish vocational training—either at school at the age of 16, or in post-16 education—have to be able to see that their training has value. There have to be employment opportunities at the end of it. The skills that the business community needs must be matched to the skills that are taught in the local FE colleges.

We have to look beyond the provision of training courses by the FE sector. There could be other providers, such as businesses. I draw the attention of the House to a scheme in south-east Hampshire, where HMS Sultan, which is a training establishment for the Royal Navy, is offering one-year residential courses for people taking part in a modern apprenticeship scheme. That has received many positive comments from employers. They have found that the young men and women who left school at 16 and who have gone on the residential course for a year come out of the process much more mature and better equipped for the world of work than they were a year earlier. We need to offer more diverse provision to ensure that we give young adults good vocational training and good training in life skills. The hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) mentioned the importance of teaching young adults the skills that they need to live as well as the skills that they need to work.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred to workplace training. The Ofsted report was critical of the quality of that training, and it is important that the young people who receive training in the workplace find that it is of good quality. Therefore, the learning and skills councils, the FE colleges and commercial training providers must work together. In my area, much of the vocational training in the Navy is provided by a commercial company, Flagship Training, which is part of Vosper Thorneycroft. It is recognised by the Learning and Skills Council as providing good quality training to apprentices in the area.

The Ofsted report mentions failings in vocational training, the FE sector and workplace training, but it sets a benchmark as to where we should be. If we are to bring about parity of esteem for vocational and academic training, it is clear that we need to make significant improvements in the way in which courses are provided and taught. Young people who are currently disaffected with education should enjoy training courses that are equally as good as the academic courses that their peers receive elsewhere.

The Government and those involved in education face the challenge of ensuring that children and young adults receive the right level of education in good quality courses, so that they are motivated and understand that they have a role in society. They should see that society has something to offer them and that they have something to offer to society. That is how we can tackle the problems that the country faces from the disengagement of young people—particularly young men—in our local communities.

5.12 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I have lost count of the number of my hon. Friends who have opened speeches on education with the words, "I was the first person in my family to go to university." I can do better than that. I was the first person in my family to go, at the age of 15, to work in an office. That was regarded as a great achievement. I did not go into the factory where my aunties and father had worked. Like the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), I did not go to university and that perhaps makes me all the more sensitive about those who fail in education or who are failed by it. I am not sure which it is.

In the past 15 years, I have had an abiding concern for the academic underachievement of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. That underachievement stems from the fact that young husbands and wives have come here from the subcontinent and do not speak English. If the learning and skills councils do not tackle that problem and teach them English to a good level, they will not speak it in their homes. Consequently, their children will go to school without knowing any English and that will set back their academic and working lives. Without the essential knowledge of English, they will not progress.

Because of the anxiety that I have had for more than 15 years, I decided to ring a couple of schools in my constituency to prepare for this debate. Although I could not get hold of them directly, my assistant rang the two schools in my constituency with the largest number of Asian children.

I was delighted to learn from the deputy head teacher of the first school that although a large number of girls used to disappear because they were taken back to Pakistan or kept at home, the problem has now been solved. By working hard with the parents, the school is getting over such problems. By and large, girls are staying at school longer to do A-levels and to go on to higher education. The problem of girls disappearing was a problem at that school, so I am pleased that things have changed.

The deputy head teacher told me that although the girls are doing well, there is a problem with Asian boys, who are not doing so well. She also told me that there was a problem with white families who are on the move. I am talking not about travellers but about families who constantly move from town to town and school to school. Their children are difficult to teach and it is hard for them to do well at school. Apparently, one family with eight children had moved so often that they had lost track of where they had lived. As a result, the children were poor academic achievers.

I phoned the other school, which also has many Asian children. One of the teachers was good enough to send me a fax that summarised the teaching situation with

regard to Asian girls. The fax sets out a good analysis of the problems and I am pleased that the school is moving in the right direction. The fax says:

"As a general rule, the families of . . . Asian girl students tend to be very supportive of them staying on to pursue their education to the Sixth Form; and many have done well there, and have gone on to higher education. Bilingual or multilingual students who do not speak English at home often develop later academically than other students of their age".

So I am pleased with my hon. Friend the Minister's comments on flexibility at 14-plus. Those girls need that flexibility because their lack of English at four gets them off to a late start and they often do not get around to doing A-levels until they are 19 or older.

The fax goes on to say:

"so continuing education post 16 can be extremely important. Our experience is that parents"—

I am talking about Asian parents—

"are usually very happy to encourage their daughters to stay on as long as they are motivated . . . For a minority of our students there are very difficult issues around the family's wish to arrange a marriage for a daughter before the daughter feels ready for it. This can cause great anxiety for some students, and it has sometimes resulted in a student's education being interrupted sooner than the school would think desirable. Adolescents sometimes find it very hard to stand up to the pressure of family expectations, or even at times to discuss their feelings in an open way with their parents."

That is, of course, a cross-cultural problem. Teenage children not being able to discuss problems with their parents is common in all cultures. That does have an impact on their education. However, the fax then states:

"It has to be said that families are sometimes more understanding and supportive in the event than their children give them credit for; but things can and do sometimes go wrong, and in extreme cases we have seen students leaving home and putting themselves at considerable risk because conflicts of this kind have not been resolved within the family."

The teacher concludes by saying:

"As a school with a predominantly white staff",

which is the case in most of my schools,

"we are in great need of more adult role-models for our Asian students. It would be particularly useful to have more Asian women on our staff in positions of authority and responsibility."

That goes wider than academia. The Bradford area needs more Asian women who have achieved. They do exist, but I want more so that Asian girls see them as role models for their futures rather than simply marrying at 16 and 17 and leaving the academic world.

Finally, I draw hon. Members' attention to early-day motion 703 tabled by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). It is entitled "BBC 'Hitting Home' Initiative", and states

"That this House applauds the BBC for their Hitting Home initiative of a week of programmes on television and radio starting on 15 February dedicated to domestic violence"—

meaning the eradication of domestic violence.

Schools must be about a bit more than preparing kids for exams. They must be about preparing them for life. From their early years of education until the end of their schooling, they should be shown the importance of gender equality: I can think of nothing more important than that. I am not just being politically correct. It is extremely important for boys in particular to understand that girls are as good, as clever and as capable as they are. They should also be taught to disapprove of bullying, however it takes place. If we can get the message across in schools that bullying is not a good thing, and that girls are at least as good as boys, we shall go a long way towards defeating domestic violence and preventing many young men from perpetrating it later in life.

5.21 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I am delighted to be able to speak on such an important subject. I think there is cross-party consensus on the need to improve things for those aged between 14 and 19, although there may be different approaches and different ideas about how to solve the problems that undoubtedly exist in many schools.

I want to make four points. The first relates particularly to those between 14 and 16. Notwithstanding what has been said by a number of Members, notably the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), I feel that we should be robust enough to be willing to push children into a different educational environment if that is appropriate. It may mean separating classes; it may mean streaming; it may mean creating different environments for different aptitudes. When we talk of pushing kids into the workplace, we must bear in mind the fact that the academics—those who will go on to university—will find themselves in a different educational environment from those in the vocational arena.

There is ample evidence to suggest that treating children with different skills in different ways does work. I know that Members disagree on the role and the rights and wrongs of grammar schools, but there are some hard facts relating to the teaching of academic children in an environment that is geared to them. In the recent added-value study, grammar schools came out on top; but we know from research carried out last year that they add value particularly in the case of "upper-middle ability" children. There is clear evidence that tailoring education to specific educational needs really works.

I do not propose to make this a discussion about the rights and wrongs of grammar schools, but I have always felt that the failures of the past were due to the absence of a strong and viable vocational alternative, and a lack of interchangeability. In an intervention earlier, the Minister made an important point about the need for interchangeability between the vocational and educational streams. At no stage should shutters close off one option from another—although that does not mean that the separate streams should not exist.

I welcomed what was said earlier this week by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Skills, about the need for a better, stronger, vocational model, and the need to learn from countries that have done well in that regard.

My second point relates to those aged between 16 and 18. I have made it here before, and will continue to do so. I fear that many of the Government's changes may ultimately undermine sixth forms, and I am still concerned about the long-term commitment of learning and skills councils to investment in them. I will watch carefully to see what happens in the next few years, and

[Chris Grayling]

will regularly challenge Ministers to ensure that in the understandable drive to strengthen vocational education the strengths of school sixth forms are not undermined and that greater emphasis is not placed on colleges at the expense of sixth forms. Both have a role to play, and sixth forms must not suffer as a result of the changes. On exams for 16 to 18-year-olds, as I pointed out in an intervention, I do not believe that the A-level system was broke. The Government's priority should be to sort out the availability of non-vocational education for young people aged 14 and over. They do not have to focus so much on trying to reform and rehash the A-level system, which has served the country well for a good many years.

Thirdly, on the vocational pathway, we have heard from Ministers about the desirability of modern apprenticeships and their intention to put pupils into the workplace at a relatively early age. I do not dispute the desirability of apprenticeships or young people gaining experience in the workplace but, as Ministers set out on that strategy, I remind them that the workplace of today, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough suggested, is very different from the workplace of 20 or 30 years ago. We no longer have the large-scale industrial employers who delivered significant numbers of apprenticeships to young people. Speaking from experience, I know that the pressures in the workplace are such that it is difficult to invest enough time in young people for them to gain the skills that they need to benefit from their experience there. Ministers must look extremely careful at the structure of such arrangements to make sure that those pupils are not simply kicking around an office with nothing to do, losing time that could otherwise be spent on education.

The 18-plus education system has been touched on by Members but its importance needs to be restated. The Government are introducing a 50 per cent. target for the number of pupils who go into higher education, but I am genuinely concerned that in too many cases pupils go into higher education at 18 taking courses that are not suited to the realities of the employment market that they will enter. If we do not tailor training for students aged 18 and above to the labour market, we will end up just putting our young people through university on courses that they may enjoy but which will not help them in professional life. At the end of the process, they will be left saddled with debts that they will struggle to repay, which is wrong.

I do not agree with arbitrary targets, but if the Government are going to increase the target to 50 per cent., they must know exactly what those students will end up doing. They must look at the future labour market and economic trends; they must try to identify what will be required in future, and must work with schools and colleges to ensure that pupils are going in the right direction. Pupils must not end up taking the wrong courses and achieving the wrong qualifications for the jobs that are available.

Fourthly, we must be careful to invest in further education as well as higher education, as FE has a vital role to play in developing the skills of the future. FE tends to be available locally, and many student debts are built up because students are away from their home communities. That is desirable for many young people, but we cannot provide universal education away home, however great and enjoyable the university experience, only to leave those kids with huge debts and the wrong qualifications at the end of the process. We have excellent FE colleges in this country, including NESCOT—North East Surrey College of Technology—in my constituency, which is doing first-rate work in developing a variety of skills. It trains the craftspeople of tomorrow as well as equipping people to take degree courses. In future, the role of such colleges, to which people can travel from home, will be as important as that of universities. We must make sure that the drive to get more young people into university does not take place at the expense of high-quality college-based education and training, which may be much more relevant to the labour market than many of our university courses.

I finish with this thought. If Ministers do not plan their policy for the future against the realities that employers, statisticians and economists say will be the labour market of the future for those kids, none of their targets or strategies will work. I have not yet heard the analysis and the insights to convince me that the Government know where their strategies are going in employment terms.

5.30 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I welcome the White Paper wholeheartedly. It responds to the many pressures on our system. For the first time in many years, it sets out a coherent way forward for the 14-to-19 phase of education. In his opening remarks, my hon. Friend the Minister said that he would give us a history of the various failures to strengthen vocational education over the past hundred years. I regret that he did not do so, but my regret was mitigated by the fact that the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), in the assumptions that underpinned his opening remarks, gave us living proof of many of those failings. I made a note of the fact that two thirds of his speech was focused entirely on universities and A-levels, which suggests to me that he has not taken on board the thrust of the White Paper on 14-to-19 education.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman is giving a misleading impression. I concentrated on those points in order to highlight the fact that the Government are wrong to pursue those priorities. *[Laughter.]* The hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) was in the Chamber. She knows perfectly well, and she can check the record tomorrow, that I said there should be a greater emphasis on FE in the Government's proposals, and that is where they are failing most profoundly.

Mr. Chaytor: I am sorry the hon. Gentleman did not make his emphasis clearer in his opening remarks. I found it interesting that he seemed to ignore one of the main points of the White Paper, which involves abolishing the distinction between the vocational and the academic. His assumption, clearly expressed, was that universities were for those following an academic path, whereas further education colleges were for those following a vocational path. I found it interesting that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) advanced his criticism that universities were

insufficiently academic. There seems to be a schizophrenia deep in the Conservative party about the future of higher education.

On the academic/vocational divide, one of the most important aspects of the White Paper, which I warmly welcome, is the new language that my hon. Friend proposes—the terms "general" and "specialist". We should no longer use the terms "academic" and "vocational", because for as long as we continue to use them, the question of hierarchy will come into the matter. It is impossible in our political culture for the vocational to be seen to have parity with the academic. The new framework of general and specialist studies is the right way forward. My only regret was that, after the point had been made early in the White Paper, the language was not consistently followed and regressed to the use of "vocational" and "academic" later on.

On the definition, does the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West really think that a degree in medicine is not vocational? Does he think that a degree in law, physics or management is not vocational? We must challenge outdated, archaic assumptions of what is vocational and what is academic. In the school system, is art not vocational? Given the labour market in which we are living and in which the creative industries are generating more and more jobs, more young people are now involved in the creative industries than were involved in textiles. Are we saying that art is not a vocational subject? I find that bizarre.

Mr. McWalter: I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, as this is the only way I shall get into the debate. Does he agree that subjects such as motor vehicle studies, which is available as a GCSE subject in Northern Ireland but not in the rest of the UK, have a tremendous academic potential for making young people understand certain concepts, and they have that "Wow!" factor that will often get them into a school, whereas they might otherwise be tempted to stay away?

Mr. Chaytor: If it were not for the fact that I want to see the end of the GCSE, I would welcome its extension to motor vehicle studies. The point is—this is another priority in the White Paper—that we need to play down the significance of the GCSE if we want to increase participation rates and encourage stronger interest in lifelong learning among more young people. The GCSE currently acts as a barrier to our doing that, so it is critical that it be gradually given less significance and become a sort of progress check on the way to the age of 19.

We must also go further and urgently start work on establishing the development of an English baccalaureate—an all-embracing qualifications framework at 19. If we can do that and take into account the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor) about the importance of developing a modular structure for such qualifications and a framework for credit accumulation and transfer, we will be on the way to having a school and further education system that will compete with the best in the world. We will find that, in such a modular structure, students will increasingly mix and match subjects such as history, geography, literature, music and art, as well as motor vehicle studies, engineering, hairdressing and hotel management. That will be better for individual students and provide a far better service for those who have traditionally been failed by our education system. It will also provide a better service for those who have traditionally followed an extremely narrow academic curriculum, and it will be for the good of the country as a whole.

I should like to make one or two extra points. The White Paper's focus on the individual learning plan is crucial. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) expressed concerns about gender equality. In one sense, that issue is changing rapidly, as it is girls who are now racing ahead in our school system. In GCSEs and—I think—A-levels, there are significant improvements in the performance of some groups of girls, if not all groups. However, what concerns me is that the rate of intellectual, physical and emotional development of our young people is hugely variable. The assumption that all young people can take precisely the same form of assessment at the same stage of their lives is misguided. From not only 14 years, but 11, we need a far greater focus on individual guidance and learning plans. I am sure that the flexibility of the new curriculum that is emerging in the White Paper will be an important step forward.

I want to express two reservations about issues on which the White Paper does not go into sufficient detail. On the institutional arrangements for the development of the 14-to-19 phase, it is a strength of the document that it focuses so much on the curriculum, but it does not say very much about how we will deliver it. The appendix contains a detailed work programme, which is important, but I should like to flag up to my Front-Bench colleagues the concerns expressed in many quarters about the ability of local learning and skills councils to bring about the transformation that we seek. There are concerns about excessive bureaucracy in the LSCs, lack of transparency and decision-making processes. There are also concerns about lack of expertise in the LSCs. We understand the history and the way in which staff were redeployed from the previous bodies, but getting more direct expertise about secondary education and further education into LSCs is a priority.

Finally, it is crucial that the 14-to-19 phase is now firmly on the agenda, but let us not overlook what happens at the age of 11. The most crucial determinant of many young people's educational future is the school to which they are allocated at 11. I do not want to rise to the bait that was thrown in by several Opposition Members earlier about academic selection at 11, but I hope that the Minister will not be deflected by the first interventions in the debate relating to admissions policies for federations of schools. One of the great ironies is that we have recently announced the establishment of an access regulator for universities. If we had an access regulator for secondary schools, there would be far less need to look at access to universities, because things would follow through automatically.

5.40 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): This has been a particularly constructive debate and it has perhaps ranged rather more widely than its narrow remit. Time will not permit me to comment on all the various interesting contributions that have been made, but they

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

have been almost universally constructive. I hope that the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) will not think it invidious if I single her out, because I thought that she made the single most important remark of the debate when she reminded us that this was not simply about competitiveness, and that education had a value in itself. We should never forget that, whatever else we say. A fairly common theme running through a number of hon. Members' speeches was the need for greater guidance for all young people; if this issue is complicated for us, it is extremely complicated for them, and they have only one chance to get it right.

We have no objection in principle to the themes of the White Paper; we find it constructive. The only point that I would make is that there are a number of interlocking interests that are not exactly the same, and Ministers need to be clear when they are pursuing these policies where they are placing the emphasis at any one time, especially if there is any dissonance between them on any particular policy. The first objective is the need for greater flexibility in the system, and we welcome that. We would also welcome better linkages back into key stage 3 and even into primary schools, and forward into the post-secondary experience of university, training or whatever. Coupled with that is the concern to sort out some of the confusion in the present qualifications structure.

The second objective—again, a proper one—is to tackle the problem of the 10 per cent., or thereabouts, of socially excluded young people, who have probably voted with their feet. We have to remember that they might not even be in school to consider doing GCSE, and we need to start to motivate them earlier, in ways that have been touched on today. The third objective—the endemic one; it has been an issue ever since the Royal Society of Arts report of 1884—is the need to tackle the desperate, deep-seated lack of prestige for vocational education. That need is encapsulated in the words that I remember from civil servant who has now retired, so I think I can quote him. When I once said, very pertly, on receiving a document, "This will require two A-levels, or the equivalent vocational qualifications", he replied, "That, of course, goes without saying, Minister." That said it all.

Alongside that worry about the vocational gap is the manifest fact that we need people with a vocational education. We have a desperate shortage of them, despite the fact that some modern apprentices are coming through. The Minister may want to advise me on this, but I believe that, at the advanced level, there are not enough. There are far too few, for example, to meet the needs of the construction industry—a subject that we debated recently. We shall be able to fill all the available places with people with craft-based skills, and we also have requirements for those with technician-based skills.

In the time remaining, I would like to concentrate on a number of points. The first relates to institutional arrangements, and we have not yet mentioned how difficult it will be to put together the 14-to-19 phase. For a start, there is a systemic division at 16, when compulsory schooling ends and post-compulsory schooling, involving voluntary participation in education or training, begins. Secondly, there are structural subdivisions, post-16, between school and further education, which is itself divided into general FE colleges, sixth form colleges and the training arm, along with whatever provisions are blended in between them for the particular individual. There have always been concerns about the anomalies in funding and remuneration in that area, and they have not always been levelled up, even if they are gradually becoming nearer to one another.

In its briefing, the Association of Colleges referred to concerns that colleges were only receiving the pupils that schools would rather not touch, and that also has a bearing on their concerns about inspections and Ofsted results. It is worried that guidance is still skewed towards keeping pupils in schools and that colleges may not get credit from their local LSCs for involvement in any pre-16 education. Proper concerns also exist about the legal framework. For example, if children under 16 go into college, child protection, liability and health and safety issues may arise.

Having said all that, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is a powerful experience to encounter a group of 16-year-olds in a further education college who might not have very good GCSEs but who have rediscovered the relevance of education. They have a buzz about them and are motivated not only to do well in their vocational attainment, but to reinvest in their general educational skills. That is a contribution that FE can make to the overall mix. I should also record the fact that there are more A-level students in the FE sector than in sixth forms, but they both matter and we should not create artificial distinctions tonight. We need to draw together the whole offer and make it relevant to the individuals.

I have scribbled down some possible criteria for a good vocational qualification. They include rigour, even if the assessment style may be different from that for general or academic attainment; occupational relevancy; coherence within the overall curriculum, so there is some understanding that a subject will be offered alongside other subjects; acceptability to teachers, because it needs to be something that they want to deliver; and acceptability to pupils and their parents, because it needs to be something that they wish to study. We must not forget that the pupils will be volunteers for the new subjects.

The parity of esteem to which we have referred cannot be achieved by fiat or ministerial edict. It will need to be earned, mostly by the qualifications' acceptability to employers. There can, therefore, be no question of tailoring vocational GCSEs to the weaker candidates. Of course, if people do not find it easy to do academic subjects but do well with their hands, that is great. However, that should not mean that the entire qualification is skewed to achieve that. It must be just as relevant for others who may wish to participate.

A case can be made for strong occupational relevance. I hope that when the sector skills councils are up and running, they will provide a contribution by specifying what is needed and how it should sit alongside other qualifications that may fill up the offer. I have always recognised a certain strain in the GNVQ concept, because it tries to be both academic and vocationally relevant. It is not fully a preparation for

work, and was never intended to be so. In some cases, it may be better to offer an GNVQ-type qualification, even pre-16, alongside the appropriate general education.

None of these proposals will work unless the offering is feasible to deliver—including any assessment—cost-effective and acceptable to the stakeholders. Strangely enough, as vocational education moves further back into the compulsory education years, its marketing effort must be even more developed.

In conclusion, I wish to make one or two comments on outcomes. Mediaeval Oxbridge would have understood rather more than modern Oxbridge would articulate that all education is, in a sense, vocational, in that it leads to something. What is needed is to get the balance right in terms of ultimate employability. The Association of Colleges expresses some concern that arises out of the experience of Curriculum 2000, with colleges being discouraged by the reaction of universities, which have discounted key skills and taken little account of breadth in their offers and interviews. The association points out that

"it is crucial that 14-19 developments gain the endorsement of HE and are taken account of in HE offers."

The business of trying to produce specifications of what is sensible, although not always ideal for the individual, is an important art that we must develop.

Beyond that issue is the acceptability of qualifications to employers. The market has not been perfect, and what employers want has not always been well articulated. They probably need a range of skills and attainments within the individual, and different kinds of recruits with different attainments across recruiting profiles. However, above all they need closer association with the education system—we cannot go on in silos. At the same time, there needs to be greater flexibility for individuals to tailor their own offers, and to develop beyond their original horizons: if they do well, they should be able to proceed to a degree and become a modern apprentice, for example.

The two forces are university pull and pupil push, and to be effective they need to operate in the same direction. If Ministers can fashion a strategy for 14 to 19-year-olds that turns words into achievements, they will have our support; indeed, they will be judged by their success, or otherwise, in doing so.

5.50 pm

Mr. Ivan Lewis: On the whole, the debate has been of a very high standard, and many positive contributions have been made. However, the great contrast was to be found in the contributions of the hon. Members for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), and for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West repeated the mistakes that have been made throughout history in our attempts to present vocational education and training.

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Mr. Lewis: The hon. Gentleman articulated a "sheep and goats" model—exactly the model that the Leader of the Opposition announced as Tory party policy on his visit to Holland earlier this week. That is quite astonishing.

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Mr. Lewis: Unlike the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West, the hon. Member for Daventry outlined some principles that could be the basis for consensus in our approach to vocational education and training.

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Mr. Lewis: As he listed those principles, I scribbled them down simultaneously. Our approach should provide a high-status, high-value route for young people. We must provide a high-quality learning experience that should not be the same learning experience as a general qualification. The experience can be stand-alone, or form part of a mixed learning pathway. It can lead directly to higher education and a vocational route—making nonsense of the 50 per cent. allegation—or to skilled employment. The option must genuinely be for all young people, and not just for disengaged young people.

In achieving those objectives, we need to put in place a number of component policy building blocks. We must consider the quality of advice, information and guidance; the attitude of parents and how to influence it; the attitude of young people; and employers' human resource policies. Employers say that they want people with vocational skills, yet they still advertise for people with five O-levels. We need to look at the way universities respond to high quality vocational pathways for 14 to 19-year-olds. I agree with the hon. Member for Daventry when he says that no magic wand or White Paper will deliver parity of esteem. What we should seek are the building blocks that converge esteem, and in time, parity of esteem will occur naturally.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West also said that young people take too many exams, and he questioned the virtue of a baccalaureate model. However, an article of 27 August last year, entitled "Tories look at replacing A-levels with baccalaureate", states the following:

"A-levels are no longer the 'gold standard' they once were, the Conservatives are to argue, as they promise an overhaul of the sixth form curriculum to require students to show greater breadth of knowledge.

Proposals being discussed by Damian Green, the shadow education secretary, and his team could mean the introduction of extra exam papers in which students would be expected to show ability in subjects they were not specialising in . . . Another option is to extend the international baccalaureate".

That runs completely counter to today's contribution from someone who is a member of the Conservatives' Front-Bench education team.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) made a generally positive contribution, as ever. He described me as a good man, and I shall put that in my next focus leaflet in Bury, South. He welcomed a measured approach, and it is absolutely vital that we get it right. We must reassure people about the integrity of the system in the short term, and we must also ensure that we get the reforms right when we deliver them, and as they impact on young people and teachers.

[Mr. Lewis]

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said something that I thought slightly unfair about the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West. He said that the Tories can say whatever they want, because they will never be in government. That accusation has often been made about the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, who also said that my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards was in the social exclusion unit. That was only when my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister thought that my hon. Friend needed extra help to get back on message.

Many people have spoken about the importance of impartial advice and guidance in respect of the Connexions service. It is important that the service be independent and of high quality. It must be universal, in the sense that all young people have access to it, and it must recognise that some young people need more intensive support than others. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough will be pleased to hear that we will be issuing guidance very soon on providing careers guidance from the age of 11. We accept that it needs to start far earlier than 14.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor) spoke in an informed and passionate way about opening up opportunities in her constituency. She rightly advocates the tremendous possibilities now available for co-operation between education institutions in localities. Schools can now co-operate with each other, and with local colleges. In the pathfinder projects and the federations that now exist, schools, colleges and employers work together in an integrated way. I am sure that we will look sympathetically on an application from Dewsbury for that type of pathfinder project.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury also referred to the importance of high-quality 16 to 19 provision in her community. She does not want young people to have to leave Dewsbury and go elsewhere for that provision. If it can be demonstrated that those needs are not being met in Dewsbury, there are real opportunities, under the area inspection and area review processes, for resources to be found to create the necessary specialist provision, whether it be part of a FE college or as a stand-alone sixth form college.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury also mentioned the structure of qualifications and the importance of looking at unitisation. I have excellent news for her and other hon. Members: my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has briefed the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and asked them to look at the question of unitisation with regard to qualifications.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) listed the many tremendous initiatives on science that the Government have introduced, but accused us of not having a strategic approach. There may be some legitimacy in that criticism. I invite my hon. Friend to come to the Department to discuss with me how we can develop a more strategic approach—as long as he promises not to summon me before his Select Committee.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) said that specialist status was not suitable for schools with a wide academic base. That is extremely offensive to many schools that have achieved or applied for that status. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it clear that the issue with grammar schools has to do with the effect on standards for all pupils in the relevant localities. It is not about ideological warfare.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) made an excellent speech. She talked vividly about the consequences of failure in terms of people dropping out at 16. We need to remember that dropping out at 16 often leads young people into low-skilled jobs, unemployment or crime, but those young people are also the parents of the future. When they parent their children, they will not instil an understanding of the importance of education—the reason we have so many difficulties in terms of aspirations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North made a strong case for the importance of getting young people engaged in active citizenship and voluntary work as part of a leaving certificate. We are all worried about the disengagement of young people from their communities, and the intergenerational conflict between younger people and their elders. Getting young people involved in community service is extremely important, and it will help with creating the skilled work forces that our public services will need in the future. Young people involved in voluntary work are far more likely to go into such work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis) spoke eloquently about the contributions made by different Government initiatives to raising standards in his community, where low aspirations have been a problem for too long. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards will look sympathetically on Willowgarth school's application for specialist status.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) made a very eloquent contribution about the importance of getting right the education offered to young people from the ethnic minority communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North advocated a more individualised approach to learning, which would take into account people's cultural or religious backgrounds and the barriers that they may face in making progress in education.

We all share a passion for all children to have those opportunities and a programme of learning tailored for their individual needs.

It being Six o'clock, the motion for Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): For the convenience of the House, we shall take motions 3, 4 and 5 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Planning (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Construction Board) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 20th January, be approved.

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Engineering Construction Board) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 20th January, be approved.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Epsom Common

6 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I present a petition on behalf of the Epsom Common Association, concerning the proposal to build a roundabout adjoining Epsom common, a historic area of land on the edge of my constituency.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons.

The petition of the Epsom Common Association.

Declares that the roundabout access proposed on the B280 (as a second access point to the West Park Site, Epsom) be removed from the relevant planning application by the National Health Service.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons put this matter before the relevant Minister, in order to implement and assist in the future protection of Epsom Common (designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest), by the removal of the said roundabout access from the relevant planning application by the N.H.S.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

La Mon House Hotel Bombing

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

6.1 pm

Mrs. Iris Robinson (Strangford): I am grateful for this timely opportunity to bring before the House a solemn matter that affects my constituency and which cries out to be addressed.

On Monday next, when the House will have risen and Members will have returned to their constituencies, people throughout the kingdom will go about their everyday chores, in business, at recreation and in the family. But in many parts of Northern Ireland, people will approach Monday in a very different frame of mind. They are the relatives of those who lost their lives in the La Mon bombing, one of the worst atrocities ever to occur in the Province. They are joined by the surviving victims, and by the many members of our emergency services who experienced the horror that unfolded in the Castlereagh hills on that dismal February evening.

Monday marks the 25th anniversary of that horrific bombing at the La Mon House Hotel, in Castlereagh, on Friday 17 February 1978. I speak not just as the Member of Parliament for Strangford, the constituency targeted by the Provisional IRA that night, but also as a member of the La Mon Bursary Committee. The committee comprises a representative group of people: relatives of the victims murdered that evening, victims who were injured in the bombing and former members of the emergency services who were involved in the aftermath of that indiscriminate and appalling attack on innocent people.

We seek, in a positive way, to keep the memory of La Mon alive and in the public domain. I speak not just from the call of duty but as someone who has been touched by the anguish and, yes, the courage of those to whom I shall refer as the "La Mon victims".

Serving with the La Mon group since its foundation in 1998 has allowed me more fully to comprehend the terrible pain and suffering that the victims experienced that terrible night and which abides with them 25 years later. Although those individuals cope with their pain and carry their burden with great dignity, one of the hardest challenges that they face is living with the knowledge that the Government have failed them by not holding an independent public inquiry to investigate the circumstances of the bombing and to establish where the responsibility lies for planning, directing and carrying out the atrocity. Twelve innocent people were killed in the massacre, and many more were seriously injured.

The events surrounding that fateful evening in Castlereagh will for ever be imprinted on the minds of the scores of people who escaped from the clutches of death. Some of those injured are still suffering physical pain to this day. Even those fortunate enough to walk away without a physical mark are haunted by the memories of that dreadful night.

The evening began as a night of celebration. It was a happy get-together for members of the Irish Collie Club and their friends. They had converged on the hotel from around the Province and were in a cheerful mood, looking forward to a pleasant event. They had been allocated a private function room known as the Peacock room.

[Mrs. Iris Robinson]

If ever there was an apolitical and non-denominational group, that was it. If ever there was an event devoid of any political purpose or content, that was it. Yet through the dark of that evening a group of men descended on the hotel. As they approached they would have heard the laughter from inside. They would have seen the innocent families deep in conversation, and they would have assessed the huge numbers who would be their victims.

What followed defies human understanding. To plant a conventional bomb at the hotel would undoubtedly have resulted in loss of life or at least certain injury. But the evil executioners of this terrorist act left no margin for doubt as to the outcome of their evening's work.

The terrorists strapped their explosives to two cans of petrol and attached them to the security grille over the windows of the room. They retreated under the cover of darkness, and no doubt congratulated themselves on their brave act as they journeyed home.

The massive explosion that resulted sent a sheet of burning petrol through the small function room, incinerating those in its path. In addition, the glass and materials from the explosion shredded the many helpless, innocent and unsuspecting victims.

Following the bombing, forensic experts had to use scraps of clothing, jewellery and dental charts to undertake the task of identifying many of the guests that evening, such were the heat and ferocity of the blaze.

It is hard for us to imagine tonight what it was like for the victims. The explosion sent an intense and colossal fireball of blazing petrol raging through the room. It set people alight and fuelled an uncontrollable inferno.

In the adjoining function room, known as the Gransha room, 400 members and guests of the Northern Ireland Junior Motorcycle club, including almost 100 children, were holding their annual dance, but the guests in the Peacock room took the main force of the bomb. Those who could—men and women, old and young—emerged screaming, with their hair, clothes and bodies on fire and scrambled out of the burning ruin. In addition to the many guests in the hotel that evening, there were in the region of 90 staff on the premises.

Eye-witnesses told of hotel guests with limbs blown off who must have been dead or who lay dying in the flames, which spread rapidly, as the burning petrol flowed across the floors. By the time the police received the bomb warning and set out for the hotel the doomed building was well alight.

The IRA killed 12 innocent people that night. Altogether some 33 people were injured, all suffering various degrees of burns. The number of those who to this day live with the mental scars remains unknown.

In the aftermath of the massacre, republicans sought to deflect criticism by suggesting that it had not been their intention to kill anyone and that the police were responsible for not acting on the warning. The more things change, the more they remain the same. That craven lie—blaming the police for not acting on the warning—grieves the victims.

The police investigation into the type of bomb used by the IRA found that four times the normal amount of inflammable liquid had been used. Those who planted the bomb at La Mon would have seen through the window, as they attached the bomb, that the room was full of innocent people.

The death toll included three married couples. Those murdered were Mrs. Christine Lockhart, aged 32; Mrs. Carol Mills, aged 26, and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Sandra Morris, aged 27; Mrs. Sally Cooper and her son-in-law, Thomas Neeson—Sally Cooper was 62, but I do not have an age for her son-in-law—Mr. Paul Nelson, aged 37, and his wife, Dorothy, aged 34; Mr. Gordon Crothers, aged 31, and his wife, Joan, aged 23; Mr. Ian McCracken and his wife, Elizabeth, both aged 25; and, finally, Mr. Daniel Magill, aged 37.

The minister at the funeral of Gordon and Joan Crothers, who left behind a two-and-a-half-year-old child, made the following comment:

"What makes men behave in a fashion worse than the animal creation about them? Animals kill only to eat when they are hungry and, within that law, they are clean. But when men kill in wrath, brutally and without mercy and consideration, from some misguided sense of racial hatred, then they are worse than the mad dogs. They are without mercy and deserve none in return."

I remember the evening of the La Mon bombing only too well. My husband, then a young councillor, visited the site shortly after the explosion and still speaks of the scene of devastation and horror that he witnessed and how even the experienced members of the emergency services were overcome with the enormity and the awfulness of the slaughter and carnage.

I should like to refer to a newspaper account of an interview with one survivor, Mrs. Lynette Holt, recorded in the *Daily Mirror*. She describes the IRA attack as follows:

"I remember a bang and seeing flames all over the dance area, someone pushed me under the table. Then the lights went out. My best friend, Christine Lockhart, was sitting next to me. I don't know what happened to her. I knew if she fell, she wouldn't get up without help because she had an artificial leg. The girl behind me was killed, and my husband, David, was blasted halfway across the room. A man came out onto the dance floor, he was completely on fire . . . like a torch. Then my husband pulled the table off me and shouted at me to come on. I put my hands out to see if I could find Christine. I wanted to drag her towards the kitchen. The smoke and flames were like plastic burning. You couldn't breath. I knew that if I didn't get out I would suffocate. I was in a pitch black cloud of smoke, and all around me were people screaming and panicking. The heat was indescribable. I felt my back was on fire."

I have given Lynette's description, although I have to point out that it is only one of many such accounts from people who suffered injury or bore the loss of a mother, father, wife, husband, son or daughter. Yet who is listening to these people? Who is allowing them to tell of their pain and suffering? Who is investigating these events and reporting on them? The Police Service of Northern Ireland tells us that the file is open, but those responsible are not even being actively pursued by the police. The families want an inquiry. The Government say that it would not be appropriate. The Minster wrote to me almost a year ago in response to my letter asking for an inquiry, and said:

"Bloody Sunday for example, was different because where the State's own authorities are concerned, the Government must be sure as it can be of the truth, precisely because in this country we pride ourselves on our democracy and our respect for the law, and on the professionalism and dedication of our security forces."

That statement might have flowed well from the Minister's pen, but it was received with astonishment by the victims who read it. This, they would tell the House, is precisely why an inquiry is needed.

The Government's policy in Northern Ireland is to place in government those who represent the organisation that carried out this attack. More than that, the distinct possibility is that a candidate for one of the top Government posts after the next election will be the man who was arrested by the police during their investigation into the bombing, and who is known to have had control over the team responsible for this outrage and carnage. The car that was used in the terrorist attack was hijacked in his area, and those brought before the courts came from his area of command. *The Daily Telegraph* of 20 February 1978 said in its editorial:

"One of those now being detained for questioning in connection with last Friday's murders is Gerry Adams, formerly known as the head of the IRAs Belfast Brigade and now described as an active member of provisional Sinn-Fein. If the evidence to support any specific criminal charges against this man is not forthcoming, he will presumably be released to continue in his activities. Can this, as things are now, be right?"

There are many unanswered questions and many people to be called to account. I believe that the victims of La Mon cannot simply put this chapter behind them until such time as they obtain answers to their questions. There should be no cover-ups and no one should be above the law. The police are certain that the attack was sanctioned and approved by Gerard Adams, who was then in command of those who are known to have carried it out. The extent of his involvement in the planning and directing of the attack also needs to be probed. When the Minister says that

"the Government must be as sure as it can be of the truth, precisely because in this country we pride ourselves on our democracy"

I agree with her. Indeed, that is the case regarding the victims of the La Mon bombing. Do the Government not want to be as sure as they can be of the truth of La Mon before advocating that one who it is believed was intimately and directly involved in masterminding and ordering the carnage at La Mon should be placed at the head of our democratic institutions in Northern Ireland? Can the Minister imagine what it must be like for those affected by the La Mon bombing to have to live in Northern Ireland every day and to witness Mr. Adams being elevated and courted by this Government while they live with the loss that he was complicit in causing?

I am proud to say that Castlereagh borough council, of which I am a member, has supported the La Mon victims committee in all its work, including the development of its bursary scheme. The council has also dedicated a stained glass window in its council chamber to the memory of the 12 innocent victims. The words of the Ulster poet, James Hewitt, are used:

"You say the name and I see the place—La Mon."

Although I believe that today is a time for remembrance and for respecting and honouring those who were murdered, we have to do more. None of those people were military or police targets. The Provisional IRA can make no excuses. The La Mon victims were innocent, decent, respectable citizens who were out for a night of enjoyment. As hon. Members would expect, the IRA bombing of La Mon House hotel continues to cause anguish and pain to this day. Those left behind have not forgotten it, and I will certainly not forget them. It is right and proper that that crime against humanity is investigated and the truth made known. We need closure, and to stem the pain and show that the suffering has not been in vain.

As the victims prepare for the 25th anniversary of the bombing, the Government can show understanding and solidarity with them by announcing an inquiry. Frankly, the relatives and surviving victims are not asking for another farce such as the Bloody Sunday inquiry. They want a simple, legally competent inquiry that allows their questions to be directed to the relevant individuals and conclusions to be reached.

Is their pain less important than that of the relatives of Bloody Sunday? Are they citizens with lesser rights? Should not the Government take more care to ameliorate the hurt of the innocent victims of terrorism rather than pandering to and appeasing its perpetrators?

"La Mon—you say the name and I see the place."

Yet I also see the aftermath. I see the legacy of the bombing on the lives of those it touched. I see the scars on the bodies and the minds. I see the cruel loss of those who have had their loved ones plucked from them. I see the hurt and the injustice. I see decent people crying out to be heard, and those who had courage in the face of adversity now showing courage in the face of obduracy. I see a great and terrible wrong that must be put right.

In the name of those who cannot speak, I urge the Government to act.

6.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Desmond Browne): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Mrs. Robinson) on securing the debate. She has done us all a service by enabling the House to remember the tragic events of 25 years ago on Monday, when the La Mon House hotel was bombed. I congratulate her on ensuring that the anniversary did not pass unmarked by Parliament.

As the hon. Lady reminded us, the details of the attack on the La Mon House hotel are horrific. We recall that outrage not only with sorrow but with revulsion. For those to whom the subject is only a faint memory, it was opportune for the hon. Lady to recall the details of the event. It was clear from the manifest emotion that that engendered in her that she feels for the victims and survivors in a very personal way. The bravery that she showed in articulating the story as she did has done us a great service. It was a privilege to be present.

I intended to refer to the details, but it would be an inappropriate use of the short time that I have left. I do, however, want those present to understand that I know the details of that particularly horrific attack. Reminding myself of them in anticipation of the debate brought home to me the nature of the horror. As Minister for victims, I have had the privilege of hearing many moving stories and meeting many brave people. I would not seek to pick out any individual from among those who have survived or been hurt by this terrible tragedy, but one of the most moving stories of all was from Rita Crawford, who lost her daughter Elizabeth and son-in-law Ian McCracken in this incident. As the hon. Lady reminded us, they were just 25. They were newly married. I met Mrs. Crawford last May during the

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

golden jubilee garden party at Loughry, and I was particularly struck by her dignity and spirit in the face of such overwhelming tragedy. She is a true heroine.

I have not yet had the privilege of meeting many more of those who were affected by the La Mon House atrocity. I am sure that they will be consistent with my experience throughout Northern Ireland: all victims and survivors of violence over the past 30 years are, in their own way, heroes. They are the people who have paid the price of the violence that has scarred Northern Ireland for the past three decades.

Mrs. Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Browne: I will just finish this point.

At this time, when there is talk of acts of completion, it is imperative that those who are involved in discussions give the victims of violence their rightful place. I will ensure that that is done. It is a pity that the hon. Lady's party is not represented in some of those discussions, especially in the implementation group for the Belfast agreement, where I intend to hold discussions with politicians in Northern Ireland about victims.

Mrs. Robinson: Is the Minister aware that, on Sunday at 2.30 pm, Castlereagh borough council will hold a service at St. Finian's church? I am sure that the families would be delighted to have the Minister in attendance, if that were at all possible.

Mr. Browne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the invitation. I am sure that she will understand that, because of my present responsibilities, my diary is very full. I will have to check what I intend to do this Sunday, but she can rest assured that, if it is at all possible, I will try to be there. However, I have to spend some time with my own family; I know that the hon. Lady will appreciate that, as she has a family herself. If I am unable to be there, it will be for pressing reasons, and I am sure that the hon. Lady will pass on my regards to the people who will be present. My thoughts will be with them on Sunday afternoon.

On the principal call that the hon. Lady made, I will have to disappoint her. I was not the author of the letter to which she referred. However, my fellow Minister who penned that letter gave the appropriate response at this time to the request for a public inquiry. Having listened carefully to the hon. Lady, I say to her with the greatest respect that the Government have no plans to establish a public inquiry into the tragedy at La Mon House. However, I understand the arguments that she made. In particular, I understand the reference that she made to the Bloody Sunday inquiry.

In the two minutes remaining, I want to set out in greater detail what was said in that letter. I know that the hon. Lady is a great supporter of our police force, the public prosecution system and the legal system. She holds them up, as I do, as examples of how crime should be pursued. It is because we take such pride in the police and the court system throughout the United Kingdom that we must make every effort to ensure that nothing detracts from the highest standards of behaviour in our police forces and in the administration of justice. There must be nothing questionable in their actions, nothing indefensible in their behaviour, nothing iniquitous and nothing base. That pride in the police and security forces has caused the Government to agree to investigate cases where allegations have been made against them—those very few cases where there has been cause for concern about their actions. We want to trust them; we have to trust them. We must therefore ensure that we are able to trust them. Our police and security forces must be whiter than white. That is why we have these inquiries. They are not designed to punish the police or to make comparisons between the police, the security forces and the other victims of crime. We have a different structure for dealing with such cases. The police investigate, and as the hon. Lady said, the police file is still open.

If there is additional information and evidence at this remove from the incident, it should be examined by the police. We should not set up inquiries which compete with the police investigations and which somehow suggest that there is something that the police could have done at the time. We know full well that that was not the case. Indeed, at the time, about 100 members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were devoted and deployed to the investigation. As the hon. Lady has pointed out, 25 people were arrested, including Gerry Adams. One man was successfully prosecuted and he was given 12 life sentences for the manslaughter of those who died. As the hon. Lady will know, he served more than 15 years in jail.

It is because we rely on that structure to investigate and to prosecute that the Government do not draw the comparisons that the hon. Lady asks us to do. We do not say the same things about the police force as we say about terrorists. We rightly treat terrorists as criminals and look to the police to investigate them and the courts to punish them. Therefore, we entrust the investigation of the bombing at the Le Mon House hotel to the police.

The hon. Lady made an implication that, in my respectful submission, is not fair. I do not believe that it would be fair to the men and women of the RUC or the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who have served and who have continued to serve the people of Northern Ireland so bravely, to have them treated in the same way as we treat the other investigations that we carry out. Conversely, it would not be fair to grant to the terrorists the concern that we give to the security forces and to their standards.

I deeply regret that that is my response to the hon. Lady. We should not forget the frightful deaths at Le Mon. The House is grateful to her for giving us the opportunity to consider the issue today.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Seven o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 4 February 2003

[MR. EDWARD O'HARA *in the Chair*]

Army Barracks (Deaths)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I am grateful to be called to address an issue that is of such widespread public concern. In the previous Session, 128 hon. Members of all parties joined me in signing an early-day motion calling for a public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of four young soldiers at Deepcut barracks in Surrey. My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster), one of whose constituents died, regrets that he cannot be present today and sends his apologies. The Minister knows of his interest in the case, but my hon. Friend is where I should be—at an important meeting of the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Since last October, the families of Sean Benton, James Collinson, Geoff Gray and Cheryl James have been joined in their quest for a full investigation of Army deaths by the families and friends of Paul Cochrane, Ross Collins, Richard Donkin, Tony Green, Dale Little, Aled Martin Jones, Alfie Manship, Gary Riches, Richard Robertson, Alan Sharples, David Shipley and Christopher Young. The issue goes far beyond Deepcut barracks. Young soldiers are dying needlessly in barracks in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Germany and Bosnia. Whatever the circumstances of their deaths, those young people joined the Army full of hope and expectations of a great career. Their families grieve for the waste of young lives. It is a matter of worry for every Army family and every hon. Member.

I wish to pay tribute to the courage of the mothers and fathers who have placed the intimate circumstances of the deaths of their sons and daughters in the public domain. I have been overwhelmed by the love that has given those families strength. The force of their determination has broken through a wall of silence. Despite their loss and profound grief, the families have told their story and acted with great dignity. They are bound by a common search for truth, but also by the conviction that it is worth persevering if other families may be spared the loss and heartache that they have suffered.

Whatever the cause of death, families in such a situation experience hardships over and above their immediate loss. In many cases, they were far away from where the death occurred and were usually excluded from the scene of the death. They have experienced great difficulties in discovering how their children died, and they felt that the Army establishment closed ranks against them. Hon. Members will be well aware that it was the pressure of the families that was instrumental in persuading Surrey police service to extend or re-open investigations into the four deaths at Deepcut barracks. I am not seeking to pre-empt the findings of that inquiry in any way.

I am pleased that the Surrey chief constable and his team have drawn from the Macpherson report and made considerable efforts to involve the relatives and their legal representatives in the investigation. Uniquely, that courtesy has also been extended to hon. Members who have expressed an interest in the outcome. It is not for the police to reach conclusions. In due course, the results of their investigation in each case will be passed, in the first instance to the Director of Public Prosecutions, if appropriate, and the coroner.

In those cases where an inquest has already been completed, it will be for the coroner to decide whether to re-open the case on the basis of fresh evidence. The chief constable is acutely aware of the public interest in the investigation and has been at pains to demonstrate the service's resolve to identify systems issues in the course of the inquiry. In the jargon of modern policing, his officers have established a "learning account" on which our colleagues on the Defence Committee, which is looking into such matters, could draw, as could a wider public inquiry.

I pay tribute to the journalists in press and broadcasting media who have encouraged the families to tell their stories and to bring the matters to the attention of the general public. I have been taken, too, by the spontaneous generosity of the experts who have given their services freely to assist the families in their search for truth. The insight of forensic specialists, legal advisers, public relations professionals and academics, as well as that of agencies such as the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission, has been enormously important. I have benefited from the input of hon. Members from parties across the political spectrum, as well as from my own. This is not a party political matter, but a matter of national importance and interest.

I want to develop further the case for a tribunal of inquiry to be established under the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921. I believe that there is an overwhelming public interest in establishing a judicial inquiry with the powers necessary to appoint investigators, hear evidence and determine the truth. There is a feeling throughout the country, whether or not it is justified, that complacency and cover-ups are rife in the deaths and other issues. I believe that public confidence can be restored only by an inquiry whose independence is beyond doubt.

I am aware that the Ministry of Defence is not generally well disposed towards public inquiries. However, no one is looking at an inquiry on the scale of the Saville tribunal—a very necessary one in my view. A modest inquiry can satisfy the required terms of reference. I am not looking to undermine the Army or to challenge military discipline. On the contrary, an Army looking to the future has everything to gain by co-operating fully and learning from such a tribunal. I want a positive and open-minded response from the Minister. I hope that he can find words to express his support for the families of victims and understand some of the frustration that they have experienced. I trust that he can honestly acknowledge the scale of the problem and, with his ministerial colleagues, undertake to engage in a dialogue that can assist in the search for truth.

An inquiry into Army deaths must listen to all those families who have so far expressed doubt and suspicion about the death of their loved ones, and it must be

[Mr. Kevin McNamara]

prepared to hear new cases. When a fresh investigation is required, it should be conducted wholly independently of the Army and the original investigating force. The inquiry should be UK-wide and cover all sections and all ranks of Her Majesty's armed services. It should invite the views of victims and the opinions of experts. It should meet in public and publish its findings.

The inquiry needs to address two issues. First, it must examine and make recommendations concerning the environment in which the deaths are occurring, so that deaths may be prevented in future. Secondly, it must study and make recommendations that will provide a prompt and effective remedy.

On the environment in which the deaths occur, I make a number of observations. Each year, there are around 9,000 new recruits to the armed services. Up to a third of the total are child soldiers. The policy of recruiting under-18s must be re-examined. The Ministry of Defence has a general duty of care towards employees, especially when potential misuse of lethal weapons by under-18s is involved. Too many young recruits at barracks such as Catterick are dying through a lack of adequate supervision and proper pastoral care.

In October last year, the Minister responded to public pressure by asking external consultants to conduct a tri-service review of internal practices involved in initial training of non-officer recruits. However, some of the incidents went beyond the period of initial training. While we welcome the publication of new research, the transparency of the process leaves something to be desired. The families of the victims have yet to be approached for their views. According to Ministry figures, between 1984 and 2001 there were 445 recorded suicides in the armed services, which is too many, and the figure is disproportionately high for a disciplined and secure service environment.

There must be better safeguards against suicide and self-harm which provide in-house assistance independent of the chain of command. Too often, the problem has been that a person has to complain about his bullying to the person who is the bully. Military discipline and punishment must not override the protection of soldiers at risk. Doctors and welfare professionals must be given appropriate standing. They must be independent of the chain of command.

After the locum at Deepcut was asked to leave last November, I was surprised to discover that the barracks have used no fewer than 32 civilian medical practitioners in the past three years. In many regiments, there is evidence of a culture of extreme bullying, routine violence and sexual harassment that constitutes torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. Preaching zero tolerance from the sidelines is no longer enough; the perpetrators must be hunted out and prosecuted relentlessly, and such practices eliminated.

In too many cases in which criminal offences have been committed, the Army is perceived to clam up, close ranks and protect its own. It must demonstrate through exemplary action that there can be no impunity for perpetrators. Whistleblowers should be encouraged, and potential witnesses guaranteed protection. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye pointed out, the Army has taken a cavalier attitude towards coroners' inquests. Although it recorded the decisions made, it did not take notes of what took place—or at least did not keep them.

On the means by which to provide an effective remedy, at the most simple level we need effective monitoring and the provision of statistics concerning deaths, injuries and internal discipline. The pervasive culture of secrecy within the military is entirely inappropriate for modern management, and it fosters abuse. According to the Minister's headline figure, 1,748 members of service personnel have died from non-natural causes in or around barracks since 1990. It is evident that a large number of those are victims of road death, as traffic accidents have been included in the total. However, it is clear that at least 100 of those deaths were firearms-related, non-combat fatalities, but I have found it well nigh impossible to get a clear picture of how, why and in what circumstances they took place, and what disciplinary action, if any, was taken.

Bereaved families and the local media have named 23 victims at Catterick barracks, but the Ministry of Defence has been consistently unwilling to provide information that would enable the public to identify clusters of suspicious deaths. The information is not held centrally or in the form requested and, it is said, could be provided only at a disproportionate cost. I hope that public concern will cause the Minister and the Department to change their attitudes, and that the Minister can give an undertaking that he will provide such information.

If deaths are to be prevented, we should establish a complaints procedure that is independent of the chain of command. It is worth considering the case for a new body that would provide oversight. Perhaps there could be an inspectorate of the armed services. The European Court of Human Rights now insists that, in cases of death involving members of the security forces, the independence of the investigation must be structurally guaranteed. The Deepcut investigation has led to some adjustments to the standard operating procedures allowing for police primacy over investigations of suspicious deaths, but I do not believe that they go far enough. If bullying and other malpractice is to be eliminated, there is a strong argument for putting serious assaults, rape and sexual harassment of males and females under the same scrutiny, outside of the police force.

When criminal charges can be brought, there must be provision for greater public scrutiny of decisions made by the prosecuting authorities. The key to justice being seen to be done at all levels is the involvement of the families of victims at a very early date. Uniquely among the cases that I have identified, the family of Tony Green at last saw his killer prosecuted by the courts, but they had no input into the decision to charge the perpetrator with manslaughter through gross negligence. They had no involvement in the prosecutorial service and no access to information. Particularly at a time when the Government are encouraging public debate—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he must be sensitive to matters sub judice.

Mr. McNamara: With the greatest respect, I am not questioning or challenging any verdict; I am talking about the family.

At a time when the Government encourage public debate on the introduction of a five-year mandatory sentence for the mere possession of a handgun, is the Minister surprised that the family consider that a two-year sentence adds insult to injury?

There is already a public debate about the procedures and verdicts that are available to a coroner's court, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye has referred to those in correspondence with the Department. However, that debate also concerns Northern Ireland. The relatives of victims of army deaths have been ill served by an inquest system that is at least 50 years behind the times. There is an issue about a coroner's powers to demand documents and to compel witnesses. There is an issue about the disclosure of witness statements prior to an inquest hearing.

There are issues about the provision of legal representation for bereaved families at public expense, the training and regulation of coroners, the role of coroner's assistants and the financial resources available to coroners. The latter is especially pressing in Northern Ireland. The shortcomings of the Deepcut inquiry have thrown up several issues relating to the practice of forensic experts. It is remarkable that there is no adequate system for the training or regulation of forensic pathologists or ballistic experts.

I have tried to give a flavour of the issues that must be addressed. I have tried to reflect suggestions and proposals put forward by the families of those most concerned. On our behalf, and looking to the future, the Army asks a great deal of its young recruits, and we have a responsibility to ensure their protection. The number of Army deaths speaks for itself. There are clear public interest reasons for establishing a tribunal of inquiry, and, to restore public confidence, that must be conducted independently under the direction of a senior judicial figure.

If the Minister is not prepared to concede my case—and those made by hon. Members of all parties—for a full inquiry, I hope that he will give an undertaking to investigate cases brought before him, to remove barriers to the free flow of information and to set out a programme of transparent measures that will address issues that are identified.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Five hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye and there are three Front-Bench spokespersons. Their wind-ups should start at 10.30 am, so hon. Members who contribute to the debate may wish to tailor their remarks accordingly.

9.47 am

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Thank you for calling me in this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have a clear reason for being here, and that is to highlight the case of my constituent Des James whose daughter, Cheryl Marie James, died on 27 November 1995 at the age of 18. The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) clearly highlighted the general strategic points that relate to that case and covered the issue in general. I shall support his points and his request for action by highlighting that individual case. I do not intend to take long but by your leave, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall be specific about what happened to Cheryl James.

Cheryl James's parents are not confident about the open verdict on her death that was given at the inquest, and that is the heart of my concern. It is important to underline that the parents do not necessarily say that the open verdict was an unreasonable conclusion, but they cannot be confident that a different conclusion would not have been reached if there had been a more detailed inquiry. Des James has highlighted specific concerns that I wish to put on the record. I hope that the Minister will assure me that he takes seriously the request of the hon. Member for Hull, North and myself for an independent and extensive inquiry into Cheryl James's death and into the deaths of others.

The heart of Des James's concern is that his daughter should not have been armed and alone at the gate when she died. The Army confirmed that in a letter to him and described the procedures at the time as having been "misunderstood". In addition, it took the Army eight hours to inform Des James of his daughter's death, which is a very long time. The family did not even know the name of the camp commander in 1995, because he did not contact them. They have only recently found out that it is Nigel Barry Josling.

Mr. James is concerned about how the family were treated with regard to that crucial information. Some family members learned that Cheryl James had died by listening to the news, which shows laxity about how individuals were contacted. It is not right that people find out from the news that they have lost a close family member. Des James was not even given the opportunity to identify Cheryl. A local undertaker returned her body to the village on Friday 1 December, so for the four days following her death the family hung on to the hope that there had been a misidentification.

Nobody from Surrey police contacted the James's family or visited them at any time following Cheryl's death. The first time that the family spoke to the police was in June 2002—some seven years after the death. It is peculiar that the parents were not involved earlier. The greatest single concern, however, is that the only people to have claimed throughout that the death was a suicide were Army representatives. The board of inquiry concluded that Cheryl James committed suicide, but others are more sceptical. The James family are not saying that it was not suicide, but they feel that the evidence was not convincing. The inquest recorded an open verdict, which suggests a degree of support for that view. The James family have evidence that the Army documented the death as suicide one week before the coroner's court was convened. The family worry that there was a desire to come to that conclusion more quickly than the details of the case implied.

The procedural chaos at the time of the death is another worry. Immediately after the death, there was discussion about whether the Surrey police should be involved in the inquiry. However, the relationship between the Army and the police should be clarified. The case for an independent inquiry in all such cases is watertight. At the very least, the James family do not

[Lembit Öpik]

feel that justice was done in the public eye. There should have been a clear differentiation in the inquiry between the Army and those who decided the verdict.

The family do not understand why an apparently thorough initial investigation was completed in only two weeks, but we have already had six months of a new inquiry and it is still not complete. If I had been Cheryl James's parent, I would probably have drawn the same conclusion as Des James and asked the Army the same questions. How can the Army give me a watertight assurance that what it claims took place actually did? How can the Army assure me that there was no bullying and that there were no extraneous circumstances leading to Cheryl James's death?

I hope that I would take Des James's circumspect and measured approach in not pointing the finger of blame explicitly at the Army and by not claiming a different cause of death. His comments have been logical, objective and measured. However, I share the concern that he harbours. If he were able to speak in this debate, he would probably say, "Convince me that I have nothing to worry about and that the tragic death of my daughter was indeed a suicide. Convince me that there is not an endemic problem in the way in which our young people are treated in the Army that caused Cheryl to take her own life. Perhaps most importantly, convince me that there was not a more sinister cause of death."

Des James does not hate the Army or think that it is a corrupt or rotten institution. The Army does a difficult job and, especially in these troubled times, most people are happy to pay their taxes for the services that it provides. However, even the Army should accept that uncertainties such as the ones that we have discussed work against it in terms of recruitment and also against the interests of natural justice. The parents in these cases have a right to expect more considered and cast-iron conclusions on the deaths of their sons and daughters.

The Minister should listen seriously to the examples of Cheryl James and others, and move in the direction suggested by the hon. Member for Hull, North. An independent inquiry into the deaths would aim to provide certainty for the parents about what actually happened. The inquiry would be effective only if the Army is duty bound to provide information in an upfront, clear and non-evasive way, which it would probably be prepared to do were the mechanisms of an inquiry in place.

What is the Minister's perspective on the request for systemic change to ensure that we do not need debates such as this one to get to the truth? Is it possible to set up an arbiter or other independent inspectorate of the armed forces? In the old phrase, if people have done nothing wrong, there is nothing to fear. An inspectorate would reassure young people who are thinking of joining the Army and their parents, and the public at large, that joining the Army does not expose an individual to particular dangers and stress which could be avoided by openness.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Hull, North secured the debate and that the Minister is willing to reply to it. Above all else, for the sake of parents and our young people joining the Army, I hope that we can make significant progress by regarding this debate as a watershed. We seek nothing more dangerous than the truth. If we find that truth, we can clear up question marks left by the past and ensure that such questions do not arise in future.

9.57 am

Sandra Osborne (Ayr): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on securing this debate and on his wider campaigning efforts with the families who have lost loved ones at such a young age. My primary aim is to raise the case of a constituent whose death occurred 11 years ago. In so doing, I am aware of the difficulties of investigating events after such a long time. However, there are striking similarities between my constituent's death and those that we have discussed, and they merit further examination.

I am adding my voice to the plea for an inquiry so that questions can be asked and, I hope, answered. As things stand, we do not know what happened in many of the cases, and that is the most frustrating aspect for the families concerned. There is a perception that there is no robust and effective mechanism in place in the Army to ensure proper scrutiny of unexpected deaths.

The Ministry of Defence and Ministers say that there has been no cover up of any sort, but that has not convinced aggrieved families, the members of which have become increasingly angry about what they regard as a failure to account for their loss. They feel let down by a general lack of concern and what they feel to be a haste to suggest suicide as an explanation and quickly draw a line under the deaths. As a consequence, many people believe that the service that these young people gave to their country has counted for very little.

Alfie Manship was a 20-year-old young man from Ayr, who died on 6 April 1992. I pay a special tribute to Alfie's mother, Jan Manship Milligan, who now lives in the USA, but who has never stopped campaigning with instinct and determination to get at the truth of her son's death. Alfie's case was raised soon after his death by Phil Gallie, my predecessor in Ayr; he was not satisfied by the answer he received and he too believes that the case should be looked at again. For a long time, Alfie's mother thought—like a number of other families—that she was fighting an individual battle. She has, however, communicated with the other families and joined their campaign. She was stunned to hear about the more recent deaths. In her own words:

"Reading the story of Private Gray's death brought shivers to my spine. You see, on 6 April 1992 my son Alfie died in exactly the same manner and I do not just mean similar—I mean exactly. He had also been on guard duty, he had two gunshot wounds to the head, both of which would have killed him outright. However, only one bullet casing was found."

Alfie died in Osnabruck barracks, Germany, but just before that he had left what is now known as Deepcut barracks, where he was bullied to the extent that he needed treatment at Aldershot hospital. By the time that Alfie reached Germany he was in a far more relaxed state of mind. According to his mother, he was coping well and had put the bullying behind him.

Mrs. Manship Milligan was informed of her son's death by a police officer and an officer from the Territorial Army in Ayr, but they could not tell her about the cause of death. She spoke, therefore, on the

telephone to an officer at Osnabruck, who told her, "One bullet, one body, end of story." It had already been decided that Alfie's death was suicide and a post-mortem was carried out before his mother was informed about his death. The Minister stated, in an answer to a parliamentary question, that an internal investigation into Alfie's death had taken two weeks. In Mrs. Manship Milligan's view, however, it was clear from the officer's words that the result was a foregone conclusion. That was not just a despicable way to speak to someone who had just suffered bereavement, it was patently not the end of the story.

There are various contradictions and inconsistencies in what has been said about Alfie's death, which I believe merit investigation. It was three years before the family saw a copy of the post-mortem report. Mrs. Manship Milligan obtained a copy of that report from someone who was unhappy with the finding of suicide. At the time of Alfie's death, the Army claimed that he had been depressed and drinking heavily. It is an alarming thought that, although the Army indicated that he was drunk, he had nevertheless been handed an SA80 and sent about his duties. The fact is that the subject's body contained no alcohol or other substances, according to toxicology tests performed during the post-mortem. His hands were also free and clean, indicating that there was no gunpowder residue.

In answer to another parliamentary question, the Minister stated that Sapper Manship died from a single gunshot wound to the head while on guard duty at Woolwich barracks, Osnabruck. However, the funeral director informed Alfie's mother that there appeared to be two bullet wounds: there was a hole in his cheek and under his tongue and there was an exit wound at the top of his head, which had also been mentioned by the doctor who declared that Alfie was dead. The pathologist had advised that there was also one at the base of his skull. It appears that Alfie's weapon was not checked to ascertain whether it had been fired.

I am dwelling to some extent on the details of this case, but I could say more if time allowed. The more recent cases are under police investigation and therefore it is not appropriate to comment on the details, or to try to pre-empt an outcome.

Alfie's mother was denied an inquest in 1992 because it was deemed not to be in the public interest. The procurator fiscal in Scotland will not hold a fatal accident inquiry if a death has not occurred in Scotland. Alfie's family did not get the opportunity for these contradictions to be raised in public. There was no police investigation. I have spoken at length to Alfie's mother: she knows that re-opening his case and examining it in the context of similar deaths will not bring Alfie back, but doing so may enable her to put her son to rest at last.

If there was a sinister cause behind any of these deaths, a thorough and independent inquiry may prevent the loss of other young lives, which is extremely important. At the very least, it might restore parents' confidence that they can send their children to the Army in the knowledge that they will be safe. My hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North referred in detail to the Army's duty of care. I was pleased to hear that the Defence Committee will carry out an investigation, and I look forward to welcoming its report at the appropriate time. However, there is a case for a public inquiry that would enable an in-depth and broad report to be produced, as outlined in my hon. Friend's remit.

I have 16 years' experience of supporting the victims of bullying and harassment. I know how the abuse of power operates. I know the isolating and secretive mechanisms that are used to make it impossible—especially for what are, essentially, captive victims—to protest. The victims are left with nowhere to go if they have no confidence that action will be taken against the perpetrator, and especially if they are not believed. The families of the victims feel that they have not been believed and that they have nowhere to go. This matter is important, and it must be addressed as there is widespread concern about it.

If any parent in this Room were to have any doubts about the circumstances of their child's death, they would leave no stone unturned until they received satisfactory answers. I look forward with optimism to the Minister's response.

10.6 am

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on securing this important debate. I had unsuccessfully sought a debate along similar lines, and I am therefore pleased that we are able finally to discuss this distressing and disturbing issue.

There is widespread concern at Westminster and among the general public about the worryingly high number of non-combat deaths at Army barracks over recent years. We have heard in detail about the matter from the hon. Gentleman. That concern is reflected in the fact that hon. Members of all parties wish to speak in this debate and have signed the hon. Gentleman's early-day motion 63. It calls for a full and independent public inquiry into the Army deaths at Deepcut barracks and elsewhere, and it has attracted 122 signatures.

I fear that public confidence in the Army and the Ministry of Defence has been badly affected by the concerns that have come to light about the deaths at Deepcut Army barracks of four young soldiers over the past seven years, and by how the Ministry of Defence has dealt with the issue. The alarming statistics with regard to the number of non-combat deaths of soldiers at UK Army barracks has added to this increasing public concern.

The concern is increasing in my constituency. I have a constituency interest in this debate because the family of a young soldier who was found dead at Deepcut in March 2002 reside in my constituency. Their son, James Collinson, was aged only 17 when he was found dead last year. I know that his family are listening closely to the debate because they, too, seek answers to what happened to their son and to all the other soldiers.

Hon. Members will be aware that there is a continuing investigation into the four deaths at Deepcut. I do not, of course, want to say anything that could impinge on the outcome of that investigation, but the significant concerns about how the Army and the Ministry of Defence have dealt with the deaths at Deepcut and elsewhere must be aired today.

I suggest that the Army's handling of these non-combat deaths has been entirely inadequate, and that the Ministry of Defence procedures for dealing with

[Annabelle Ewing]

such deaths in Army barracks raise significant concerns that can be properly addressed only by a full and independent public inquiry. The James Collinson case is one example. The Army was quick to reach the conclusion that his death was a suicide. When his father had to contact Deepcut to ascertain the status of the investigation shortly after his son was buried, an official there told him, "What investigation? One bullet, one body—draw your own conclusion." That eerily echoes the information that was given to the family of Alfie Manship. It is a disgraceful way to treat bereaved families of Army soldiers.

The Army rushed to such a conclusion even though no proper investigation or forensic post-mortem had been conducted. There had been no securing of the crime scene, as evidenced by the fact that about eight to nine months later, James Collinson's cap badge was found in the Deepcut perimeter. It had somehow become separated from his cap, which was on his head at the time of his death. Something is surely wrong with a system that allows such conclusions to be reached without any proper investigation. There would be no proper continuing police investigation if it had not been for the efforts of the Collinson family and all the other families involved. That, too, is nothing short of a disgrace.

The fact that the Collinson family had to exhume their son's body in December last year to try to secure a proper post-mortem starkly illustrates the total inadequacy of the initial approach at Deepcut. That was shortly before what would have been James Collinson's 18th birthday. It is unacceptable that the Collinson family had to go through such an ordeal. I would be interested to hear the Minister explain to us all why that had to happen. Why was there no proper post-mortem in the first place? The Collinson family and others have had to fight tooth and nail to have the deaths of their sons and daughters properly investigated. Will the Minister explain why that was so?

The Collinson family and other families involved in this sorry saga had to deal with what they regard as the MOD's excessive secrecy. There have been disturbing developments over the course of their campaign to secure justice. The Minister will know that the Surrey police recently instructed Tayside police to visit the Collinson family home to sweep for electronic bugs. That arose from concerns expressed by the Collinson family and other families. The fact that the Surrey police acted on those concerns shows how seriously the Surrey and Tayside police forces took them. The results of the sweep appear to be inconclusive. The MOD's response, which appeared in a local newspaper, *The Courier and Advertiser* on 27 January 2003, is somewhat curious. Its report states:

"However, when contacted by The Courier an MoD spokesperson was quick to deny the suggestion. 'This is somewhat misguided', he said. 'The army do not go round planting bugs in houses. They are subject to the same laws as everybody else. The military would not bug anyone—only the Home Secretary can sanction such an activity.'"

I find the MOD's response, as reported in *The Courier and Advertiser*, somewhat ambiguous, if not curious. Will the Minister reassure the Collinson family and other families that no UK Department or agency under the responsibility of a UK Department has been involved in any bugging of phones?

The hon. Member for Hull, North rightly said that the MOD has a duty of care, particularly to young soldiers in its charge. Serious questions have been raised as to whether that duty has been properly exercised. The extensive concerns now raised can be properly dealt with only by a full and independent public inquiry. I, too, welcome the Defence Committee inquiry, but it is no substitute for such a public inquiry, which is the least that the Collinson family and other families—not to mention the public at large—deserve. Basic notions of justice dictate the necessary approach.

These young soldiers joined the Army to serve their country, and the military establishment has treated their families shabbily, which is a disgrace. The circumstances surrounding the deaths of these soldiers must now be properly investigated.

10.16 am

Mrs. Patsy Calton (Cheadle): I, too, shall highlight a particular case, which was brought to my attention only yesterday as a result of the publicity surrounding Deepcut. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on securing this important debate. I had not realised until yesterday, as I said, that a family in my constituency was affected by a much earlier case.

Paul Stanley Lowith was training in the military police in Chichester in 1978. Aged 17, he was the youngest of five orphans. His sister, who was just 20 and had recently become a mother, was aware that he was unhappy, and she suspected that he was being bullied. She thought that his mood was strange because he was used to being away from home; like the rest of the family, he had been to boarding school.

All his sister knows is that one night, her 17-year-old brother allegedly took some live ammunition shells, went to the Army firing range and shot himself. The family was told that he committed suicide. His funeral was given full military honours and his military records were sealed for 30 years. The family requested a copy of the death certificate and the coroner's report, neither of which was made available to them.

I have already said enough for everyone to realise that several questions need to be answered. This was a young man without a mother and father, whose guardian believed that the Army would make him a man. Bullying may well have taken place, or perhaps the official version of his death is correct. The truth is that the family do not know, but no evidence was presented to support the official view.

I spoke to the young man's niece on the phone this morning. She is now in her 20s and spoke about the culture of secrecy. The Army, as an institution, must open up and fully answer the families' questions. The world has changed in the past 25 years. This family must know what happened to their brother and they need to have confidence in the information that they were given. For their own peace of mind, they need closure on the issue. Young men and women joining the Army need to know that it can deal with these cases openly, in a way that is subject to public inspection. They and their parents should have confidence that they will be afforded the care that we have heard about in the debate.

10.19 am

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the opportunity to follow the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mrs. Calton), who said that things have changed in the past 25 years, as all of us recognise when we look at what is happening in society. Although there may be a place for measures to train young soldiers for what they may have to face, people will not accept bullying as part of that system.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on securing the debate. On opposite sides of the House, we often spar, but we are at one on this matter: we both want the best for our armed forces and their families.

Paul Robert Cochrane died in July 2001. I had a visit shortly afterwards from his senior officer, who assured me that there was no bullying in the forces. As I served in the Army cadets and have known a number of people in the services over the years, I took that with a pinch of salt. However, it must be put in the context of the publicity. As the hon. Member for Ayr (Sandra Osborne) said, we were told that a person was killed with one bullet, yet there was evidence that there were other bullets. That is the most remarkable form of suicide I have ever come across. These matters must be faced with much more realism than they have been.

I am the Member of Parliament for the constituency adjacent to that in which the Cochranes live. I have met them; they were in touch with me early in the proceedings. They continued the campaign with my colleague in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Sir Reg Empey, and with our defence spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson). We must face issues, or we will not be able to give people satisfactory answers.

I have copies of Ministry of Defence answers to colleagues which remind me of a sermon that I read in my early ministry; it was well set forth, but there was no life in it. I discussed the sermon with some senior colleagues, including the man who delivered it, who said, "Yes, you missed the thunder and the lightning—the atmosphere." Those in the Ministry of Defence who responded to the letters missed the atmosphere of Mr. Cochrane's telephone conversation with his son, who told him about being bullied, which is on tape. Then came the sound of the shot, as the young man committed suicide.

The Ministry of Defence does not say that the young man did not commit suicide, but it wants to discover what drove him to such a situation, and there are no answers that will satisfy anyone. In one answer, it states that it cannot say anything because the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were involved in the investigations. The nation of Northern Ireland has discovered latterly that there has been interference in police investigations; therefore, it is rather suspicious to say that the matter was investigated by the PSNI if no satisfactory evidence has been brought forth. Can the Minister tell us when the board of inquiry is likely to complete its investigations and say whether it has informed the Cochranes of its latest view? Unless there is a public inquiry into the pattern of the deaths, there will be no real satisfaction, and we will hinder proper recruitment for the Army.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We have 36 minutes left. It would be reasonable and equitable for each Front-Bench spokesperson to take no more than a third of that time.

10.25 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I shall not take long to make my remarks because it is clear that this morning there is unanimity across the parties, not only in the early-day motion, but in Members' contributions.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on securing this important debate, and I pay tribute to the families, whose perseverance and fortitude in ensuring that the issues are on the public agenda have enabled them to be addressed in the open way that we all want. It is now for the Ministry of Defence to respond in a similar fashion, as it must want to ensure that the deaths are properly investigated and that lessons are learned for the future.

The Army's equal opportunities statement declares:

"We have zero tolerance of any form of prejudice, harassment or bullying."

However, the Army's words do not always match up to its efforts. The MOD has a steep hill to climb when 43 per cent. of troops believe that bullying and harassment are rife and over 5 per cent. have been victims of such abuse. The focus of this debate has naturally gravitated towards the Deepcut cases. The issue is not just the questionable verdicts of suicide and the deaths of soldiers, but why questions were not automatically asked when such a high suicide rate among young soldiers at one Army base was recorded.

It is almost impossible to believe that that did not raise questions about the circumstances of the tragic deaths. Why was not better care taken of the young recruits? What resources, such as counselling and contacts with non-military welfare organisations, were available to them, if they needed them to cope with the stress of Army life? I welcome the investigation by the Surrey constabulary, but will the Minister assure us that all the evidence secured by the investigation will be available to the families and their representatives, so that they can draw their own conclusions?

The MOD reports that, over the past five years, there have been 93 deaths recorded with an open verdict or as suicide. The fact that the families of 40 of those service personnel are now threatening legal action surely reflects a huge dissatisfaction with, and distrust of, Army protocol and procedure. That must be addressed, and I am sure that the Minister will agree once again that perception matters. We need to ensure that the matters are fully investigated and the findings made public.

The position of the military police, the constabulary and the coroner must be clarified. I say that because in recent years there have been two questionable suicide verdicts in my constituency, although not, I hasten to say, at Army barracks or a military centre. However, those verdicts have raised many questions about the relative responsibilities of the police and the coroner and the way in which families are able to engage in the process with the coroner. When one adds the further significant contribution of the military police and the MOD to that already difficult situation it amplifies the

[Mr. Colin Breed]

need for clarification. I know that the Government are already examining coroners' courts. I hope that as part of that review they will take into account the issues surrounding these cases, and the way in which coroners' courts act in conjunction with the police and the military police. That is an area of civilian life that needs to be sorted out and clarified.

There should also be a review of the support services available to soldiers. Life is stressful enough, and when we recruit young soldiers, particularly those under 18, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that their welfare is looked after. Our soldiers must be in no doubt that the Army and the MOD are right behind them and will defend their interests in every circumstance. It is clear that many soldiers feel unable to discuss or even to raise issues of personal safety with anyone, and that they often suffer in silence.

I also recommend an urgent review of the way in which contact is made with families. We heard some distressing stories about the way in which families are advised of the tragic deaths of their loved ones. That seems to be done in a very cold-hearted way. Regrettably, that was also part of the clarification needed in the cases of civilian deaths that I spoke about earlier.

Families should be engaged at a very early stage. They have rights concerning attendance at post-mortems and what happens after a suspected questionable death, but many families do not realise that they have such rights. Unfortunately, many are not advised of their rights until much later, and by that time they cannot make a valid contribution or become part of the process. That situation needs to be urgently reviewed, so that when the fact of a death is relayed, families are counselled and made aware of their rights.

These are tragic cases. Many of the contributions this morning have been very disturbing. If average members of the public were here listening to the debate, they would want to raise many of the issues that the families are raising. I believe that the families and the general public want answers. Questions have been raised about what happens in our Army barracks and military centres, and the MOD should take the opportunity not only to give its answers through a public inquiry, but to ensure that real lessons are learned. It must ensure that the Army lives up to its statement, which I read at the beginning, that it has

"zero tolerance of any form of prejudice, harassment and bullying."

10.33 am

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on his persistence in the matter, and on bringing it to the attention of the House. He is nothing if not tenacious. I also congratulate those hon. Members who have spoken, some very movingly, about the particular circumstances affecting their own constituents.

No one who has any knowledge of these matters can have anything but the deepest sympathy with the families, not just those who are in the public eye at present, but others who are grieving privately and quietly. There can be no greater tragedy in life than to lose a child who is just embarking on what would have been their career, and we take the matter very seriously. However, in a sense the debate is somewhat premature because, as has been mentioned, the Surrey police inquiry is under way. It is difficult for any of us to comment while that is so, although it provides us with an opportunity to put on record concerns, some of which have been expressed publicly, and some of which have not.

I come to the debate double-hatted, as I am both Vice-Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence and a shadow Defence Minister. For the assistance of the House, I shall mention what the Select Committee said about the matter in a press release last summer:

"The Committee is concerned by events at Deepcut barracks. We are aware, however, that police inquiries are continuing. We have no wish to cut across or interfere with those inquiries. We believe that there are grounds for a Defence Committee inquiry into conditions at Deepcut. We will decide on the scope and nature of that inquiry once the police inquiries are complete."

That, I hope, puts the record straight on what the Committee has decided to do about the issue.

It is important that the military recognises its duty of care to those in its charge. However, we should be quite clear that we are preparing young men and women to take their place in an army trained for combat. That means that training has to be rigorous, and that is more difficult in today's society than it was 20 or 30 years ago, or even, dare I say it, when the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) was enlisted in the Army. Fewer people live away from home today. On a recent visit to Catterick, we went to the rehabilitation centre, where those with broken bodies, leg injuries, fractures and so on were being rehabilitated, because today's young people are not the same as those who previously joined the armed forces. That is not a criticism of them; it just means that the Army has to adjust.

Lembit Öpik: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that a culture of bullying or impropriety would be justified on the basis that we needed to train our young people.

Mr. Howarth: I do not think that anything I said could possibly be construed in that fashion, and certainly that was not my intention.

It is important to put the statistics in context. Figures from the Library show that in 1994 there were 19 suicides in the Army. That is the equivalent, at a rate per million, of 154. That compares with an overall United Kingdom average among males aged 15 to 24 of 115. In the most recent year for which figures are available, 1999, the number of suicides in the Army had fallen to five, which equates to a rate of 45.6 per million. That compares with a UK average of 106 among males aged 15 to 24. The figures show that the Army is conscious of the need to address the issue, and has done so with some success.

The hon. Member for Hull, North mentioned the learning account initiative, which I understand is under way, in tandem with the police inquiry that has been undertaken. The police are giving the Army information from their inquiry to date, and they are telling it some of the things that they think it could usefully learn from the inquiry. The Army should examine two issues. First, it

should consider the risk of bullying because it is completely unacceptable that a young person, or anyone, should be subject to bullying.

The Army must also consider the question of unhappiness. I was encouraged when I visited Catterick and talked to the young recruits. I asked whether they would know if one of their fellow recruits was unhappy and whether they would rally round. To a man and woman—boy and girl—they responded, "Of course we would." We should not underestimate young people's capacity to be aware of difficulties faced by their peers. I spoke to the brigadier in charge of the recruit centre at Catterick who said that the Army is trying to find ways of being more proactive in recognising the signs of potential unhappiness.

As other hon. Members said, the Army must consider who has unsupervised access to weapons. That is important, and the Army need not wait for the outcome of an inquiry but could undertake such consideration immediately.

The services need a better system of family liaison. Individual cases cited by hon. Members today show that there has been inadequate liaison between the Army and families after a tragedy. The Army must get to grips with that and ensure that there is better liaison. Part of the problem is that the Army Training and Recruiting Agency covers a tremendous number of young people. The hon. Member for Hull, North said that there are 9,000 recruits a year, which is a fantastic turnover. After the recruits have finished their training, they go to a regiment, corps or unit. They are nurtured, and an esprit de corps exists, but that is not prevalent in a large training establishment such as Catterick, so more needs to be done.

Mention was also made of the need to maintain barrack-by-barrack statistics to determine whether problems are clustered—I think that that word was used earlier—and whether specific problems exist at specific barracks. The Ministry of Defence said that it would be expensive to collate that information, but I find that difficult to accept. That is one step that could be taken to help to tackle the problem that we face.

Mr. McNamara: Would the hon. Gentleman accept that what made me pursue this course of action was the fact that the Ministry of Defence kept no records of how, why, where and when these events occurred that it was prepared to give to the House or hon. Members in answer to questions?

Mr. Howarth: The Minister will undoubtedly want to address that.

The Army has taken several steps, and I have described some. I understand that there has been much greater clarification of procedures to be followed in the event of a death in barracks. The original standing order was ambiguous, and I understand that there is a new one that clearly provides primacy for the local police force, not for Army investigators. That will be welcome.

I do not believe that the Army is uncaring. On the contrary, it has a vested interest in being seen by young people and their parents as a good employer that cares for those in its charge. Given the need to recruit 9,000 people a year, the Army must recognise that if it does not have a reputation for being a good employer and for caring about people's personal development, it will not get those recruits.

The Army has made it clear that it is recruiting people in a narrow pool. Thankfully, there is limited unemployment in this country, so it is having to compete against all types of employer for its recruits. The position could not have been put better than by my noble Friend, Brigadier Lord Vivian, when he wrote to Lord Bach in June last year:

"I believe that it is a matter of great regret on the part of all concerned for the good name of the Armed Forces that the Ministry of Defence and the Army have failed to respond to this series of incidents by volunteering sufficient and timely information in each case . . . This is the sort of case that can affect recruiting and retention, especially if the general public start to think that The Army is a poor employer and does not care for its men and women, which you and I know has no foundation."

That is why all of us have a vested interest in ensuring that the lessons are learned from the recent tragedies.

In a newspaper article in *The Sunday Telegraph*, an MOD official was quoted as saying,

"we will publicly accept mistakes were made in the way the tragic deaths of these soldiers was handled."

What plans does the Minister have to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated? Are lessons other than those to which I have referred being taken on board today? It has been widely reported that the Army has responded to the deaths with an investigation into how suicides can be prevented. Can the Minister confirm that? Have any preliminary conclusions been reached? Can he confirm that, from now on, the police will investigate all similar deaths?

I have received a letter from a Lieutenant-Colonel Tinckler, a consultant surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps volunteers. Mention was made earlier about the number of medics at Deepcut. I accept that today's debate is about not only Deepcut but other barracks, but the lieutenant-colonel was dismissed from his post as a locum after only two days of a one-month contract, without being given a reason. Does the Minister have any information on the matter which he can share with us? Can he say something about the provision of medical care at barracks throughout the country?

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I should make it clear at the outset that I have recently taken over all training, personnel and welfare functions from my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, with the exception of the Deepcut inquiry. He has been involved in that for some time, so we both felt it appropriate for him to deal with it until the end of the investigations.

I am grateful for the chance given to me by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) to make general points and reply to the debate. As Members are well aware, the Surrey police investigations into the deaths of the four soldiers at Deepcut remain ongoing and will not conclude until early March. I cannot pre-empt the results of those investigations, nor will I comment on matters that are

[Dr. Lewis Moonie]

related directly to them, other than to say that it is my belief that the Army has co-operated fully with Surrey police during the inquiries and continues to do so.

In addition, Mr. Frank Swann, the independent ballistics expert employed by the soldiers' families, has been given full access to each of the sites where the incidents occurred so that he can conduct his investigation. I assure Members at the outset that all their points will receive my careful consideration and, when appropriate, a written reply. I also assure them that any warranted changes in procedure will be made. I make no mistake about that.

My ministerial colleagues, the Army chain of command and I are well aware of the interest that has been expressed by the House, the media and the general public, particularly over the past 12 months, in the number of deaths of Army personnel resulting from non-combatant injuries sustained in Army barracks and elsewhere. While that has, understandably, centred on the deaths of the four soldiers at Princess Royal barracks, Deepcut, it is acknowledged that some concerns expressed have wider implications for the Army as a whole, as is illustrated by the cases that Members have raised today.

I recognise that every death in the Army, however caused, is a personal tragedy that has a devastating impact on the partners and families of those concerned. It is a sad fact of life that non-natural deaths occur in all walks of life. Non-combatant deaths in the Army, and indeed the armed forces as a whole, are no exception. The Army's approach is to be constructive and proactive—to minimise, through training, education and welfare support, the likelihood of incidents occurring that may result in loss of life, and to ensure that, when such incidents happen, lessons are learned to minimise the possibility of them occurring in the same way in future.

While parliamentary and media attention over the past few months has primarily focused on the incidence of alleged suicide in the Army, it must be placed properly in perspective. In doing so, I believe that it is rather arbitrary to make a distinction between the deaths of Army personnel in barracks and elsewhere. Not all deaths that occur in barracks are the result of suicide, as accidents and injuries resulting from training activities also make up a proportion of the total. Similarly, not all incidences of suicide among Army personnel occur in the barrack environment.

Statistical information provides the basis for analysing the number of Army non-combatant deaths due to injury. Substantial work has been undertaken over the past few months to refine that data and bring reporting in line with the Office for National Statistics. The most recently available statistics from January 2003 show that there were 1,763 deaths of Army personnel due to non-combatant injury from 1984 to 2001. That represents the total of deaths through injury, irrespective of how they were caused, where they occurred and whether the individuals concerned were on or off duty. Of that total, 276 were awarded a coroner's verdict of suicide. A further 49 were recorded as open verdicts and 41 still await a coroner's verdict. Of those 366 deaths, 29 individuals were aged 18 or under.

Comparison with the wider civilian population is complicated by the different age and gender mix of the armed forces. In particular, the armed forces have a lower proportion of females compared with the civilian population. That is allied to the fact that females have a lower propensity to take their own lives than males. Allowing statistically for those differences, published research shows that the suicide rate and deaths subject to open verdicts are broadly comparable between Army personnel and the population at large.

Mr. Breed: Does the Minister accept that the statistics are spread throughout the country on an averaged basis? Our concern is the number of deaths at a particular place. If they had occurred in a town or a village, it would have been recognised that something had to be done.

Dr. Moonie: Speaking as an epidemiologist, which I was in my previous incarnation, I should correct the hon. Gentleman's misconception on the distribution of conditions. It is natural for clusters to occur. If clusters did not occur, I would be suspicious about any condition. When checking information on vital statistics, it is important that we check them carefully against the experience in the rest of the population and that we use standardised methods, whenever we can. Only then can we honestly tell whether something is worthy of special note, as opposed to the attention that should be given to any case of non-natural death. With that proviso, it is important that we use the best available standard of scientific information. We have reallocated our cases according to nationally accepted guidelines.

The incidence of suicide and open verdicts in the Army is lower than in the civilian population in the 24-to-39 age group and broadly similar in the 20-to-24 age group, but higher in the 16-to-19 age group. Although the available figures permit a broad comparison with the wider civilian population at this time, the information must be treated with caution for the reasons that I have outlined. The Ministry of Defence is working with the Office for National Statistics, the General Register Office for Scotland and the General Register Office for Northern Ireland to produce a more detailed and refined comparison.

The Army Individual Training Organisation—now known as the Army Training and Recruiting Agency—has come under particular scrutiny as a result of the reporting of events at Deepcut. Fourteen soldiers undergoing initial training died within the categories of suicide and open verdict in the 21 years between 1982 and 2002. A further case—that of Private James Collinson, which has been raised—is still awaiting a coroner's inquest. The Army and the Ministry of Defence share the sense of loss that each of the families feel in such circumstances, and recognise that it is made more acute by the fact that many individuals concerned had been living away from the family home for only a short period.

It is also fully understandable that the families look to the Army to take care of their loved ones, and that they seek to understand all the circumstances surrounding such regrettable events. Nothing can take away the pain, grief and sense of loss that they experience when such things happen. However, the number of deaths must be

put in context. During the period in which those 15 deaths occurred, 250,000 soldiers passed through basic training.

Broader concerns have been raised about initial training in the armed forces. On 17 October 2002, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State announced to the House that he had commissioned a special review of the initial training of all non-officer recruits in each of the three services. That work is being undertaken independently of the service and its respective commands, and my right hon. Friend will be in a position to make an announcement to the House on the findings of the review in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North raised a further specific concern about the incidence of death in barracks as a result of injuries sustained from firearms. Although we are especially concerned about that—in particular, with regard to young soldiers on guard duty—the majority of deaths and suicides do not result from firearm-inflicted injuries.

Firearm injuries are responsible for under a third of all suicides and open verdicts, although the incidence of those in the Army is significantly higher than in the civilian population because of the ready access to weapons. The risk to the individual must always be balanced against the need for the Army to undertake operational and other security duties. We carefully examine such matters. We have been studying this one closely, and we will continue to do so to see whether other changes in procedure can be made that will lessen the chance of such deaths occurring.

Mr. McNamara: Will my hon. Friend undertake that no recruits under the age of 18 will be left alone with Army munitions or guns and so forth, and that that will not be left to the discretion of the camp commander?

Dr. Moonie: On that, I can say that I will take any action that is necessary to ensure that good practice is observed at all times, as I will with regard to bullying. We adopt an attitude of zero tolerance to bullying. A training regime may be felt to be quite harsh by people who come out of it and those who go into it from a domestic environment, but there is a difference between being harsh and rigorous in training to produce good soldiers and bullying, which is totally unacceptable to my ministerial colleagues and I, and to all the senior officers I have spoken to. Any further changes that need to be made will be made to maximise the chance of being able to report bullying and get rid of it, wherever possible.

As usual, time is catching up with me. In summary, commanders at all levels in the Army deeply regret all incidents that result in loss of life, however those might have occurred, and they take very seriously their duty of care towards those for whom they have responsibility, in respect of training and procedures. We have tried to enable soldiers to undertake activities while minimising the dangers involved.

Wild Birds

11 am

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): It is a pleasure to be here this morning, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

This debate started in an unusual way. I was shocked last weekend when Grace, my five-year-old—like all five-year-olds, she knows everything that there is to know about nature and wildlife—asked, "Daddy, what is a starling?" It occurred to me that she had never seen a starling. These birds were once regarded as pests and they were all over the place when I was a kid. However, it struck me that in our small garden at home in Nottingham we have seen neither a starling nor a sparrow, although wood pigeons, blue tits and robins have passed through, and we were thrilled to see a weasel last week. Birds that were common a decade ago seem to be disappearing, even from the acute radar screen of a five-year-old. Alarm bells began to ring, and I thought about the thrushes, blackbirds and many other species that are going missing. The purpose of the debate is to ask the Minister, "What can we collectively do about it?"

We have recently debated the common agricultural policy, and I would certainly hold the Minister tightly accountable on that issue. On this occasion, however, I look to him to give us a few lines on what we can do together to revive some of the species of urban wild birds. Wild bird numbers matter in their own right, but they can also be regarded as a thermometer with which to test the environmental health of the United Kingdom. To their credit, the Government are using breeding bird populations as one such thermometer, and it is obvious from reading it that the UK environment is running a bit of a temperature.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): My hon. Friend will remember that five or six years ago my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister used starlings to monitor environmental pollution. Perhaps my hon. Friend will induce the Minister to tell us how that survey progressed. It was interesting that the starling was picked as a disappearing bird that could reflect what was happening to its environment.

Mr. Allen: My hon. Friend the Minister is well known as a starlingist in government circles, and I am sure that he will tell us about that survey.

During the past 30 years, the numbers of certain birds have drastically declined. The numbers of some thrushes are down by 57 per cent., skylarks are down by 52 per cent., great partridge numbers are down by 58 per cent. and some of our closest neighbours at home have suffered too—starling numbers are down by 71 per cent. and house sparrows are down by 62 per cent. These declines are catastrophic. If we were talking about white rhino or panda populations, everyone would rightly be up in arms. This is happening in the UK, and although the most recent surveys show a modest recovery of common birds since 1998, especially woodland birds, there is still a continuing downward trend in respect of farmland birds.

To pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), perhaps the Minister will take this opportunity to bring hon.

[Mr. Allen]

Members up to date on the state of research. What research is being conducted, what have the researchers reported and what is in the pipeline? We need to know why woodland and urban birds, and especially the house sparrow, have vanished from many of their former haunts. The decline in sparrow numbers has been so steep that many people have commented on the situation. *The Independent*, to its credit, ran a campaign to save our sparrows in order to bring the trend to the attention of the public. There has also been a lot of publicity in greater London that is intended to generate public awareness.

As far as I can tell, no one knows the reason or reasons for the disappearance of sparrows, although it is evident throughout the country from Liverpool to Glasgow, London and my own city of Nottingham. Many explanations have been proffered. Perhaps the Minister can synthesise the current thinking on which is the most likely and perhaps add some further suggestions. The current explanations are as follows: that pollution is killing off small insects and even young sparrow chicks; that there is predation by an ever greater number of cats and birds such as sparrow-hawks and magpies; that there is a lack of suitable nesting nooks and crannies in modern buildings—certainly the highest number of sparrow nests were in buildings and houses dating back to at least 1919—and that the use of pesticides by domestic gardeners, as well as those that we are used to being used on farmland, may reduce the availability of insects.

I spoke to Friends of the Earth this morning. Its representatives talked about a noticeable reduction in aphid numbers and, because of the use of slug pellets, a reduction in other bird foods that would normally be available in domestic gardens. As well as telling us what research is in the pipeline, will the Minister bring together some of the answers as to why there is a clear decline in the number of urban birds?

Dr. Gibson: I wonder whether we might induce the Minister to reflect and pronounce on articles that suggest that radiation from telecommunication masts may have some effect on sparrows. I do not see sparrows using mobile phones, so the masts must be the problem. It may sound trivial, but the environment can change rapidly and have effects on animal life. Does the Minister take this claim seriously?

Mr. Allen: Indeed. In a previous debate we touched on the common agricultural policy, which because of its subsidy regime has undoubtedly contributed to predation of bird populations throughout Europe, not only in farming areas but also in urban contexts. When the Minister goes invigorated—as I know he will be—from our debate to seek further reform of the CAP, I hope that he will feel that he has the massed ranks of bird lovers at his side as he tries to resolve some of the knottier issues. They do not affect only householders and farmers; they have a drastic impact on wildlife in general and wild birds in particular.

I hope that my hon. Friend will seek to use the good work carried out by him and his Department in respect of farmland birds and to point that effort also at urban wild birds. The Government have done a great deal—I commend them for that—and I am sure that he will give us a list of things that they are doing. A great deal is also being done by the voluntary sector. Perhaps I may focus on what is happening in my own county. In Nottinghamshire, the wildlife trust is working closely with farmers and the farming wildlife advisory group to advise them on how to manage their land more sympathetically given the current crisis.

At Attenborough in Nottinghamshire, the trust is creating reed beds for the endangered bittern. The Sherwood Initiative, thanks to a lottery heritage fund, is working towards restoring Sherwood forest as a stronghold for the woodlark and nightjar. The Nottinghamshire wildlife trust is working with a variety of farmers, local authorities and the Environment Agency to restore habitats along the Trent valley. Wet marsh land is being created for lapwings and waders, reed beds for bittern and marsh harrier, and shallow water to create habitats for thousands of wildfowl and waders.

This has knock-on benefits because we can combine enhanced amenities for birds with economic regeneration and the establishment of sustainable flood defences. That focus is clearly on farmland birds. I seek to draw the Minister not necessarily away from them but into a broader focus to encompass the urban bird population as well.

There are some greater problems that I do not have time to mention. Certainly, we should commend the Government's effort to slow and check global warming. If left unchecked, it will have catastrophic effects on all species, including human beings. However, in the medium term, we must plan for the impact of climate change, which is likely to alter the mix of species in the United Kingdom, with some habitats moving northwards and the complete loss of other habitats due to the rise in sea levels.

Bird habitats in the UK are highly fragmented and often isolated, which means that it is more difficult for species to shift naturally if their habitats migrate. The Government should consider that as part of their land use and development policies. The combination of rising sea levels and hard sea walls leads to coastal squeeze with habitats such as inter-tidal mud flats and salt marsh often being lost to the sea because they cannot move inland past artificial man-made barriers. In turn, that has an impact on the numbers of wintering wading birds such as red shank, curlew and wildfowl, including Brent geese and widgeon, for which the UK is internationally renowned.

Wildlife and wild bird numbers in the UK tell us much about the health of our environment. They also matter to those who elect us. I do not need to talk crude electoral politics to my hon. Friend the Minister because although it is part of his Departmental brief, his heart also in the issue. However, it may serve a purpose to remind Ministers and other Members that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has more than a million members, a figure for which any of the parties represented in the House would be most grateful.

Given the importance of the issue, can the Minister assure us that the Government will specifically investigate the plight of urban wild birds, especially the fate of the sparrow, to try to get to the bottom of the

decline in numbers and to find solutions to the problem? Do the Government intend to use planning legislation to protect birds?

Rather than this issue being an aside in diary columns or a funny piece in newspapers, I hope that it is mainstreamed, which I believe is the Minister's intention. There should be a public campaign led by the Government to alert farmers and town dwellers about the problem of the decline in wild bird numbers and to recruit us all to assist with solutions.

I do not want to sound like a "Blue Peter" presenter, but we would welcome the Minister's advice on nesting boxes, the sort of food that householders can supply to assist bird populations and other hints of that type. I do not know whether I should embarrass the Minister by asking whether he has a bird box at his Department or in his garden, but, knowing him, he has several.

Advice on avoiding the use of pesticides should be given across the range to householders and gardeners who care about their environment but may unwittingly add to the problem. They need to grow more shrubs and trees to provide more habitats for the insects that birds feed on.

We are all enthralled when we see David Attenborough on television creating brilliant and beautiful documentaries about the global ecology featuring whales or primates, such as in Sunday's episode. They are riveting to us all. This environmental crisis, however, is literally in our back yard. I hope that the Government agree that this problem is one that they need to address. They need to gather all the different layers of UK society together into one family—farmers, ordinary householders, Members of Parliament and the voluntary sector, which is working so hard on the problem. The Government have some great ideas, especially about farmland birds. With a great public campaign, we may see the revival of some of the species that were once commonplace in our back yard.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on securing the debate, and on the knowledgeable and enthusiastic way in which he presented the issue of bird populations in this country and the undoubted problems that many of them face, which the Government acknowledge. He is right that, with about one million members, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is the largest conservation body in Europe, which illustrates the wide public interest in issues such as birds and conservation.

Dr. Gibson: Will the Minister give credit to the work of the British Trust for Ornithology of Thetford in Norfolk, whose news is regularly distributed to many Members? It works in isolation, in some ways, although Norfolk is a great county—a mecca, indeed—for many birds. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North has visited it several times to see the migratory bird life.

Mr. Morley: I am happy to compliment the work of the BTO, which works for the Department and undertakes a great deal of scientific analysis. Indeed, I shall say a few words about that organisation, as I had the privilege of launching a joint BTO-RSPB woodland bird study at Thetford not very long ago. I should say for the formal record that I am a member of the BTO, the RSPB and various other conservation organisations.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of the decline of starlings and house sparrows. They were once common birds, but their numbers have seriously declined over the past 25 years. The starling is now on the red list of high conservation concern. Its numbers declined by 65 per cent. between 1970 and 1998. Recent research by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs shows that over the past 30 years, house sparrow populations have declined most in the south-east of England. Urban and suburban gardens have seen the most marked fall. In contrast, however, the good news is that they are thriving in urban and rural areas in Scotland and Wales, and there has been a slight increase in populations.

House sparrow breeding, however, has fallen from about 12 million pairs to fewer than 7 million. About 60 per cent. are found in rural and urban gardens. There is no doubt that a combination of factors account for the decline, such as food source and food availability, including for the young, and nesting availability. House sparrows, in particular, nest in old buildings. These days, farm buildings are much tidier and more modern, and modern houses are insulated and draught-proof. It is believed that insulation has denied nesting to house sparrows and starlings.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, pesticide use has had an impact on the availability of seeds and insects. Predation is also a factor, although separate studies of sparrow-hawk predation indicate that it is unlikely to have affected these populations, as sparrow-hawk populations and those of many other birds of prey declined significantly in the 1960s due to the use of pesticides. I am glad to say that many of these species have shown a recovery, but populations are much dictated by food availability. Interestingly, principal prey for sparrow-hawks, such as woodland birds, has increased over the same period, so there is no evidence that they are having a detrimental impact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North asked about the theory of increased telecommunication use and telecommunication masts. I have heard that theory, and have discussed it with some of our scientists. It does not stand up to examination. In Paris, for example, the house sparrow population has not declined. I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that the French are no less averse to using mobile telephones in Paris than in any other city in the United Kingdom. They might, in fact, be a little keener. I do not believe that there is a correlation between mobile telephone masts and the decline of sparrows. It seems more complicated than that. A study is being conducted by several organisations. The BTO common bird census provides an invaluable database for observing trends in British birds. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee is examining the research and will produce recommendations on the problem of house sparrows.

Mr. Allen: I want to underline the Minister's personal reputation on, and commitment to, this subject, not only while he has been a Minister, but since he first

[Mr. Allen]

walked through the portals of this place. Whenever we received queries about the subject, we always referred to him, even before he secured his current exalted position. I will not go into the stories of the Minister doing bird imitations in Committee, because I know that you want me to get on with my point, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

When does the Minister think that the committee is likely to report?

Mr. Morley: I do not have the details on that, but I will write to my hon. Friend. Indeed, he may want more details on what is being done about house sparrows, so I will arrange for that to be done, too.

My hon. Friend asked what the public can do to support birds generally, and house sparrows in particular. Many people feed wild birds in their gardens, which is important, especially during the winter as it means fewer mortalities and a larger potential breeding population in the spring. It is sometimes useful to provide food throughout the summer for supplementary feeding, and water availability is important.

It appears that nesting sites are a factor for the house sparrow. Many people are keen on nest boxes, and my hon. Friend asked what I do. I have a range of nest boxes in my garden—I think that I have seven. They are designed for a range of species including tits, and I have open-fronted nest boxes for robins and two colonial nest boxes that are designed for sparrows. I have my personal biodiversity action plan on tree sparrows in my garden, as I am trying to establish a breeding colony. I have established a wintering flock in a feeding station in my garden, and they are colonial nesters, so I have two boxes of three, which is like a little tenement block for sparrows.

The difference with house sparrows that most people do not understand is that they have a problem with nest boxes. Most nest boxes that people buy are for blue or great tits. That is understandable, as people like to see them in their gardens, but the holes are generally too small for sparrows, and if one wants to encourage breeding sparrows in nest boxes, one needs a larger entrance hole. The boxes are easy to make, and they can be bought. I have specialist boxes and know that as part of several studies into sparrows, suitable boxes have been erected with considerable success. I know that one farm has a line of them and, with it, a successful colony of house sparrows, so the boxes are significant for populations. I also have boxes for breeding tawny owls and artificial house martin nests. I have perhaps gone a bit overboard on boxes, but most of them are occupied and effective.

DEFRA has committed £600,000 to the woodland bird study, which has already received contributions from English Nature and the Forestry Commission. The study is being carried out by the RSPB and the BTO. It is a detailed examination of our woodlands birds, which is interesting in itself, as there appears to be a decline of certain woodland species. There is a decline in the south-east of England, which is strange because it is one of the better forested areas, but an increase in the midlands, including Nottingham. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that. They are thriving in different parts of the country.

There are some issues that we have to understand about why certain species—the woodpecker and marsh tit, for example—have declined, while other woodland species, including most of the tit species and the greater spotted woodpecker, have increased significantly. There have also been increases in a number of wetland species. We have sites of special scientific interest, which are important protected habitat areas, and that protection has been strengthened by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. In the area of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North, there are three SSSIs: Sutton and Lound gravel pits; the River Idle washlands; and the Welbeck estates, which are well known not least for the honey buzzards that nest there.

As my hon. Friend says, in many instances the numbers of farmland birds have declined catastrophically—the tree sparrow population, for example, has declined incredibly by 95 per cent. Much of that is linked to changing farming practices. These changes are not in any way malicious; they have been driven by intensification, trying to achieve outputs, economies and efficiencies. I have to agree with my hon. Friend that many of them have been driven by the common agricultural policy, which has had a negative effect on the way in which the inducements have encouraged intensification in certain farming practices which, in the longer term, may not be desirable or sustainable in relation to the climate and habitat.

It is likely that we will see changes over time. In the interim, we are arguing for changes to the CAP. We are also extending the countryside stewardship scheme and the environmentally sensitive areas scheme, which have been very successful. Schemes targeted at species in decline such as stone curlew and red kite have had considerable success in rehabilitating the populations. I was pleased recently to be in Derbyshire to launch the first RSPB's peak birds project annual report. Part of its purpose is to examine how to arrest the declining population of twite, which breed on the Pennines. I am confident that we will make progress on that issue.

Our new entry-level agri-environment schemes, as part of the reforms recommended by Sir Donald Curry, will have benefits in relation to the measures that we can implement in farmland areas. The organisation of our agri-environment programmes is undergoing its mid-term review. I know that concern has been expressed about the specialist schemes that can be targeted on species recovery. I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that in terms of future reforms there is no reason why we cannot continue to have specialist schemes designed to bring about species recovery within agri-environment programmes.

Mr. Allen: As time is running out, I am keen that my hon. Friend should refer to my point about wider public awareness and a possible campaign, not least on urban wild birds. Would it be possible, even arising from today's debate, for the Department to issue, if not guidelines, a press release listing some of the things an average person without a great deal of knowledge who wants to do their bit, as well as the farming community, can do to help?

Mr. Morley: That is a practical suggestion. We support the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, which works with farmers and landowners on

conservation. English Nature does a good job with its range of leaflets and information on how people can support biodiversity and wildlife. It is the Government's main conservation arm, and perhaps the most appropriate body to deliver that advice. I shall speak to its representatives on how we can collaborate with non-governmental organisations and wildlife groups on the matter.

I recently took part in the national garden birdwatch, which is run by the RSPB every year. It is a good awareness raiser. I am glad to say that it was launched in No. 10, because it demonstrates our commitment as a Government to biodiversity, conservation management and the issue of wild birds. As my hon. Friend rightly stated, the Government have set public service agreement targets, both in terms of restoring farmland birds but also in relation to birds as a quality of life indicator, which is important.

I appreciate my hon. Friend raising this serious quality of life and conservation issue today. We take it seriously and I shall look closely at his helpful and considerate suggestions.

Sitting suspended till Two o'clock.

Flooding (Thames Valley)

2 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I was lucky to be chosen to lead the debate, but the issue goes beyond party politics and my constituency all the way up the River Thames. Some hon. Members had worse experiences than mine, and they were at least as heart-rending.

I asked for the debate because I want help from the Government, not because I want to play the blame game or to point a finger, although it may come to that. We also need help from elsewhere, but that is not the subject of the debate.

I want help from the Government on three counts. First, I want to get the facts and the truth. Secondly, I want the Government to draw up plans for the future now that we know what can happen. Thirdly, inevitably—I am sure that the Minister guessed what I would say—I want to request money.

It may be self-evident, but the message time and again from people who have lived in my constituency for a long time is that they know about flooding, they have seen it before and they understand it, but this time something different seems to have happened. I keep hearing that; it is a subjective view, but we need to address it. Some have argued that there was more rain than there had been before, and some that there was less, but there certainly was rain, and the river rose rapidly. Some say that they have never seen it running so fast and we need to know about that.

The result, inevitably and predictably, was flooding. The flooding of land is inconvenient and a nuisance, but if open spaces flood, up to a point one can say, "So what? That is what open spaces are there for." However, it is the flooding of properties that hits the headlines and in that respect the constituencies of other hon. Members may have fared worse than mine. It surprises me how difficult it is to get the facts, but the best estimate is that between 100 and 150 properties actually had water inside them, but hundreds of others nearly did and the residents are worried about next time.

I do not suggest that people whose properties were flooded with river water and rain water did not suffer a huge personal crisis, but I want to concentrate on flooding with sewage, which is in an entirely different category; it can be linked with other flooding, but it can occur on its own. In some groups of houses in my constituency, the sewers were blocked because the pumps would not work, with the result that people had sewage all over their gardens or in their houses. They had to use a mobile toilet at the end of the road, whatever their age, and whatever the weather and the time of day or night. That was a horror above all horrors, and that is what hugely exercises my mind.

The overarching debate about flooding has two parts. First, what happens to the rain and river water and, secondly, what happens about the sewers? The first concerns the Environment Agency and the second Thames Water. The issues overlap, but they can be considered separately.

[Mr. David Wilshire]

I speak only for Spelthorne, and leave other hon. Members to say what happened in their constituencies, but in the most recent emergency the councils certainly came across as having learned from the flooding two years ago. Their response was better. I would not say that it was perfect, but lessons have been learned. The police have also learned some lessons, as their gold and silver command response appears to have worked better than two years ago. The fire and rescue services have similarly improved. I think that they have been buying boats, and I plead with the Minister to let them buy a few more. The emergency plans have been worked on, and I will say something about the need to improve them, but it would be churlish of me not to recognise that lessons have been learned since the last flood.

Before we say what we should do about the flooding, we need to understand the causes. I am the first to admit that I do not yet understand what happened.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and apologise to hon. Members that I will not be able to remain for the full debate because, as they know, I am deeply involved in the subject that is being debated in the House.

I want to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his tone of inquiry. The most important task is to find out why the flooding happened and what can be done in future. I am concerned by the speculation in and around Slough about whether the Jubilee river is the cause. The case is not proven, and I hope that in the debate we will be able to uncover what difference the river has made and the lessons that we need to learn.

Mr. Wilshire: I agree absolutely with the hon. Lady. Like her, I have many constituents who are convinced that the Jubilee river caused the flooding. My response is that it could have. I can see the argument that it was the cause, but I can also see the argument that it was not. As a layman, I do not know. That is why my first plea is for the truth, because only when we have it can we make plans. If the Jubilee river is not the cause, we will have wasted money spent on trying to improve it. If it is the Jubilee river, we must do something further.

We must get to the facts. Three themes and theories have emerged from my constituency about the river and rain flooding. The Jubilee river theory is the first. Some of my constituents are convinced that the Thames barrier was the cause, and other constituents believe that the flooding was caused by a lack of dredging. They believe that, and we have to give them enough information to work out whether their beliefs are right or wrong. We cannot just leave them with those assumptions. I hear regularly that Thames Water has not invested enough money in the sewers, has lacked interest in the problem and was incompetent during the emergency. I say that with some trepidation, because I do not believe any of that, but it has to be put in the open. It is being said, and if it is untrue, we have a duty to dispel the myth. If it is true, we must act on it.

I hope that the Minister will respond. The first question is whether the Government can help us get the facts. There is no point in having plans for the future based on fiction; we need them to be based on fact. We need to know whether the flooding was different and, if so, why. We have made some progress. During the emergency, the Environment Agency was available and frank, and I thank it for that. It has improved its response in the two years since the last flooding, and it was accessible at least to me. I defend it for having its priority as the emergency. Since that finished, it has been open. It has held two all-day public sessions, taken the abuse on the chin and said that it wants to find the facts, for which I applaud it. It is now conducting research and re-running the computer model used at the public inquiry, which had to happen.

During the emergency, Thames Water was overwhelmed, and there must be a lesson to learn from that. It was difficult to get hold of, although I accept that it had enough people demanding help without being annoyed by an MP. However, it has also been difficult to get hold of since the flooding. I am sorry to say that it has been a little coy, so perhaps we can work on it to be as open as the Environment Agency. It must tell us—the Government can persuade it if necessary—exactly where the real sewer problems are, as they are not always where they appear to be. It must tell us what needs to be done to solve those problems, and when it is going to take that action.

We also need independent verification. Understandably, when people face such difficulties, they tend to say, "Ah, well, how do we know that the body that we hold responsible is being open and honest when it does the research?" I applaud Spelthorne borough council, which is running Elmbridge borough council, by all accounts. It has jointly commissioned an independent expert to do some research to be compared with that done by the Environment Agency. That might sound wasteful, but I support it because people need reassurance. Will the Minister lend his support to that independent verification and reassurance, rather than merely saying that it is the agency's responsibility? There is a limit to how much local authorities can afford to do, but the Government have the power to make grants available. If they do nothing else, will they help to fund the exercise of reassuring local people and commissioning research to be compared with other research that is being done?

We must decide what we intend to do to protect people in the Thames valley against further flooding. Nature being what it is, I accept that there will always be problems, but what do we intend to do to minimise the risk and the damage? It would be churlish not to admit that there have been improvements. The Thames barrier and the Jubilee river stop flooding, whatever one might say about them. Whatever one might say about local issues, a scheme at Stanwell Moor in my constituency has prevented some 150 houses, which are regularly flooded, from being flooded.

Work has been done and progress has been made, but it is blindingly obvious that more must now be done in the light of what happened a few weeks ago. I accept the Environment Agency's argument that the recent floods were comparable to, but not as severe as, those in 1947. However, it also says that if we want a quick fix, we will have to double the width and the depth of the Thames to cope with the extra water that goes down the Thames past my constituency. I am not calling for that, as it would lead to the destruction of heaven knows how many houses and most of Staines town centre. It is not a solution. I mention it merely to indicate that quick

fixes are not necessary available to us. We must consider how we can take immediate action, which means focusing on smaller schemes if necessary, as they can be designed and implemented quickly.

I hope that the Government will support the argument that a short-term solution would be to find ways of diverting the floodwater away from properties on to open land. We should try to find quicker and cheaper ways of taking limited action. There is a caravan park in my constituency that is right by the Thames, and I am told that it should be possible to send the water around it rather than through it. Such a measure would help. We could become locked in a debate about dredging. However, this is not such a debate but a request simply to clear the rubbish from the tributaries. My attention is regularly drawn to the fact that that work has not been done. All these measures are short term and easy to carry out if there is the will and the Government help.

There must be a commitment greatly to invest in upgrading the Victorian sewerage infrastructure. I look to the Government to help with that. Other practical measures need to be taken that do not cost money. The Minister will be pleased to hear that I shall leave the subject of money—the best bit—until last, although he will not escape a request for a cheque or two.

With regard to the planning guidance, much comment is made about inappropriate building in the flood plain. Planning policy guidance note 25, which was introduced in July 2001, is scheduled for review in 2004. Will the Government please review it now to see whether it is still appropriate in the light of what has happened?

I draw the Minister's attention to the Deputy Prime Minister's wish to build more and more houses in the south-east. My constituency has a quota to be met. We do not have much choice but to build on the flood plain because there is nowhere else left. Will the Government get rid of the ridiculous request to build more houses in Spelthorne?

Norman Baker (Lewes): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Is he aware that the current absence of regional policy means that houses are being built on the flood plain in the south-east, while in Hull 10,000 houses are being knocked down?

Mr. Wilshire: I would love to go down that route, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I have a great deal more to say about the Thames valley and I am not at all familiar with what is going on in Hull.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) is more about flexibility around housing targets than housing need, which in my constituency is very high. We have to find places to build houses, especially affordable ones, but I accept my hon. Friend's point that inflexibility leads to pressure for inappropriate development.

Mr. Wilshire: Exactly so. I do not want to go down that route. All that I am saying is that we do not want any more houses in our flood plain, thank you, whatever the debate about need. If there is a need for houses, put them somewhere sensible, not in Spelthorne flood plain or anyone else's flood plain.

The Minister might want to consider another practical and technical issue. Some roads in my constituency needed closing. The procedure for closing roads and keeping them closed does not work. The result was fisticuffs and the police became involved. The Government could deal with that issue.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Does my hon. Friend agree that a principal problem, which I also experienced in my constituency, was the lack of manpower available to Surrey police, which as we all know results from the swingeing cuts in grant to that force?

Mr. Wilshire: Absolutely right. I would love to have a debate about that too, but I might get a chance tomorrow afternoon to slag the Government off about the way they have treated my local police. For the moment, I shall stick to flooding.

I noticed in *Hansard* on 27 February last year at column 1351W that the Government said that they were reassessing the methodology governing their economic appraisals of flood schemes. Quite right too. Will the Minister tell us how that appraisal is going? Has he now changed the methodology? Will he also tell us what plans he has to get emergency plans revised quickly, and will he publish the results when he obtains them?

Financial matters are the key area in which the Government have a role to play. When we have plans to implement, when we have the facts and have done the design work and know what has to be done in the short term, will the money be available? Who will provide it? I hope that the answer is the Government.

The outcome of the floods in 2000 was that, as recorded in *Hansard* on 14 May 2002 at column 555W, the Government made available £16.35 million to meet the emergency costs and repairs. How much money will be available this time? The problems have been worse. Can we therefore assume that the amount of money will be greater, and, if so, by how much? Are the Government willing to help us meet the cost of independent verification?

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) spoke about police grant. The same is true of the fire and rescue services. The formula does not seem to take any account of the need to deal with such emergencies. Will the Government review their formula for funding fire and rescue? More boats are needed by the Surrey fire service and, I suspect, in Berkshire too. How much money will be received?

What will we be told about the flood defence committee grant? I understand that the Thames region grant in the year 2002–03 was £1.1 million, and that it has just been announced that for this year that amount has been cut to £300,000. What is it about the Thames valley that means that the same amount of money is no longer needed? If the Government are tempted to say that that is because the flood committee has balances of £17 million, I have a further question for the Minister. Why have those balances been allowed to build up when work needed to be done? The Minister cannot hide

[Mr. Wilshire]

behind the issue of balances because those balances should not have been there. Why have the Government allowed those balances to develop?

My final question with regard to finance concerns what should be done about Thames Water. Thames Water has spent a huge amount of money on the priorities of the day, which are, generally speaking, Government driven. The amounts of money available for investment through Thames Water are determined by Ofwat in its settlements. I accept that a large amount of money has been made available for improvements to the sewers. However, the past few weeks have demonstrated that nothing like enough money has been released to Thames Water to carry out the work needed on the sewerage systems of my constituency and elsewhere.

What will the Government say to Ofwat about releasing more money into the system to make those improvements? I could go on at length. Sometimes, in a debate such as this, one has the wonderful opportunity to speak for an hour and to put the entire world to rights. There are many other things that should be said, and many other things that are important. However, I urge the Government to accept the debate in the spirit in which it is intended. This is a request for help and not for finger pointing. We need help to establish the facts, to develop practical solutions and to pay for those solutions.

I reiterate that this is not merely an academic exercise, nor is there a need for another report, another debate or a committee meeting. The image that I leave with the Minister is that of some of my constituents, who have had to walk around their living rooms with raw sewage up to their ankles. That sewage is still in their gardens and in the roads. This debate is about individuals in crisis and is a problem that cannot be ignored. I urge the Minister to accept that we need help now, and that action must be taken very quickly.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Edward O'Hara): Order. I remind hon. Members that the winding-up speeches should start at 3 o'clock. Hon. Members wishing to participate should gauge their contributions accordingly.

2.22 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire)—a place where I spent some time when growing up—on securing the debate. I remind him that the floodwater that passes through his constituency flows through mine a few hours earlier and through that of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) a day earlier than that. It is a problem that we share.

I will adhere to your strictures to be relatively brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker, not least because I had prepared a speech on reform of the House of Lords, which would probably not go down very well in this Chamber. I have considerable interest, both as a Member of Parliament and as a fisherman, in the levels of the River Thames, and in some of the appalling devastation as a result of the floods this year and in 2000–01.

What is the cause of flooding? I shall come to the urban myths later, but primarily flooding is caused by the quantity and location of rainfall, which catchments are most affected, and the state of the aquifer at the time. That is the difference between the flooding in 2000 and the flooding that we have just experienced. The aquifer—the underground reservoir—was denuded during the exceptionally low rainfall in the late 1990s, and so was not fully charged as we approached the winter of 2000. Consequently, although there was a phenomenal amount of rainfall—some of the heaviest rainfall to be recorded in recent years—it was able to go somewhere before the rivers overtopped and the flood damage occurred. Sadly, that did not happen earlier this year. The aquifer was fully charged and the combination of heavy rainfall in the Thames catchment in Gloucester, in the Cotswolds and further down the valley resulted in the highest levels since 1947.

I shall describe what happened in a small part of my constituency called Purley on Thames, which is not well known. It has an interesting history but, sadly, as the hon. Member for Spelthorne said, it was built slap bang in the flood plain, and perhaps even in the functional water meadows.

The Environment Agency, which was responsible for providing flood warnings, did its job. On Tuesday 31 December, a flood warning was issued to local authorities and to the local population. The floodwaters did not begin to enter the properties in Purley until the evening of Friday 3 January, three or four days later, and 200-odd properties in my constituency were affected.

Purley is on a bend in the river, just below Mapledurham weir, downstream from Pangbourne and up from Reading. It was a camp site in the 1930s, which slowly transformed itself into a collection of shacks and riverside bungalows. I know it from the 1970s, when I drove there from west London—ironically from the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Spelthorne—to go fishing. I always thought that one day I would like to live in one of those little shacks, although I do not think that any more.

The shacks were developed, some without planning permission and intuitively, as people nailed cladding to the outside of temporary buildings and after five years established user rights. The community was not built by Barratt or Wimpey or to planning guidance. The ad hoc building activities in Purley would have caused a lot of problems, but Purley parish council, an organisation not renowned for its commitment to socialism, did its job diligently and spotted the problem, and in 1966 it produced local planning guidance. A datum level was established some 1ft above the 1947 high water mark. Some of the properties were built to that level and some were not. The question for the local authority is how efficient or effective was their building control and planning enforcement process.

What happened to the people I represent earlier this year? I received a call on the morning of Saturday 4 January from Mr. John Chapman, the Conservative councillor for Purley, for whom I have a high regard. John and I get on fine; we are both passionate about representing our constituents to the best of our ability. I provided John with a set of waders that I borrowed from the local fishing tackle shop and we spent that Saturday morning paddling round Purley.

We saw a good many distressed people who were angry because of the lack of emergency response. People who had just moved into the area and did not realise the house that they had bought was below the 1966 flood planning guidance level were livid. We looked along rows of houses, none more than 30 or 40 years old, and saw properties where the garden had flooded but the house had not. In others, built a foot or so lower—you do not notice that until the floods come—people were distraught and crying because their houses had flooded. One young woman had invested her life savings in a property and the local shop, and was completely flooded out. For the people of Purley on Thames, the planning regime might as well not have existed.

As one would expect in any flood-risk area, there was a compound that held sandbags. Despite a flood warning from the Environment Agency, West Berkshire council failed to provide sandbags. People in the know got the few remaining available sandbags and the rest fell apart in their arms, because despite being given four days' clear notice by the Environment Agency, it was beyond the wit of West Berkshire council to fill bags with sand and make them available for the council tax payers in the flood-risk area. I hope that the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) is listening, because West Berkshire is a Liberal-controlled council and it has many questions to answer about its conduct.

The emergency response, of which I am most critical, was mixed. I have nothing but praise for South East Berkshire emergency volunteer force, but the sad fact of life is that its members were the only people on site that Saturday. Did I see anyone there from the local council? In fact, the police were pretty tardy: not many turned up on time. SEBEV was there only because one of its prime co-ordinators happened to live in Purley on Thames. The organisation functions from Bracknell. I have repeatedly looked into this problem. There was no guarantee that it would have done such an excellent job of using its boats, evacuating people from property, liaising with the parish council and putting people in emergency accommodation had it not been for the lucky coincidence that one of its co-ordinators lives in Purley.

Yes, the Environment Agency did its bit. The flood warning went out. I advise constituents who live in flood plains to subscribe to the automatic flood warning system. It sends an automatic message to the telephone answering service. Sadly, the Environment Agency's website crashed. I see one or two people from the agency in the Room. I should like to receive assurances that that will not happen again, because people rely on such information. I would not be so forceful if it were not for the arrogant way in which it has behaved subsequently, but my most damning criticism is of West Berkshire council and its failure to trigger an effective emergency planning procedure.

Not only was there a lack of presence on the Saturday—apart from my good self, some volunteers and the local council—the West Berkshire council did not even set up an emergency incident point until the Sunday. People had been flooded for some 36 hours and were distressed. The icing on the cake was the e-mail from West Berkshire council. I am sure that hon. Members would not want a council that they have affection for to send such an e-mail. The council's emergency planning officer sent it to the volunteer chair of Purley parish council, Mr John Southall. Purley parish council has a budget of £46,500 per annum. West Berkshire council has a budget of more than £50 million per annum. We should bear in mind the fact that the e-mail was sent on Friday evening, when floodwaters were entering people's properties. It stated:

"Dear Mr. Southall . . . In view of the flooding situation in Purley I was wondering how you are holding out as I am always, especially concerned for the vulnerable people affected by the situation. Perhaps you could call me or email me on Monday to see whether we can help in any way."

The e-mail was sent by the assistant emergency planning officer of West Berkshire council, who is paid to send such garbage at council tax payers'expense. It said that

"the Parish Council is the place to co-ordinate and organise the help on the ground."

Yes, of course it is, with its budget of £46,000. It went on to say that Mr. Southall's neighbours knew their requirements

"better than the council ever could. We do not want to take that responsibility off you but re-assure you, that we will do everything we can to make Purley as resilient as can be against flooding."

Presumably, that meant the Monday morning. Best of all is the closing line of the e-mail:

"Best regards and our hopes for a dry weekend".

My constituents pay their council taxes for that sort of stuff.

I attended a meeting the following Friday with Councillor John Chapman. Hon. Members should bear in mind the fact that I am a member of the Labour party and he is a Conservative. We were treated to a display of breathtaking arrogance from the Liberal Democrat party, especially from its chief executive, Jim Graham. In my presence, Councillor Chapman was told by the chief executive that he took a dim view of councillors criticising his council in the local paper, and that it is the job of a councillor to represent the interests of the council to the people of Purley, not the other way round. What a perverse notion of democracy.

I have vented my spleen long enough on West Berkshire council. I imagine that hon. Members have taken the point. I can assure them that, for all the nonsense that West Berkshire council has come out with in private, in public it has finally set up a review chaired by Councillor John Chapman into the reasons for the flooding and how the emergency response procedure can be improved. I give the councillors credit for that, but only with their hands twisted half way up their backs were they prepared to concede any point. The review should be completely unnecessary because lessons should have been learned from the floods two years previously.

What can we say now and what can be done to reassure my constituents? Some of the urban myths must be debunked comprehensively. I have heard it said—I am sure that it was also said in Spelthorne, Oxford and elsewhere—that the Thames flooded because the Woolwich barrier was not shut. Absolute nonsense. If that were the case, St. Paul's would have flooded regularly. The Jubilee river can have no effect upstream of the point at which it leaves the River Thames, because water does not flow uphill.

However, other measures can be taken. The civil defence grant available for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which funds emergency planning officers, is about £19 million for the current year. My

[Mr. Martin Salter]

local authority in Reading receives only about £67,000 to fund its entire emergency planning operation at a time when we are at risk from not only flooding but terrorism. That paltry sum must be reviewed urgently. The Emergency Planning Society and the Local Government Association have suggested that £70 million is a more realistic budget for the civil defence grant.

Engineering solutions could help the people of Purley, and I hope that the Environment Agency is able to fund those. I want the Government to ensure that no local authority can hide from the fact that its emergency plan is not working as it should due to lack of support from central Government. That is a challenge to us all, especially to the Minister.

2.36 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): The recent flooding of the Thames had severe consequences for many of my constituents, especially for the communities of Datchet, Sunnymeads, Ham island, Wraysbury and Hythe End. I visited those places, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) and the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), when the river broke its banks, and I saw the disruption and distress caused. People were understandably angry, but it is vital to point out that people performed many acts of kindness and helped their neighbours.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne said, it was clear from the start that local people blamed the new Jubilee river for the problems. Although there was substantial rainfall at the end of last year, most people did not think that it had been exceptional. They thought—probably intuitively—that they had seen rain just as heavy and continuous during recent years, but that that had not caused the dire consequences that they faced. One of my constituents wrote,

"the rainfall and the conditions were nothing like as bad"

as the great flood of 1947. Moreover, some of the flooded houses had never flooded before. People asked themselves what had changed, and everyone thought that the difference was the new river.

I remember the inquiry into the Jubilee river well, and I often visited the scheme during its construction. There were remarkable civil engineering achievements. The river had to go under the old Great Western line, and engineers had to burrow under the M4. The environmental side of the project has been a great success.

However, important questions were raised from the start about how the scheme would work in practice and the effect that it would have downstream of the settlements of Maidenhead, Windsor and Eton, which it was designed to protect. I remember struggling with the complicated mathematic formula—the hydraulic model—that was used to show what should happen in different circumstances.

We were told that when the rivers met at Datchet, a certain volume of water would arrive faster than it otherwise would, but that the river level should not rise significantly. That should have meant that there would be no change downstream of Datchet, but given recent experiences local people who live there do not believe that. Datchet is significant because the Jubilee river rejoins the Thames at Black Potts, which is just above Datchet, to make one river again out of two. That is where the flooding in my constituency began. Hon. Members should also take note of the fact that there was unusual flooding above the point where the rivers bifurcate at Cookham, Bisham and Hurley. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) is concerned about that issue and is acting to deal with it.

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe): Is my hon. Friend aware that some of my constituents in Marlow and Medmenham are convinced that they experienced similar problems to those encountered by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead? Is he aware that both they and I want to be associated with his comments on introducing an independent element to the inquiry?

Mr. Trend: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I will return to that point in a minute. People who live upstream of the beginning of the scheme feel intuitively—I hope that this is not an urban myth—that there may have been a bottleneck effect.

The Environment Agency tells us that the Jubilee river performs the service for which it was designed, which is to protect Maidenhead, Windsor and Eton. That seems to be correct. From the point of view of people who live there, the scheme can be judged a success. Downstream, however, the story is different. The word "sacrifice" came up many times in talking to people and in correspondence. People downstream feel that their interests have been sacrificed for those of Maidenhead and Windsor. One correspondent wrote:

"It is quite clear that the residents of Wraysbury have been made sacrificial lambs."

Another referred to

"this sacrificial flood . . . Surely, shifting the problem from one area to another defeats the whole object of this construction."

One local inhabitant reached this conclusion:

"Maidenhead and Windsor have been protected at the expense of Datchet, Wraysbury, Ham Island and others downstream."

As my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne said, the central issue is about what happened. My constituents want to know whether the problem has been shifted rather than solved. What effect has the Jubilee river had downstream from Datchet? I agree entirely with my hon. Friend: we need to know the facts. An immediate independent inquiry is needed to test the effects of the new river. It is right that the Environment Agency should carry out its own review and re-run the model that it presented at the original inquiry. However, that is not enough. I was encouraged by what my hon. Friend said regarding the local authorities. They had independent professional advice at the time of the public inquiry, so they should get together and secure independent, expert, professional advice to check the Environment Agency figures and they should run their own model, if that is necessary. Only then will the local communities be confident that all that can be done is being done.

We must investigate how the Jubilee river was operated during the recent events, and we need independent professional advice on that. There have

been many theories—some of them are surely urban myths—about the operation of weirs and sluices. I am not an expert on such operations. The December floodwaters were the first real test for the Jubilee river. It is important for its future operation that a judgment is made on how it behaved overall, and that a conclusion is reached about how it was operated.

The maintenance of the river must also be considered. The Environment Agency has told us about the dredging that has been done in the last half century, but we should consider urgently whether more dredging could be done. A constituent who lives on the river told me that jetties and landing stages may not have been constructed properly and they must be examined, as they may be causing obstructions. Ditching and drainage have been mentioned. There were some apparently isolated examples of water welling up some way inland from the river. That was perhaps due to a raised water table being compounded by poor drainage and ditching. That must be considered.

The flood warning system was not satisfactory. For example, the telephone system did not work well in my area. Good local plans must be in place, and I would advocate the return of sirens along especially vulnerable stretches of the river. I remember the old post-war civil defence siren system, which was tested every so often and people knew when it was going to be tested. As a child, I thought that that was wonderful. The people who lived on the banks would have been saved from a great deal of trouble if a siren had sounded when the situation became acute. The other systems did not work well.

I believe that the Government, the Environment Agency and local authorities should consider a range of questions relating to the management of the Thames and its flood plain. Much has been said about building in the flood plain and about terminal 5, which will surely have some effect on the Colne, Colne brook and the Thames. I support my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne in his comments on planning policy guidance note 25.

It is important that we reconsider the plans put forward during the original public inquiry for a further scheme to cover the stretch of the Thames from Datchet downstream. Much was made of those plans some years ago, but it has been lost sight of in the intervening years. When I inquired a few years ago, it was perfectly clear from the Environment Agency's answer that the plans had been dropped. A new scheme should be considered as a matter of urgency, and the Government have a role to play in that.

Key responsibility for the management of the Thames belongs to the Environment Agency, although some of the matters that I have raised, such as ditching, sandbags and cleaning up, will have to be dealt with by local authorities. The royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead did well in that regard. However, some of the main issues can be pulled together only by the Government. I ask the Minister for a number of assurances. First, I ask the Government to play a part in the investigation into the effects and operation of the new river, which is a substantial public project of national importance. The Government have sources of expertise and experience that could be very helpful.

Secondly, a major review of the various factors that cause flooding throughout the Thames valley needs to be undertaken. That is clearly too large a task for local authorities, and I ask the Government to take overall responsibility for such a review. Thirdly, the Government should try to clarify where liability lies. If it can be shown that the problem originally faced by the towns of Maidenhead and Windsor has not been solved, but simply transferred to Datchet and places downstream, then surely there is an important question of liability.

Finally, I ask the Government to revisit the question of flood insurance for homes such as those belonging to my constituents which were recently flooded. As we know, a new system was introduced on 1 January. The Association of British Insurers speaks of using its best efforts for people living in areas liable to flooding, and has said that flood insurance

"should continue to be available for as many customers as possible."

As we all know, that means that insurance will not be available for many households in future. If my constituents could not get insurance, the value of their properties would clearly be damaged, and that is not fair. The ABI has tried to pass on to the Government the responsibility for dealing with the problems of flooding. In my view, the Government will have to deal either with the problems or with the ABI.

People in my constituency who have suffered so greatly in recent weeks must know what happened, and why. I look to the Government to help us to discover the answers.

2.47 pm

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe): I shall be brief. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) for securing the debate, and for introducing it, and I join him in paying tribute to the work of the emergency services in combating some of the distress, anxiety and difficulty that my constituents in Marlow and Medmenham experienced during the recent flooding. They believe, rightly or wrongly, that the Jubilee scheme was either partly or wholly to blame for the exacerbated levels of flooding, but I agree with my hon. Friend that we do not know whether they are right.

The written answer that I received from the Minister on the matter last month is significant. It said that

"the Environment Agency takes the view that the Jubilee River has no impact, adverse or otherwise, on either community."—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2003; Vol. 397, c. 612W.]

The Minister will forgive me if I do not take that as a categorical denial; the agency merely "takes the view". I notice that the agency is also conducting its own inquiry into what happened. Trevor Goodhew of the agency was quoted to that effect recently in the *Marlow Free Press*:

"We do not know whether it worked"—

I believe that the "it" is the Jubilee scheme—

"as it was intended to but rather than look at it ourselves and be accused of prejudice, we are asking independent regulators to do it."

I understand that that independent element is a separate branch of the Environment Agency. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that.

[Mr. Paul Goodman]

In a further written answer, when I asked whether all the information gained by the EA about what happened would be published, the Minister replied:

"As with previous floods, there will be an analysis of what happened and the Agency will make available to the public lessons learnt from this information."—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 734W.]

My constituents feel that unless the agency is open and publishes in full information about what happened in January, an independent inquiry along the lines of the one suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) is needed. Unless the Minister can persuade me otherwise, I am inclined to think that that is correct. The levels of flooding were so exacerbated that my constituents are right to ask for an explanation for what happened. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.50 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I would like to take this debate upstream but not necessarily upmarket from some of the excellent contributions that we have had, and talk about the flooding that occurred in parts of Oxford—in South Hinksey, Kennington and on the Botley road—just as it did two years ago. For the first time, there was flooding in a few properties in Old Botley and Abingdon, as a result of the River Ock flooding. Like the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), I spent much of my Saturday and Sunday seeing the problem first hand—working with the emergency services and council workers and trying to let people know what options were available. I fear that I was not as well equipped as the hon. Gentleman. I had no waders. I had only a pair of inadequate wellingtons that were too short. There is concern about whether the equipment provided for the workers was adequate.

We have heard about the impact of flooding, which can be set out in various ways. First, there is the stress from the fear of one's property being inundated, which is followed by the impact of the actual flooding. I do not recommend removing properties in the flood plain and building them somewhere else, so the only solution is the provision of adequate flood defences.

With the exception of Abingdon, all the areas that I mentioned are affected by the same tributaries to the Thames flooding over the flood plain, so the key question for the west Oxford area is whether there will be an adequate flood defence system. Without one, I fear that it will be difficult to overcome the problems of insurance. I entirely endorse the wise words of the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) about insurance problems.

Mr. Salter: The hon. Gentleman and I have constituencies with a similar geological make up. A substantial gravel seam in the Thames valley runs from Reading upstream to Oxford. Does he acknowledge that one of the problems is that, as the aquafer rises, water can literally enter people's properties without overtopping the river purely as a result of the rise in the water table? It is important that we do not give false hope to our constituents by talking about flood defences that may not yet be technically feasible.

Dr. Harris: That may apply to a small number of properties, but the ones that I am concerned about could be improved by flood defences because they suffer from direct inundation from the street rather than from within. Flooding has an effect on house values and, therefore, the mobility of the population, because people find it difficult to sell their houses and move. The problems experienced by houses in the flood plain have been exacerbated by subsequent developments in the flood plain when those involved in the planning system should know better.

Guidelines could be toughened up in the review of PPG25. The Vale of White Horse district council in my constituency has a new policy. It not only treats the Environment Agency as a statutory consultee on developments in the flood plain, but never disagrees if the EA advises against planning permission for flood plain developments. That is not the case with other local councils, but such practice could be included in guidance to beef it up.

During flooding in the Oxford area, some things went well and some went badly. The emergency services performed well, particularly the fire and rescue services. They were there, they were available, they had their mobile phones and went from house to house when requested. Another thing that went well were some functions of the Environment Agency—their workers on the ground and the supply of pumps, which in many cases kept the water at bay.

I pay tribute to Innes Jones, Geoff Bell and Peter Collins, the engineers, who were on the ground with me on those days. They made themselves available to see the situation at first hand and helped to deploy their facilities. Council staff worked hard and the supply of sandbags was better. The flood defences that had nearly been completed in Kidlington were not called into action, but at least people in that area were not as stressed as they feared that they might have been in view of the 1998 floods. Another thing that worked well was the action and initiative taken by local people, such as Mr. Andy Webber of Earl street, and Mr. John Mastroddi of Kennington road in Oxford, who took matters into their own hands by alerting their neighbours and getting stuck in with the deployment of pumps.

What did not work well, according to a council debrief that I attended, was the command structure, which was not up and running quickly enough and was not centralised enough. Road closures were not clear. The Botley road should have been closed; the wave effect from large vehicles going down it directly exacerbated flooding and it was not clear why the police did not close it earlier. The warnings were inadequate. Websites are there to be updated and they can be specific. They can warn, "People in Botley road in Oxford ought to know that flood waters are not predicted to peak until tomorrow, so even if one thinks it is getting better, please do not remove the precautions." It would have been better for us to have had loudhailers, because that would have got across the message. Some hon. Members perhaps do not need

loudhailers in the Reading area, but they would have been a boon, because they would have got the information directly to the people who needed it.

Thames Water did not work well. We have heard about the sewage problem. There will always be sewage contamination of the highway drainage and vice versa, but Thames Water has since got its act together and has set out a second stage study. It will take six months to complete, at a cost of £25,000. In a letter of 29 January, Thames Water states:

"Whilst we hope that this study will help us identify a solution to the flooding problem, we must make the best use of our resources and, with this in mind, I regret that I cannot confirm that funding will be available for any suitable scheme."

That question has already been raised by the hon. Member for Windsor.

Finally, we must consider the performance of Railtrack in dealing with the culverts for which it is responsible under the railway line at Kennington. It has delayed and that is still considered to be a problem by people in that area. Therefore, there is a great deal for the agencies to do and I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.57 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) on securing the debate. I want to express sympathy to my constituents and my thanks to the Surrey fire and rescue service and Runnymede borough council for their sterling efforts during the crisis. My hon. Friend said that we are not in the blame game. Everybody here will understand that the initial reaction of people whose houses flooded just two years after what they thought was a once-in-a-lifetime event is anger. As that sentiment subsides, cooler heads are prevailing and, as my hon. Friend said, people want to make sure that they find out what happened, so that there is a firm base of evidence to build on in planning for the future.

Hon. Members have mentioned the maintenance of water courses, the contribution of the Jubilee river; and the operation of weirs and barriers on the Thames. There is a huge need for an independent element in the analysis of those problems. The Minister was shaking his head earlier, when my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne was talking about the lack of independence in that one department of the Environment Agency audited another. However, I think that the Minister will accept that there is at least a problem with the public perception that the Environment Agency is both the promoter of major infrastructure projects, such as the Jubilee river, and the regulator that ultimately has to assess whether those projects are working.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I will deal with that in my reply. First, the EA schemes are subject to independent assessment by Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs engineers—who are not part of the EA. As for the Jubilee river, which I will look at in detail, the assessment was made by a completely independent consultant who is not part of the EA.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the Minister. If he can elaborate on those remarks during his reply, it would be helpful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne said, Runnymede, Spelthorne and Elmbridge borough councils have immediately taken the initiative in appointing an independent hydrologist. He will review the events, so that they can talk to the EA on a qualified basis, rather than retelling residents' anecdotes, which is important, but not definitive. I join my hon. Friend in asking the Minister whether he can help with the funding of that initiative by councils.

There are questions about the effect of the Jubilee river, other man-made influences and river maintenance, but there is also a willingness to recognise that the end result of the analysis might be that climate change is ultimately responsible for what occurred. If that is the case and we must accept that such events will happen more frequently, given that river defences in London were improved 30 or 40 years ago to good effect—there has been no flooding since—are the Government prepared to support the major expenditure on infrastructure that would be required to take that approach further up the Thames to secure the defence of areas such as Chertsey, Egham and Staines? We know that the Government propose to abandon the flood defences of several rural areas, but I hope that the Minister will assure us that the flood defences of urbanised areas will remain a Government priority.

May I suggest to the Minister that if climate change is responsible for the floods, there would be no more appropriate source of revenue for the funding of flood defences than the climate change levy? When that was announced, it was supposed to be revenue neutral, but the Government have since reneged on the reduction of employers' national insurance contributions that made it revenue neutral.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are talking about flood defences.

Mr. Hammond: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but the financing of flood defences is an essential part of the issue.

If it turns out that heavy rainfall and climate change are the root cause of the problem, we shall look to the Government for investment in effective management in order to allow those of us with constituencies along the river to live with the changed situation. That will mean making necessary resources available to the Environment Agency and other bodies.

Tomorrow, the Deputy Prime Minister will announce his communities plan to the House of Commons. The Government recognise that development in the south-east is inevitable and necessary in order to maintain national economic growth. The policy will be hollow if the Government do not address the significant investment that will be required to protect vulnerable areas of south-east England from coastal and fluvial flooding over the next decades.

3.2 pm

Norman Baker (Lewes): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) on securing the debate and on the way in which he presented his case. May I offer my sympathy to his and other hon. Members' constituents who were affected by floods? My constituency of Lewes was severely hit in 2000 and I am only too aware of how severe and traumatic floods can be for individuals who are caught up in such unfortunate events.

I understand from a parliamentary question answered by the Minister earlier this month that the flood was the third worst in the Medmenham and Marlow areas since records began. The flood was worse than that in any other year except 1894 and 1947. We know that 645 homes were flooded during the new year holiday period, and we have seen on our televisions that this is the anniversary of the terrible floods of 1953. Floods are sadly always with us, and they will always be with us. There is nothing that any Government—not even this Prime Minister—can do to stop floods from occurring. We can try to ensure that we put in place measures to minimise the impact of floods on our citizens and the Government can put in place measures to slow down climate change, which several hon. Members rightly mentioned.

Climate change is undoubtedly occurring. The Thames barrier has been mentioned, and hon. Members might be aware that in 1982, it was planned that the barrier would last unchanged until 2030. It was anticipated that there would be 10 closures per year in this decade and 30 closures per year by 2030. However, there were 24 closures in 2001 and there were 19 closures this winter. It already seems that the Thames barrier is under increasing pressure, which must be caused by climate change.

I understand that the Environment Agency has a £4 million project to plan for flood risk management in the Thames estuary. It would be useful to know what progress has been made on that and what further expenditure the Minister anticipates along the Thames to protect London, which is key to our national position.

In the context of climate change, it is important that we put in place measures that minimise the requirement for flood defences to try to solve the root problem rather than deal with the sore that arises as its consequence. It is interesting that building is now taking place on flood plains, although the Government are taking steps to stop it. However, we have an overheating of the south-east compared with almost dereliction in some parts of the north, because the Government fail to have a proper regional policy. It has been predicted that carbon dioxide emissions from air travel will double between 1990 and 2010, the Government are abandoning road traffic reduction targets, and the amount of energy generated from renewable sources went down last year from 3.3 to 3.1 per cent. There has also been an international failure to ratify the Kyoto agreement by some of the key players, not least the Americans and President Bush. All those factors, which may seem a long way away, have an impact on the Thames valley, as they do on my constituency and all others in the country.

The Minister can do his best to erect flood defences, but it will not solve the problem unless his colleagues in Government take the necessary steps to deal with climate change, and I am sad to say that they are not. However, there are steps that the Minister can take to improve matters in his own Department as well. We are seeing an increase in the money allocated for flood defences, to which the Minister will doubtless refer. However, we have not yet seen any Government action to sort out the bureaucratic and shambolic arrangements that have been in place for so many decades, if not centuries, in this country to deal with flood defence. So many bodies are involved. All have powers, but none has a specific duty to get on and do something.

When a flood occurs, after we have tried to deal with the immediate aftermath, the question is who is responsible. Is it the Environment Agency, the water company, the Highways Agency, the county or district council, the internal drainage board, Railtrack or the riparian owners? The Government need to get grip on that and ensure that a clear, workable structure is in place. By putting money into flood defences, the Government have put more fuel into the car, but they have not dealt with the fact that it is barely roadworthy. Until they do that, we will continue to struggle.

We need to ensure that we do not always leap to the assumption that the best solutions are always hard engineering measures. It may be that they are the best option for individual towns, but I do not think that sufficient attention has been paid nationwide to the opportunities presented by soft measures. We could examine the use of farmers' fields for flooding and riverbank heights to the north, south, east and west of towns. Those measures have a role to play, but the Environment Agency seems to look to hard engineering measures first, just because it has always done that. I will stray briefly to the subject of Lewes. The Environment Agency has been able to come up with a complicated plan for Lewes, but it has been unable to reach agreement with half a dozen farmers south of the town to use their fields for flooding if necessary. If that is replicated in the Thames valley and elsewhere, something is wrong with the system.

The hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) raised the question of West Berkshire council. I thought that he was uncharacteristically acerbic in his presentation, and I wonder whether he would have been like that if it the council had been Labour run. I am sorry that he brought a party political point—

Mr. Salter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Baker: I have barely raised the matter, so perhaps the hon. Gentleman will let me finish it.

I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman brought into the debate a party political point that had been happily lacking in other contributions. I also think that he was wrong to refer to an officer of the council in critical terms rather than a councillor. Those officers are not elected, and it was wrong to say that he had a party allegiance.

Mr. Salter: *Hansard* shows that I was critical at Prime Minister's Question Time of my own party's lack of financial support for the civil defence grant. I had some

stern words to say to Reading borough council about its sandbag policy. Even in this debate, I did not shrink from drawing to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister the inadequacies in the emergency planning funding regime. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that I have been anything but partisan.

Norman Baker: I am grateful to hear that. I always have time for the hon. Gentleman and that helps to put the matter in context. I am always wary of attacking individual councillors and others in Westminster, when they are unable to answer back effectively. I could say many things about my own county council, which is not Liberal Democrat, but I usually restrain myself for those reasons.

Finally, I want to speak briefly about the planning of flood defence schemes for individual towns. Evaluation of properties is an important issue: they are often grossly undervalued, so the cost-benefit ratio of what can be achieved in a particular town is sometimes out of line. More proper calculations are necessary and we should also examine the Environment Agency's requirement to apply cells to specific towns. Again, they often fail to provide a townwide solution and leave some areas unprotected, causing conflict in the communities. Some of those undesirable aspects of the problem apply nationally, so when plans are brought forward for the Thames valley and elsewhere, I hope that the nationwide problems will be addressed as part of the process.

3.10 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) on securing this timely debate and on the tone of his speech, which was greatly in the spirit of inquiry. He made some thoroughly practical suggestions and sparked off useful contributions from other hon. Members.

This year we commemorate the 1953 flooding disaster when the North sea took England by storm. On the night of 31 January 1953, wind speeds of 125 mph were recorded before the tidal flood descended on the east coast. Three hundred and seven people died, 24,000 homes were damaged or destroyed and more than 30,000 people were evacuated. Nearly 200,000 acres of land were inundated and 100 miles of road and 200 miles of railway were seriously damaged.

Speaking on 30 January this year at the 1953 floods conference in Norwich, the Minister assured his audience that the Government were committed and on track to meet the challenges of flood and coastal defence for today and tomorrow. He contrasted 1953 with today, stating:

"We do live in different times—not least because we are better at warning people. In 1953, there was no national warning service. Emergency plans were hampered by poor communications."

In the light of the flooding disasters of Christmas and new year 2002–03, the Minister might be accused of a certain wishful thinking. Despite 136 flood warnings, 645 properties were flooded, some in my own constituency. Many were left stranded and without communication when the Environment Agency's website crashed due to over-use. Apparently, the problem was 40 times worse than in the year 2000 and, as we have heard, the Thames valley was particularly affected—not just by river water, but by overflowing sewers bringing the most stinking of consequences.

I am concerned that the consultation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the flood and coastal defence funding review explicitly excluded from its scope

"emergency planning and emergency funding arrangements".

If the Minister acknowledges that flooding is a natural phenomenon that cannot be eliminated, and admits that the risk to people and property can be managed, why were contingency provisions omitted from the consultation? I recognise that it is also a Home Office problem, but we are told that we have joined-up government.

Mr. Morley: The answer is simple: the Home Office is carrying out its own review on emergency planning, dealing with some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West, particularly in respect of funding and organisation.

Mr. Sayeed: DEFRA is the lead Department. It is extraordinary that DEFRA's consultation paper, "The Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review", did not deal with emergency planning and emergency funding arrangements. Will the Minister tell the Chamber when the conclusions to that consultation will be published? I have asked the Minister that question several times and have yet to receive an answer.

Flooding is often mentioned in the same breath as admirable terms such as sustainability, strategic approach and integrated management, but how much of them did we see in relation to the flooding in the new year, and how far have they been put into practice in the Government's long-term vision for flood and coastal defence? Operational responsibility for flood defence rests with the Environment Agency, the internal drainage boards, the local authorities, the maritime local authorities, the water companies, the riparian owners, and so on. That is hardly conducive to an integrated strategic and streamlined approach that would have the flexibility to recognise and react to specific local needs.

There is a case for a statutory duty for operational authorities to carry out flood and coastal defence activities rather than their current permissive powers. Will the water Bill, which is due to be published very soon, include powers to rationalise the two-tiered flood defence committees? How will the Government ensure that decision making does not become too remote from local interests? What consideration has been given to the establishment of a single executive operating authority, possibly the Environment Agency, funded by a central grant, that would require action to be taken in the event of an emergency and apportion responsibility and costs afterwards in order to prevent a problem from becoming a disaster? Such decisions could be subject to an appeal system, and should be monitored to ensure impartiality.

When will the Government realise that flood plains contain areas that provide general economic and environmental benefit to the greater community, not for capital gain by the development and building industries, but as water-absorbing land that can reduce the risk of flooding elsewhere? Some 27 per cent. of new property by value throughout England and Wales, including £80 billion of property in and around London alone, is built on flood plains. How many more millions of households

[Mr. Sayeed]

are to be exposed to increased flood disasters, lack of insurance cover and a drop in property value that renders homes a worthless asset? Why are the Government putting more people at risk of flooding while planning to introduce taxes to pay for more, crucial flood defences? Why are more than one in three applications to build homes on flood plains being approved while the advice of the Environment Agency is ignored?

Last year, the Government approved 288 of the 758 planning applications that the Environment Agency objected to on the grounds that they would mean building on flood plains. One in five of the rejected applications were then passed on appeal, against the agency's advice. The Deputy Prime Minister's regeneration scheme for the Thames Gateway region would put another 1 million people at risk from flooding.

Will the Minister confirm that he is considering a new tax on property developers to pay for the erection and maintenance of flood defences on flood plains? Will local authorities also be expected to top up the flood defence funds in addition to all the other burdens that central Government places on their shoulders? Who will be required to pay for the increased drainage costs? Will it be the existing shareholders who, by and large, do not want even more urban sprawl? Will it be local authorities, which are usually opposed to building on flood plains? It may be the water companies, which will then pass on the costs to their existing customers, who do not want the development in the first place. Those costs may include the cost of new, otherwise unnecessary main drainage systems. How much of the money for flood defences promised by the Minister on a year-by-year basis has been spent on, or earmarked for, flood defence plans agreed by the competent authority? If there has been an underspend, how large is it, why has it occurred and what are the Government going to do to remedy the situation?

Surely it is time that the development of flood plains was capped. The Minister should spend more time and energy researching soft defences—sustainable farming practices that assist water retention and the streamlining of responsibility in view of the increased risk of disasters threatened by climate change and rising sea levels. The exercise of the forces of nature is out of our control, but the minimisation of their impact lies in the hands of the Government. The delivery of a policy that looks beyond sandbags to a long-term preventive strategy is essential before the next disaster catches us as unprepared and underfunded as we were in 1953.

3.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) on the way in which he has raised the debate. He made a number of pertinent points. I regret that in the 10 minutes available to me it will be difficult to answer all the points made by hon. Members. We have had some good contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), and the hon. Members for Windsor (Mr. Trend), for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman), for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), for Lewes (Norman Baker) and, of course, for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed).

I have every sympathy with those, in the Thames valley and elsewhere, who were affected by the floods over the new year. It is very unpleasant to have one's property flooded. I want to place on the record my appreciation for the Environment Agency staff, who worked long hours throughout the holiday period, the local authority staff, the emergency services and the volunteers, who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West stated, gave their time willingly and freely.

I echo the point that this is the anniversary of the devastating 1953 floods, which affected my constituency when the Trent burst its banks. Even though north Lincolnshire is quite a long way inland, the floods reached the edges of Scunthorpe. The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire asked many questions, which I cannot answer in 10 minutes, but the Government are going to arrange a three-hour debate on flooding this month, which will be an opportunity to go into the details in greater depth.

I point out that the hon. Gentleman might have arranged such a debate in his own party's time. This subject is of interest and there are serious issues at stake. We are confident that we are on track to reduce risk. We are not complacent. One can never entirely remove the risk of flooding, as hon. Members have acknowledged, but we have done a great deal in the past few years. There will be an opportunity to discuss the details of the funding review in the debate, and during proceedings on the water Bill, which I expect to be published around that date, we will be able to answer some of the questions raised by the review.

Although the January floods affected about 600 people, for whom I have every sympathy, they were comparable to those of 2000 as there were similar groundwater levels. In some parts of the country the water levels were higher. In the Thames area water levels were at their highest since 1947. In 2000, 10,000 properties were affected. In 2002, 600 were affected. That is no consolation to those involved, but it shows that steps are being taken progressively to reduce the risk.

The 1947 figures for people affected in the Thames region are dramatic. I must qualify them by saying that there are differences in every kind of flood, and the 1947 flood was caused largely by snow melt, whereas this year's flood was caused by intense rainfall over a short period. The way in which the tributaries behaved in 1947 also differed, although some of the tributaries were higher in 2003 than they were in 1947.

I will give hon. Members some indication of the scale of the problems in 1947, although I am surprised at the figures because there has been a lot more building since then. In January 2003, approximately 120 properties in the region of the Thames from Windsor to Teddington were affected—the figures are not yet exact because information is still being received—whereas in 1947 the number was 6,956. We do not have information on whether all the properties in 1947 suffered from internal flooding.

In Surrey, which includes the Thames, Bourne and Wey, 231 properties were affected in 2003, as against 333 in 2000 and 7,015 in 1947. In the area from Spelthorne

borough, which involves the Thames and the Colne, the figure for 2003 was approximately 60 properties, whereas in 1947 it was 2,114. Those figures are evidence of the huge investment in flood defence made by successive Governments.

I shall struggle to respond to all the questions that I have been asked. I shall respond first to the hon. Member for Spelthorne, since it was his debate, so he has perhaps a greater entitlement to answers.

I do not often do this in such debates, but I shall agree to the three points about which the hon. Gentleman asked me. First, he wanted the facts, and we are keen to provide those; secondly, he wanted the plans to be examined in an attempt to minimise the risk to his area, and we are happy to agree to that; thirdly, he asked about funding, and I can assure him that funding will increase year on year.

Mr. Wilshire: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: I have only four minutes remaining, but I will do so.

Mr. Wilshire: Year on year will not do. I want to know how much and when.

Mr. Morley: The actual details are published by the regional flood defence committee, and it has strong reserves to deal with the legitimate issues concerning contractors and land purchases which may arise from the plans. The committee has a very good record.

I shall comment briefly on the Jubilee river, because I know that it is of concern to hon. Members. I should make it clear that, based on the information that I have seen, I am satisfied that the Jubilee river did not have an impact on the properties on the Thames which were flooded.

The Jubilee scheme protected approximately 400 properties from flooding and a further 1,000 properties from disruption by the floods. I understand that people may be concerned about the scheme, which is new. However, its details were examined by a public inquiry in 1992 which concluded that the downstream effects would be minimal.

This year, the water levels rose very fast, faster than in 2000, both upstream and downstream of the Jubilee river. The impact of the Maidenhead flood release scheme on peak water levels upstream was also negligible. The water levels downstream were measured using the best data available from the gauges on the tailwaters of the weirs; the readings of the peak flood levels from those weirs cover all major floods since 1894. If the Jubilee river were causing downstream levels to rise, we would expect to see evidence of that at the gauges downstream of where the Jubilee river re-enters the Thames. However, there is no such evidence.

Mr. Wilshire *rose—*

Mr. Morley: I have only two minutes, and I want to deal with the independent aspect. I will then give way if I have time.

I may be able to reassure the hon. Gentleman about the reviews. The Environment Agency has commissioned Gibb Ltd., which is an independent engineering consultant. That is why there is no case for funding further independent reviews, although I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Environment Agency and DEFRA will be happy to co-operate with any sort of review. Gibb Ltd. was commissioned to re-run an updated hydraulic model, using the 2003 flood data, to determine the impact on downstream flood levels. That model was run with and without the flood alleviation channel.

The preliminary findings presented to the Environment Agency showed no significant difference between levels in the Thames just downstream of where the Jubilee river joins it, with or without the flood alleviation channel. Residents will, of course, be invited to examine the data that have been collected, and to speak to staff about their origin and the analysis. In due course, when the full data are produced, they will be made available to all interested parties.

I hope that in the three-hour debate there will be more chance to talk through the details, but I make it absolutely clear that although I understand residents' anxieties, and we will take steps to reassure them, the Jubilee river was not responsible for the recent flooding.

Alzheimer's Disease

3.30 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): First, I pay tribute to my constituent, Mr. Mervyn Richardson, who brought the issue to my attention and who has been campaigning on behalf of his wife, Beryl, who has Alzheimer's. Much of what I shall say is personal to him, but I will make general points.

There is no question but that the three Alzheimer drugs, which were reviewed in 2000 by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, enhance the cognitive skills of Alzheimer sufferers as well as the quality of life of the sufferers and their carers. It is important to remember the carers, too.

My constituent made a video called "A Sweeter Pill to Swallow—Beryl's Story", which emphasises the improvements that can be achieved. It should be remembered that Beryl started her galantamine—Reminyl—treatment with a mini-mental state examination score of 11. The NICE recommendation is a minimum of 12. By June 2001, within a month of reaching the full drug, Beryl's MMSE score had increased to more than 17. It fell off to 10 in March 2002 and, in accordance with NICE guidance, Beryl was taken off her Reminyl treatment when her cognitive skills fell dramatically.

Beryl was put pack on the Reminyl treatment, at my constituent's instigation, when her skills improved. She was then administered 150 per cent. of licensed dose and she again improved. Her MMSE in November 2002 was recorded as 17. The fact that Beryl was able to contribute to the video made in October 2002 says a great deal about the benefit of the treatment with Galantamine.

All three drugs, Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl, cost about £1,000 per annum, as does memantine—Ebixa. Alzheimer's disease is a major killer in the developed countries; some put it as the third most lethal. My constituent feels strongly that it should be given a much higher priority, as are cancer and heart disease.

All those three drugs inhibit the acetylcholine esterase. In addition, galantamine via the nicotinic receptors enhances the production of more acetylcholine, the brain chemical messenger, on which brain cell to brain cell communication depends. Hence, Galantamine is far more cost-effective than the other two NICE-approved drugs.

In October 2002, a fourth Alzheimer drug, Ebixa, was licensed in the United Kingdom. It works differently from the other three. Ebixa decreases in the brain the level of glutamate, which leads to neuronal disfunction. It has been successfully used in Germany for 10 years and in several other EU states for a varying number of years.

Ebixa is reported to be of value for sufferers with more severe Alzheimer's disease than the other three drugs, and my constituent is concerned that it has not been referred to NICE for consideration. In a parliamentary answer, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), made it clear that that would not happen yet.

Monthly Index of Medical Specialties, in announcing Ebixa, does not refer to it having to be prescribed initially by a specialist, as is the case for the three other inhibitor drugs. Some 60 per cent. of sufferers benefit from the use of the three inhibitor drugs. For some like Beryl, the improvement is dramatic. Some sufferers who do not benefit may not do so because their carers have not been adequately trained in how to deal with the side effects.

The cost of all four drugs is about £1,000 a year, which is good value for money if it delays the onset of the disease and saves up to £20,000 that may be needed to keep somebody in care. As cancer drugs are prescribed in combination, there is an excellent reason for Ebixa to be prescribed in combination with one of the other inhibiting drugs, especially Reminyl. My constituent would like that to be considered as part of treatment in future.

The problem in Poole—there is the same problem in Bournemouth—is that the primary care trust has declined to prescribe Ebixa because its drug budget is about £1 million overspent. Although Andrew Morris, the chief executive, whom I saw at the weekend, said that a much bigger provision is being made for next year, there is a real problem for many primary care trusts, as the Minister will understand.

My constituent is concerned that mismanagement of drug budgets means that pressure is placed on some more expensive drugs, such as those for Alzheimer sufferers, and their not being delivered. His view is that people on prescriptions should be subject to blood tests to ensure that they are taking the medicine. There is a problem in ensuring that people who pick up repeat prescriptions take the drugs. We all know examples of people who do not. I suppose that there are civil liberty worries about that. Nevertheless, we need to manage the drugs budget much better if we are to provide more expensive drugs to Alzheimer sufferers.

In the case of Alzheimer sufferers, drugs need to be used under the supervision of a responsible carer. Hence, the likelihood of an Alzheimer drug being administered as directed is far greater than for any other drug, especially for an aged out-patient. In many cases, the progressive nature of Alzheimer's leads to incontinence, which is degrading to sufferers and carers. The onset of that can be delayed by the administration of, for example, Reminyl. Incontinence pads are expensive and cost many thousands of pounds. My constituent was concerned to learn recently that Dorset health care trust has an 18-week delay before it can assess whether people should receive incontinence pads. Such delays will cause hygiene problems for sufferer and carer, and there is greater likelihood of depression and, sometimes, suicide.

It is important that drugs are prescribed at the earliest possible stage. In times of obvious economic stringency in the NHS, my constituent fails to understand why primary care trusts are permitted to prescribe Aricept and Exelon when it has been clearly demonstrated that Reminyl has double action, and that its effects are greater and last longer.

It is extremely unreasonable of Poole primary care trust to refuse to allow the prescribing of Ebixa when the signs are that that well-tried drug is effective for those in the far more advanced state of Alzheimer's. Additionally, far too many patients who qualify for inhibitor drugs are experiencing delays in referral by GPs. There are delays in assessments and, if a scan is

required, the delays are even greater. As inhibitor drugs slow down the onset of the disease, such delays may have a real impact on their performance when they are finally administered.

There is a difficulty with postcode rationing. Hampshire has a different regime from Poole, and there is a worry that people are treated differently throughout the country. If we study diagnosis and the treatment rate for Alzheimer's throughout Europe, we see that France, north America and Spain have a far higher rate of diagnosis and administration of the drugs than us. I wonder whether the disease has high enough priority in the United Kingdom.

My constituent is concerned that he has had a long fight for the drugs that his wife requires. He is a chemist who has a list of qualifications as long as my arm. He knows what he is doing, and he worked for the United Nations for many years. His worry is about not only his case, but the cases of others who have to fight for drugs on behalf of their loved ones. The important point is that the sooner an assessment is made and inhibitor drugs are administered, the better the patient's chance of at least a good 12 months before the onset of more serious problems. We must bear in mind the consequent quality of life for them and the carer as well as the savings for the national health service.

My constituent is extremely keen on the World Health Organisation's comment that every country, no matter what the constraints on its resources, can do something to improve the mental health of its people. The courage and commitment to take the necessary steps are required. He wants to hear from the Minister that that disease has the highest priority, that there will not be postcode rationing, that the drugs that have an appreciable effect in slowing down the disease are being delivered and that we can improve quality of life for people who face trying circumstances, sometimes towards the end of their years. Occasionally, however, young people suffer from Alzheimer's. It is not exclusively suffered by the elderly.

I welcome the support of my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke). I am sure that our constituencies on the south coast have a high proportion of pensioners, that such problems occur regularly and that the Minister's response will be dear to the heart of many of my constituents.

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. The issue is important, because our constituencies contain a high proportion of pensioners.

One of my constituents contacted me today, and I would like to ask the hon. Gentleman whether he has heard of similar cases. She wants her husband to get the best possible care, so she works in a café at lunchtime to earn the £110 a month it costs for drugs that are not available locally. She is heartbroken that those drugs are available in neighbouring areas.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. As I said—I hope that the Minister responds—the drugs cost about £1,000 a year. Problems can arise if primary care trusts are under budgetary pressures. In such circumstances, people sometimes have to spend their own money on their loved ones. One can understand that, but it is difficult and annoying when people see that neighbouring primary care trusts take a different view to theirs.

I have said enough. I have a great regard for my constituent, and for his caring and campaigning for his wife. I hope that the Minister clearly sets out Government policy on the issue.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on securing this important debate. He has raised issues of wide interest and concern to people throughout the country, not just in his own constituency. I am aware of the campaigning work of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, who has produced a video—which was met with some acclaim—that highlights some of the issues, and I pay personal tribute to the work that he has done in caring for his wife.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of carers and families at the start of his speech. We should all be aware that although such work is often expressed as being a burden, many people care gladly for their families. We must ensure that we put in as much support as we can for people who take on such responsibilities.

Alzheimer's disease affects a large number of people in this country; it involves not only the patients, but their families and carers. Although drug treatment is important—the hon. Gentleman has concentrated on that and I will refer specifically to those issues—care for such patients revolves around a series of health and social care interventions as well as the available medical drugs. It is important that we try to give as much holistic support as we can. Because the disease is so widespread, there is intense interest in new drug treatments that are being developed to alleviate or delay the progression of the disease and which may eventually result in a cure.

It is estimated that there are about 600,000 people with dementia in the UK. About 5 per cent. of people over 65 have dementia, rising to about 20 per cent. of people who are over 80. The number of people who live to a more advanced age is rapidly increasing, so the number of people with dementia is also increasing, and we expect that increase to become significant in the coming years. It is estimated that by 2026 there will be 840,000 people with dementia, rising to 1.2 million by 2050. That is on the horizon, and it will become an area of increasing concern. Many people of advanced years have a wide range of medical conditions, which means that caring for them is a complex task.

It is estimated that Alzheimer's disease causes up to 60 per cent. of dementia cases; the figures that I mentioned earlier are for dementia cases as a whole. Alzheimer's is characterised by a widespread loss of mental function, and features memory loss, difficulties with language, disorientation and, sometimes, a change in personality, which can be difficult to cope with. People with dementia and their carers need high-quality services to ensure effective diagnosis, treatment and wide support.

We recognise the importance of meeting the mental health needs of older people—the hon. Gentleman outlined the World Health Organisation's statement on mental health needs—and that is why we have made it a

[Ms Hazel Blears]

priority. It is one of the eight standards in the older people's national service framework, which shows that it is one of the Government's clinical priorities. The NSF was published in March 2001 and covers a range of issues for older people such as rooting out age discrimination. That is important because age discrimination should not influence the way in which primary care trusts exercise their policies on the prescription of drugs.

The NSF also contains a specific section on mental health care for older people. The standard says that older people with mental health problems should have access to integrated mental health services provided by both the NHS and local authorities which ensure effective diagnosis, treatment and support for them and their carers. That is a wide description of the Government's priority and the way in which requirements should be met locally.

Standard 7 sets out a detailed service model that states what older people with mental health problems are entitled to. It also contains a series of milestones to allow us to monitor progress. They are due to be introduced in 2004, and we are gathering information about what local communities are doing to ensure that they comply with the milestones in the service model. The framework is pretty rigorous and the mental health services that older people receive in the future will not be hit and miss; they should be able to rely on the framework wherever they live.

That is important because the hon. Gentleman made a great deal out of the postcode rationing of drugs, although we were all well aware of that several years ago, before the advent of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, when postcode rationing of services was just as much of a problem. The introduction of the NSFs will do for services what I genuinely believe that NICE did for new drugs and emerging technologies.

Anti-dementia drugs are only a small element of the range of health and social services that older people with dementia need, but it is fair to say that they are becoming increasingly important. Three main anti-dementia drugs are available; their proper names are donepezil, rivastigmine and galantamine. They are used as part of the treatment for people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's, and although they cannot cure the disease, they can delay the onset of more serious symptoms.

In January 2001, NICE recommended that the three drugs should be available on the NHS as one component of the management of people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. We provided that the NHS should be under a statutory duty to make drugs available after a ruling from NICE, and the statutory duty has bitten on the service. People are entitled to expect the three approved drugs to be available when they are deemed to be clinically suitable. If people with Alzheimer's disease meet the criteria for requiring the drugs, they should be able to access them on the NHS.

We are aware that there has been a steady increase in prescribing since the NICE judgment. When NICE considered the issue, it estimated that the total cost of the three drugs was likely to rise to about £42 million a year, but it would take at least three years to reach that level because people would need to go through an assessment and it would have to be determined how the drugs could help with the holistic care of people with Alzheimer's.

Data for 2001–02 indicate that about £13.5 million was spent to meet the cost of dispensing the three anti-dementia drugs as a result of primary care prescribing. Prescribing has continued to increase during 2002–03, although we do not yet have figures for the full year. However, hospitals prescribe a considerable amount of Alzheimer's drugs and that is not included in the PCT prescribing budgets, which means that we do not have the figures on that. We expect prescribing to increase at a steady rate as more PCTs prescribe the drugs. Almost 100 per cent. of PCTs are prescribing the first of the drugs, and about 87 to 95 per cent. are prescribing the other two. Clinicians are finding the drugs an increasingly useful way in which to manage people with Alzheimer's.

The situation is different for the new anti-dementia drug, memantine. It was launched in the UK in October, so it has not been around for very long. Because it is the only drug for moderate to severe Alzheimer's, there is inevitably great interest in its availability. We do not yet have any prescribing data with which to analyse its availability, but we know that some people are obtaining it on the NHS and some are obtaining it privately.

The state of affairs is clear. NICE has yet to assess memantine for clinical and cost effectiveness, so for the moment NHS bodies across the country have to access the publicly available evidence and determine local policies for the drug's use. The same applies to any treatment that has not yet been approved by NICE; that is an established position, and it is for PCTs and clinicians to decide locally on their policy.

We can perhaps anticipate what the hon. Member for Poole will ask next. The question now, obviously, is when will NICE appraise memantine. We are considering including an appraisal of the drug in the next—and eighth—wave of NICE's work. Announcements should be made about that wave in the next few weeks, so hon. Members will not have to wait months for it. Submissions for the appraisal are currently before Ministers, and NICE will then determine its timetable for the next wave. As I say, the drug came on to the UK market only in October, and some five months later, we are considering putting it before NICE for its next wave of work. That is a sign of the importance that the Government attach to the issue.

I recognise that even that period is disappointing for those who think that memantine should immediately be available to all people with moderate to severe Alzheimer's, but we must recognise that there are enormous pressures on the NHS, and particularly on PCTs and their prescription duties. It is therefore essential that we assess the clinical and cost effectiveness of a drug before making it generally available on the NHS. We now have a statutory duty, once a drug has been before NICE, to make sure that we follow through and enforce its decisions.

The hon. Members for Poole and for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke) both mentioned postcode rationing. Before the introduction of NICE, there was a free-for-all as to which patients could obtain which

drugs. The introduction of NICE has led to a much more rational and coherent system of drug and technology use. I am sure that, as a result of the spending review settlement, both hon. Members' local PCTs will experience a real-terms significant increase in investment over the next three years. That increase will probably be in the region of 7 or 8 per cent. a year for most PCTs.

I recognise that there are still pressures on budgets because PCTs have so much to do, and the expectations of their communities are so great, but, to be fair, hon. Members, should acknowledge that significant real-terms extra investment is going into the NHS at every level and in every community in the country. The Government have decided that it is right to make that investment to make sure that we can get not just drugs, but services and facilities for patients, wherever they may be.

I am pleased to say that, in Poole, the PCT is able fully to implement the NICE guidance on the three Alzheimer's drugs that have already been approved. People can get referrals to the psychiatrist for older people, and are then able to access the drugs, despite the fact that there is immense pressure on Poole's budgets. I am also informed that the PCT has done an excellent job of managing its prescribing, and it provides some very good services.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance that his constituents attach to proper medicines management, and he said that there needs to be good, tight control on which medicines are taken. Obviously, that is an important subject for the Government, both in terms of being cost effective and ensuring that drugs are not wasted, and in terms of ensuring that patients take their drugs properly. One of the biggest reasons for admission to hospital is people not taking their medicines properly and having severe interactions between medicines. That causes extra cost and distress.

I am pleased to say that, in Poole, 82 per cent. of GP practices have implemented annual reviews of medication for people aged 75 and over. GPs sit down with patients, go through all their medicines and see whether the prescription is up to date and which drugs are no longer needed. They actively manage the medicines that people are taking. That is happening throughout the country. Bournemouth PCT now has a multidisciplinary group that covers medicine management. High priority has been given by PCTs to ensuring that medicines are managed extremely carefully so that money is not wasted and patients get appropriate care.

I understand that recent research suggests that we are getting much closer to finding the cause of Alzheimer's disease, and to working out methods of early diagnosis and of preventing its development. It is an exciting time for people working in the field. Although the drugs that are available provide only temporary respite, the future looks brighter than it did a few years ago. The theme of the Alzheimer's Society awareness week this year will be new treatments in the future.

I wish the society and researchers in the field well in their work. I hope that, over the next 10 years, they will be able to produce more new drugs significantly to improve the quality of life of people with dementia. The new drugs approved by NICE have had a significant effect on the quality of some people's lives and those of their carers. We do not devalue or denigrate that important work. However, when we authorise the use of drugs nationally, we must ensure that we make the right decisions based on proper evidence put forward by NICE and that those decisions can be followed up in every part of the country.

I was interested to hear that the hon. Gentleman's constituent thinks that Reminyl is more effective than the two drugs approved by NICE. I will make further inquiries, because I was not personally aware of that information. There may be other research projects going on to examine the most cost-effective use of the drugs already approved.

It is fair to say that improvements have been made to the care of people with Alzheimer's in the immediate vicinity of the hon. Gentleman's constituency—in the availability of medicines and the health and social care supported by the local council. Those improvements are mirrored in many different communities throughout the country. It may be accurate to say that Alzheimer's was a neglected disease, but as people are living longer, the problem will increasingly become all too apparent to hundreds of thousands of families who may have to live for a long time with Alzheimer's sufferers. Research, good drugs, good support and care for carers will therefore be extremely important.

I am pleased to say that the carer's grant, which was introduced in 1999, was extended in July 2002 for a further three years until 2005–06. During that time, it will more than double to £185 million to provide extended care and 130,000 further breaks to carers. That is a significant step towards recognising the work of carers in looking after members of their family and friends who unfortunately suffer from Alzheimer's. We have also implemented the invalid care allowance, which will be renamed the carer's allowance, to ensure that people have some independence and some financial recompense for their caring work. That will ensure also that there is an individual assessment of the carers' needs, as well as those of the people being looked after.

The framework shows sufferers from the disease and their families that the Government take this work extremely seriously and that we will continue to assess and evaluate each new drug and development. We are also interested in making sure that people have access to the highest quality care on the most equitable basis possible throughout the country. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue today. I know about the work of his constituent, who has done an extremely good job in caring for his wife in these circumstances. I undertake to ensure that this issue is kept at the forefront of the Government's thinking and that it remains a priority for us.

Severn Barrage

4 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): I am grateful for this opportunity to initiate a debate on the vital topic of renewable energy in the United Kingdom, in particular on the potential of the Severn barrage. I want to thank the World Wildlife Fund and the Severn tidal energy group for submitting their thoughts, which have informed my views from different perspectives.

The Severn barrage is a mythical creature, seemingly lost in the mists of time—or lost in the mists of the Severn estuary on a dank winter day. It is now a legendary apparition, somewhat akin to the Loch Ness monster, occasionally sighted rearing its curious form along the banks of the Gwent levels. Does it really exist? Is it just a fable from children's tales or—if one takes a different view—a nightmarish vision designed to send children quivering in fright to bed along the shores of Severnside? On the contrary, it is real—or, at least, it could be. In fact, it is like something in a fairy tale—a Peter Pan. If enough people believe in it—in particular, those strange people known as Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers—the Severn barrage could live again. It could return from folklore and become a part of a living, breathing, modern Wales and United Kingdom.

The first proposals for a Severn barrage were made in the 1840s, so it could be argued that if it has not happened by now, it never will. However, the first proposal for the channel tunnel was in 1802—so you never know.

My background has given me a special interest in this subject. More than 10 years ago, I was a student at that excellent seat of learning that is Swansea Institute of Higher Education, a leading light in vocational and applied education in south Wales. That is sufficient praise to satisfy my lecturers and former colleagues. As part of my MSc in European leisure resource management, I assisted peripherally in research in a European project known as the Esturiales study with my former professor and close friend, Graham King. The study involved a detailed analysis of several major estuaries in Europe, including the Severn, in an attempt to put forward proposals for estuary zone management.

The study was complementary to my MSc, rather than an integral part of it, and although I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to work closely on such an important project and to travel to some interesting places in Europe, I still remember saying to Graham—who was also my dissertation tutor—nine months into the 12 months of my course, "Don't you think that it is now time to start on my dissertation?" His response was non-committal, and we turned our minds back to more important matters, such as the European project that we were engaged upon.

One of the prime aspects of EZM is conflict resolution in marine and coastal environments that recognises the special contribution that estuaries make to biodiversity. Although the Severn is not identical to the Tagus, for example, it is a splendid exemplar of the many conflicts that exist in such environments. There are shipping movements, leisure craft, special marine habitats, wetlands, sand dredging and commercial fishing, historic sites along the tidal reaches, and, not least, it is an attractive leisure venue for walkers and tourists. In short, like all great European estuaries, it is a marvel of nature.

However, it is also a marvel of the influence of mankind and womankind. It is a living, working, thriving animal that has co-existed with, and been modified by, humankind since historical records began. Ports and jetties have altered the shape of the coast. Extraction—currently a controversial issue—has fed the economic development along its shores. Farmers have helped to shape the coastline. Roads have skimmed its surface on bridges that link the Celtic homeland with the land of its former inheritance across the water, and rail tunnels burrow beneath it.

The English and Welsh communities that inhabit the coast of the Severn are separated by a vast pool, but in many ways they have shared a common past, living with and off the bounty and beauty of this powerful stretch of water. Like many intimate relationships, it has always been about power to some degree. We have ever been the submissive partner, recognising that the Severn is a mistress of immense power. It is the second largest tidal reach in the world after the Bay of Fundy—where, by the way, tidal power is operational. We are, in effect, a houseguest, and we take what we are given and are grateful. The issue now is whether the long-term houseguest reasserts its rights and takes a greater share of what is on offer. If so, can the two live happily ever after? That is the great conundrum of sustainable development. The puzzle is never more illuminating than in discussions on the Severn barrage, which while offering huge potential benefits, has a direct impact on three sites of special scientific interest, a special protection area under the European birds directive, a Ramsar site and a proposed special area of conservation. Therefore, proposals for the barrage should not be taken lightly.

In 1989, the Severn barrage project general report derived from the tripartite studies examined the feasibility and impact of an ebb-tide electricity generating barrage stretching from Brean down near Weston-super-Mare to Lavernock point near Cardiff. It rapidly ran into confrontation, especially over costs and environmental concerns.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): My hon. Friend's speech deserves support for its literary merit alone. Powerful environmental groups that could generally be described as friends of the mud spoke out against the ambitious Severn barrage. They made a strong case and stopped it. Does my hon. Friend consider that the best practical way forward would be the more modest proposals of islands that would use both the power of the tide and that of the wind to generate electricity, but in a way that would not be environmentally disruptive?

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend makes an intelligent point. I do not believe that either proposal should preclude the other at this stage. My sole purpose in having the debate is to ensure that all options are discussed. I agree that technology and the principle that small is beautiful have moved on substantially, but that should not make us too cautious about large-scale projects. Environmental concerns, as he rightly pointed out, are more significant in such estuaries than in other

areas. If we fail to discuss adequately a major proposal such as the Severn barrage, with all its pros and cons, we are probably doing a disservice.

After a brief sighting of the mythical barrage creature in 1989, it disappeared under the waves. It is a shy creature, so why is it back? Why has it been sighted once more off the shores of Barry and Weston-super-Mare? I shall explain. The conditions have changed markedly to make the barrage at least worth discussing. I shall highlight the significant factors that make it necessary to discuss this issue, and I shall explain why it must feature in the forthcoming energy White Paper and why it must receive a considered and balanced hearing. The changes are outlined in the recent report that was commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry, so it must believe that they are worth examining, and will be carried out by the Severn tidal power group.

The three main factors of the report are the reductions in the cost of capital through such mechanisms as project finance, the expanding post-Kyoto market in renewables and greenhouse gas emission savings, and the possible role of the barrage in alleviating the forecast challenges of habitat erosion through global warming. I shall first deal with financial viability. A project of such scale can either cause sleepless nights or break ministerial careers. If 2001 prices were applied to the 1989 energy report, the staggering cost would be £10.3 billion to £14 billion. However, the reduced cost of capital of up to 40 per cent., the restructuring of capital funding for major projects, including public private partnerships, project finance, bond issues and reductions in construction and design costs since 1989 all combine to make the project more financially manageable in terms of capital costs.

Billions of pounds can be psychologically damaging to Ministers and Back Benchers who can feel like rabbits caught in the headlights of an oncoming juggernaut. Surely the money could be spent better elsewhere. However, there is potential under a PPP and project finance approach to give the financial risk to the private sector, with a probable 25-year project cost payback against the backdrop of the Government's assurances on premiums for the energy created during that period. Depending on the financial restructuring, the barrage could be returned to Government at the end of 25-year payback to produce an estimated further 95 years of renewable energy with the minimum of maintenance.

We should consider the forecast costs of the 2012 Olympic games, which official estimates put at more than £2 billion and others at more than £4 billion. No matter how fast the Olympic athletes run or how high they jump, they will not produce 6 per cent. of the electricity needs of England and Wales. The final cost of the channel tunnel was estimated at between £12 billion and £13 billion, but the chunnel does not offer electricity or protection against the effects of global warming, such as flooding and sea-level rises. We should also bear in mind the fact that the lifespan of the electrical dynamo is 120 years of low-maintenance, free energy, so balancing the admittedly huge initial capital cost against a 120-year cycle makes the project not quite so daunting.

Tidal power by barrage has been used with success for 35 years at the 240 MW La Rance range at St. Malo. The Severn barrage could produce an estimated 8.6 GW of electricity, which is 36 times that of St. Malo or, in simple terms, 6 per cent. of the total electricity needs of England and Wales. It is not difficult to see what the 6 per cent. would do for the Government's ambitious targets on renewables, and it would move us away from reliance on carbon-based fuels. Whereas the original EP57 study suggested a capacity of 1.1 GW, the new, more ambitious figure reflects a more efficient use of the tidal energy and augments the overall viability of the project.

The financial considerations are further supported by the fact that the project could be part of new Government thinking on project funding. However, such a project, with an estimated payback of 25 years, would attract private sector backing only if Government offered some surety of the premium for the electricity. Understandably, the private sector wants to reduce the risk in exchange for investing so massively. The cost of such a project is so vast as to be frightening, but the rewards—financial and otherwise—are so constant over the long term and the financial risks in proven technology so easily dealt with that the Government should not be scared. The project is not necessarily a monster; it could be, to coin the name of one of my children's favourite characters, a big, friendly giant.

I emphasise the conditional—the "could". The WWF has kindly noted:

> "While a Severn Barrage presents an exciting project for engineers and politicians that could provide a major contribution to our renewables in future, it would be a large, costly and permanent construction that would alter the environment of the whole area with major ramifications for the ecology and behaviour of the estuary as a natural system."

Like those who live along the Severn, it has genuine concerns that prevent support for the Severn barrage at present. Those concerns include restrictions on fish movements, the impact on designated wetlands and mudflats, and the impact on coastal birds, sand movements and beaches. There are also questions about the barrage's impact on shipping, especially any future demands by Bristol for larger shipping and dredging.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Does my hon. Friend share the perception that whenever schemes that have an ecological impact are proposed, people focus on the negative ecological impact and rarely examine the potential positives? I examined the project at university and noted that it would increase the amount of biodiversity in the land beyond the estuary, so it would have a net benefit on biological creatures living in that area.

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend is correct. Although I do not intend to go far down that line of argument, the full cost-benefit analysis and environmental impact assessment of such a large project should take into account not only the possible negatives, but the possible positive externalities on the environment. Creating a stable water platform behind the barrage, with the increase in biodiversity that has been suggested, is a benefit and needs to be taken into account.

These and other concerns must be investigated further. However, they will not be explored unless the barrage features in the energy White Paper. This is a case in which a few printed words can open a debate or stifle it before it has begun.

[Huw Irranca-Davies]

The other potential benefits include the significance of areas of change in the post-Kyoto targets on renewables, which now create a viable market for renewables and for savings through reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The barrage could reduce emissions by up to 18 million tonnes a year or 3 per cent. of the United Kingdom's carbon-based emissions. The Government's own forecast suggests that the UK could be a net importer of gas by 2006, and could source up to 90 per cent. of our gas demand beyond our shores by 2020. In strategic terms, it is clearly in the UK's interests to explore methods of reducing exposure to non-UK sources and, as we all intend, of reducing our reliance on nuclear energy.

DEFRA reports that the annual cost of flood damage in the Severnside region is £120 million a year. That is estimated to rise to an incredible £4 billion by 2075. If a barrage can mitigate those costs by managing the extremes of tide and flood, that should be included in the debate. In the absence of a barrage, the existing shoreline plan anticipates that the rate of coastal erosion through climate change will increase and lead to the loss of the habitat that we discussed earlier, but—it is a big but—much of the prevailing thinking on the marine energy contribution to sustainable development focuses on the smaller scale, such as tidal pools, small-scale barrages and wave energy.

There is something of the Schumaker "small is beautiful" argument here. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) mentioned, there is a corresponding danger of piecemeal development and an incremental creep towards targets that are never reached and that recede into the distance. If we are firm in our intentions on renewable energy, all options, large and small, should figure in the discussion. That is not so much blue-sky thinking as blue-water thinking. Let us not rule out any options.

Why should I be interested in the subject as a representative of Ogmore? That is not Ogmore-by-Sea, by the way—that delightful coastal village—but Ogmore, the thoroughly land-locked constituency. The potential benefits that I outlined could be good not only for the people along the Severn, but for the people of Wales, the rest of the UK and all the nations whose signatures embellish the Kyoto treaty, as well as those that regrettably do not.

These arguments make further examination worthwhile. If the barrage is viable, we should be courageous in our support. If it is not, we should rule it out and focus our energies elsewhere. It is time to see whether the mythic Severn barrage, like the channel tunnel, can be made real, or whether it should be consigned to folklore for evermore.

4.17 pm

Alan Howarth (Newport, East): I shall be brief, as we want to hear the Minister's response.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) made an important, elegant and eloquent speech. As he said, the subject has been discussed for a very long time—longer, even, than the discussion on the reform of the House of Lords. We know that we need security of energy supply and a reduction in our CO_2 emissions. Unless a new generation of nuclear power stations is to be built, which we do not want, we also know that we must find environmentally sustainable sources of new energy.

Nuclear power will make a smaller contribution to our overall energy supply. It will, as my hon. Friend noted, be risky to depend increasingly on imported gas, and we should not look the tidal gift horse in the mouth. There is an enormous potential source of energy for the harnessing. Of course the wider environmental impact must be considered very carefully. As my hon. Friends noted, there are pluses as well as minuses to the environmental impact. The matter is complex, but we must consider it.

There will clearly be problems in financing such a vast project. However, we famously have the lowest long-term interest rates in a very long time and have gained the experience of public-private partnerships, so we can finance projects such as this if we decide that it is the right thing to do and if we have the will to do it. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore in hoping that the energy White Paper will include a commitment thoroughly to study the feasibility of the Severn barrage and the arguments for and against it. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West will agree that those living on the shores of the Severn are not frightened of open-minded and intelligent analysis of the project. Responsibility will straddle the UK Government and the Welsh Assembly, just as the barrage will straddle the Bristol channel. That provides an additional challenge, but there is no reason why the work should not be undertaken.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on securing the debate. He has long taken a keen interest in renewable energy and, in particular, the proposals for the Severn tidal barrage. I had planned to say more about renewable energy, but time prevents me from doing much on that front. Members will be aware that the Minister for Energy and Construction cannot be here, so, as Wales Office Minister with responsibility for green issues, I am responding on the Government's behalf.

The UK has spent considerable sums—£20 million in all, of which the Government provided £12 million—in evaluating the potential of generating electricity from tidal barrages. The scheme, part of the new and renewable energy programme, ran from 1978 to 1994. Tidal barrages use well-established technology. Several locations around the world have been studied, but relatively few projects have been constructed. The first and largest, with a capacity of 240 MW, is on an estuary near St. Malo. When I paid a visit, I was greatly impressed by what I saw.

The UK programme included a detailed study of the Severn and the Mersey barrages, as well as less detailed studies of the Wyre, the Duddon, the Conwy and the Loughor. As assessment of the overall UK potential was also undertaken, together with an underpinning programme of generic studies, largely addressing environmental issues.

In July 1993, the Conservative Government nnounced the programme's closure. Energy Paper 62, Government evaluation of the prospects for renewable nergy published in 1994, estimated the total accessible esource at about 50 TWh per year—about 12 per cent. f our current electricity supply. Ninety per cent. came rom eight larger sites and the rest was distributed across bout 30 smaller sites around the country. Of the total, ess than 40 per cent.—19 TWh a year—was available at ess than 10p per kWh at 1992 prices, using an 8 per cent. iscount. At the time, it was not seen as attractive as ther options. Potential non-energy benefits were seen s relatively small, as was the potential for reducing osts.

The Severn was the largest potential project studied nd the total cost of the Severn evaluation programme vas £8 million, of which the Government provided £4.8 nillion. With a capacity of nearly 9,000 MW and an utput of 17 TWh per year—more than 4 per cent. of otal current UK supply—the Severn barrage would be ne of the largest civil engineering projects in the world nd by far the largest renewable energy generation cheme in the UK. It would mean building a 10-mile arrage between the Severn estuary and the Bristol hannel, just downstream of a line between Cardiff and Weston-super-Mare, enclosing about 140 miles of oastline.

At 1994 prices, the cost of generation was estimated t 7.5p per kWh at an 8 per cent. discount rate, rising to 7p per kWh at a 15 per cent. discount rate, excluding rid reinforcement costs. As with all such capital-ntensive schemes, generation costs are highly sensitive o the discount rate.

In July 2001, the Government commissioned the Severn tidal power group, an industry grouping that co-sponsored the earlier programme, to undertake a short study of the project to establish whether developments since 1994 justified a more substantial review of the project and to define what issues such a review would need to cover. The report was published last month, making it clear that significant changes have occurred that would affect the scheme, though not all point in the same direction.

Since 1989, the cost of power generation has gone down and the completion of the second Severn crossing has reduced the potential benefits of a road crossing over the barrage, while existing and planned increases in the size of shipping using the Bristol channel and the Severn estuary could have a significant impact on the scheme, throwing into doubt the size of the shipping locks in the earlier design. Any restrictions on the port of Bristol would have severe commercial consequences. We have also, of course, become much more aware of environmental issues, as other Members mentioned earlier.

There is no doubt that, with the loss of approximately 65 per cent. of the inter-tidal area, a barrage would have a major effect on the ecosystems of the Severn estuary. Constructing the barrage would result in the loss of the unique tidal nature of the estuary and cause major problems for migratory fish such as salmon. The Environment Agency believes that substantial environmental loss to conservation and biodiversity would be likely.

However, the study group pointed to the likelihood of increasing flood damage in the Severn estuary due to global warming, and therefore pointed out the possible additional benefits of the barrage in protecting the Severn valley. I should note, however, that although the barrage would afford protection against tidal surges, the Environment Agency believes that that would be a very expensive way to provide flood protection.

The study estimates that the cost of the scheme would be between £10 billion and £14 billion at 2001 prices. Pre-construction activities, including a £30 million environmental assessment, might cost £300 million over five years, and construction would take a further five to seven years until barrage closure, with full power generation about two years after that. Those are significant sums by any stretch of the imagination. However, peak employment during construction might reach 30,000 to 40,000 people, about half of whom would come from the Severn side.

The report suggests that the project might be financed by the private sector through the bond market over 40 years or more at a cost equivalent of about 6p per kWh. That would, however, be about twice the amount of UK sterling project bonds issued to date, and it would require a high degree of security in terms of the future income stream from the project. The study group suggested that that could be achieved by a public-private partnership contract let by the Government or by underpinning obligations for the purchase of the output. In effect, the private sector would underwrite the construction risk, but the Government would underwrite the future income stream needed to secure the project's financing.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I am sorry to intervene in such a time-limited debate. Will the Minister acknowledge also that the nature of the project is such—it involves proven technology—that there is less long-term risk? It would not be like other PPPs or large schemes such as the channel tunnel, because it does not have that element of risk.

Mr. Touhig: That would depend on when the project started, were it to go ahead, and on design costs and the market. If there were to be a public-private partnership, we would have to make a commercial judgment on that matter. It is clear, therefore, that the project would not proceed on a fully commercial basis in the private sector.

On the basis of the study, the group concludes that a more substantial reappraisal of the project would be needed. The Government have not yet reached such a conclusion, but plan to set out their policy towards large-scale tidal barrage developments in the forthcoming White Paper, which will be music to the ears of my hon. Friend.

The further studies recommended by the report would cost about £3 million, although, as has been made clear, much larger sums would be needed for a complete environmental appraisal. We are considering whether that would represent good value for money. Clearly, I cannot pre-empt the publication of the White Paper, but in reaching our conclusion we will take full account of the report and of the views expressed in the debate.

I conclude by emphasising the Government's commitment to renewable energy. We have set ambitious targets, and believe that this is an exciting

[Mr. Touhig]

time for renewables. The Government are determined to push forward on that agenda. Our task in meeting the demanding targets that we have set requires the vision to carry forward our objectives and to turn that potential into reality. There are many barriers in our path, but the rewards are immense—reliable sources of clean energy, a reduction in carbon emissions and a developing renewables industry will be crucial to our country's future. We all need to work together to achieve that.

I commend my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and I am grateful to him and to other Members for their contribution. I am sorry that there was not sufficient time to give a fuller reply. We must await the White Paper's publication to see whether it sheds any light on my hon. Friend's ambitions for the Severn barrage.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Four o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 5 February 2003

[MR. FRANK COOK *in the Chair*]

Gulf War Illness

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am grateful for this timely opportunity to raise the issue of Gulf war illness. My purpose is simple: I want to ensure that our troops are not exposed to any unnecessary risks to their health, as they were in the 1991 Gulf war, if and when they are engaged in hostilities in or near Iraq. I hope and pray that such a war never has to take place, but if it does, I would never forgive myself had I not drawn attention to the lessons of the last war. I know that I speak for many others. I am a member of the Royal British Legion Gulf war group, and am only too well aware of the suffering of so many veterans in that conflict. I am delighted that the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates), who is also on that group, is present, as are several hon. Members from all parties who share my anxiety.

Clearly this is an appropriate moment to pay tribute to that group and to the veterans' associations. I must especially thank Colonel Terry English, chairman of the group and Royal British Legion director of welfare, and Professor Malcolm Hooper of the university of Sunderland, for their help in bringing together so much evidence for the debate. I also pay tribute to Lord Morris of Manchester, who has been a determined and persistent supporter of all Gulf war veterans. Recent ministerial answers to his questions in the other place have increased, rather then dispersed, our concerns.

Why should we be worried, because surely the Ministry of Defence is capable of managing the inoculation programme, the application of pesticides and any other possible threat to the long-term health of our troops? I hope so, but frankly the omens are not encouraging. Organophosphate pesticides are extremely dangerous chemicals, as the House knows. They were originally developed by the Nazis in the second world war. From my long-term involvement as chairman of the all-party organophosphate parliamentary group, I am aware that they are now supposedly subject to rigorous controls. However, it was not always so.

Despite ever louder warnings from medical and environmental scientists, it was only in the late 1980s that the Health and Safety Executive issued a comprehensive advice sheet on the dangers. In the early 1990s, I established that other Departments were totally unaware of the serious risks of both acute and chronic health hazards. Even farmers, who were forced to use them for sheep dips by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, were left in the dark.

Guidance note MS 17, which has been updated since the 1980s, provides the following succinct and official description of the signs and symptoms of acute OP poisoning. They include

"those related to excessive activity of the autonomic nervous system: miosis (pin-point pupils), blurred vision, lacrimation, excessive salivation, cold sweats, bronchorrhorea, cardia arrhythmias/badycardia with decreased cardia output and hypotension; ... those related to over-reactivity of voluntary muscle: tremors, impaired co-ordination; and ... non-specific symptoms: headache, giddiness, loss of appetite, nausea and diarrhoea."

There are other signs, too, which I need not go into. My point is simply that a great many of the signs and symptoms have been found among troops suffering from Gulf war illnesses. Some are chronic, some are long term, and they are very serious.

As information about the 1991 conflict became available to parliamentarians, I was concerned to know how many of our troops were exposed to OPs, in what conditions and with what precautions. I asked the then Minister for the Armed Forces a parliamentary question. I shall quote his answer extensively because it is extremely important. He said:

"I am aware of only 10 British service personnel who would have been involved with organ-phosphorous pesticides used by United Kingdom forces during the Gulf conflict. These 10 were members of a medical team involved in delousing some 50 Iraqi troops with a dusting powder containing 1 per cent. malathion at the prisoner of war enclosure at Quaisuma. Malathion is recommended in standard therapeutic textbooks as a treatment of choice for lice infestation and several preparations are commercially available in the United Kingdom, including body lotions and shampoos.

No clinical evidence indicative of exposure to organo-phosphates has been found among the service personnel who have come forward with concerns about their health related to service in the Gulf. No specific research into organo-phosphorous has therefore been carried out in relation to the alleged Gulf war syndrome, though evidence from all relevant sources is closely monitored."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1994; Vol. 248, c. 1237.]

Amazingly, two years later, at the beginning of October 1996, after an intensive inquiry within the Ministry, the very same Minister had to make an abject apology to the House and to me because he had been completely misled. He said:

"It has become clear, as the House now knows, that organophosphate insecticides were used more widely in the Gulf than we had been led to believe. I regret that the information given to the Defence Select Committee and to other hon. Members in the past few years has proved to be incorrect."—[*Official Report*, 15 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 680.]

Many hundreds of our service personnel were exposed to dangerous chemicals in the Gulf, and it was not reassuring to learn about Ministry of Defence lack of competence and transparency, but worse was to follow.

Claims that OPs were used only by trained operatives, with proper precautions and protective clothing, have been specifically challenged by Sergeant Tony Worthington, who has clear photographic evidence. He has shown that operatives were exposed to massive doses of OPs and other pesticides in vapour form. We still do not know whether those OPs, apparently bought locally in Saudi Arabia, were of a type that was banned for use in the UK. We can be sure, however, that any warnings and instructions for use were in a language that was unintelligible for those unsuspecting service

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

personnel. It is not surprising to note that Professor Cherry's research found an association between exposure to pesticides and symptoms of Gulf war illness. Parallel research in the USA is equally alarming.

After that dreadful experience, surely the Ministry of Defence learned its lesson. On 7 January, just a few weeks ago, I tabled a parliamentary question that was answered by the current Minister with responsibility for the armed forces. My question was:

"To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will take steps to ensure that British service personnel are not exposed to organophosphate pesticides when on operations in the Middle East."

In view of the 1991 disasters, I expected a promise to avoid such risks. Instead, he replied:

"The use of pesticides remains an essential component of force protection against the threat of insect borne disease. It is the policy of the Department only to procure pesticides approved under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 or to seek approval from Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD) of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to store items in United Kingdom, for use in overseas locations.

Those pesticides are only supplied to and used by trained personnel, who are fully equipped with the appropriate personal protective equipment."—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2003; Vol. 397, c. 79W.]

I thought that that would be enough, but decided to make absolutely certain that there would be no risks. So I tabled further questions for answer this week, in which I asked the Secretary of State for Defence what training and guidance is being given to British troops and hygiene units in the use of organophosphate pesticides in any potential conflict in Iraq, and if he will make a statement. I also asked the Secretary of State whether adequate protective equipment is available to British military units using organophosphate pesticides, and if he will make a statement. As of yesterday, all I had received was a holding answer saying that he will answer shortly. Having already drawn attention to the problem, I expected a direct and firm answer to reassure our troops.

So let us get to the truth of it. I have a number of questions for the Under-Secretary. If he cannot answer them all today, I hope that he will write to me. What OPs have been shipped to the Gulf—full names, please—and are they all approved for use in the UK? Will only fully trained operatives be used in the spraying and swing-fogging of any pesticides? Will protective suits and other precautions be employed? What studies of the effect of strong Gulf sunlight on the conversion of malathion into more toxic compounds have been undertaken? What other pesticides have been supplied and are intended for use? Has lindane been supplied, with all its inherent dangers? Pyrethroids are known to be nerve poisons that have a powerful synergistic action with OPs.

Will DEET be issued to troops? It also has a synergistic effect with other pesticides. In 1991, much stronger solutions of DEET than those used in holiday packs were issued. Will those be issued again? What consideration has there been of the cumulative effect of OP exposure and administration of nerve agent pre-treatment set—NAPS—tablets, which attack the same target enzymes in the blood? What assessment has there been of the findings of Mackness and others that Gulf veterans have greatly depressed levels of para-oxonase in their serum? What steps have been taken to prevent repetition of the problems this time? British troops serving their country—serving us—have every right to expect their Government to take all precautions to avoid unnecessary risk, but the evidence is not encouraging.

Another controversial aspect of the preparations for the 1991 hostilities was the inoculation programme. Many Gulf veterans who have since developed serious illnesses have given us evidence of administration of vaccines that was at best slap-happy and at worst downright irresponsible. The combination, in quick succession, of a cocktail of vaccines, quite outside the normal protocols, seems absurdly ill-considered and out of control in many units.

I am no medical expert: others in the Royal British Legion team are far more qualified that I am to deal with such matters. Indeed, other hon. Members in the Chamber have relevant experience, and I hope that they will contribute. The best that I can do is to refer to the submissions made to the United States congressional hearings that we facilitated in the House of Commons last July. For example, the evidence given to those hearings by Professor Graham Rook contained this summary:

"The Hypothesis that we put forward in 1997 was that long-term changes in the balance of the immune system could be caused by multiple vaccinations. This would be exacerbated in psychologically and physically stressed individuals and also by the chemical exposures and this could lead to a diverse range of symptoms including mood changes. So, I am going to show you that five new types of information have come forward to show the hypothesis was not as crazy as it was thought originally and it is within the epidemiology and the immunology done ... it is important because it was saying that giving a massive load of vaccines in the Gulf War could have systemic effect on their overall immune systems for many years after."

I must remind the Under-Secretary of the moving evidence given by Samantha Thompson, widow of Nigel Thompson. She said of her late husband:

"Nigel was a Petty Officer in the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm and served in the Gulf War in 1991. Shortly after returning from the Gulf he started displaying the symptoms of Motor Neurone disease. Nigel always believed his terminal condition to be attributable to his active service in the Gulf. Right up to his death he fought tirelessly on behalf of Gulf War illness. Nigel also repeatedly called for an independent public inquiry into what went wrong during Operation Desert Storm that left so many military personnel ill or dying."

The failure of the Ministry of Defence even to acknowledge the existence of specific Gulf war illnesses has been especially scandalous, showing a level of cynicism and lack of sensitivity when the US authorities have been much more sympathetic. As long ago as January 1995, the United States Government accepted the need to compensate those suffering from Gulf war illnesses, and I understand that Congress subsequently ordered compensation in the order of $60,000 per veteran.

Meanwhile, the indefatigable Shaun Rusling, who leads the National Gulf Veterans and Families Association, has identified a series of official decisions recognising Gulf war illness despite Ministry of Defence obstinacy. I quote just one. Mr. Alex Izett, a former Royal Engineer, was accepted to have been damaged by the vaccinations by a pensions appeal tribunal just last December. The tribunal found:

"We accept you were vaccinated and we looked at the MOD letter 24.01.01. We note the posity of the vaccination date: we therefore accept the evidence Autoimmune induced osteoporosis caused by vaccines."

That is absolutely specific. I believe that the case may not be contested further by the Ministry. Perhaps the Under-Secretary can confirm that.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I have been involved in Mr. Izzet's case, and I understand that he has received a letter from the Ministry saying that it will not contest the decision, but for 12 years it has contested his case. Mr. Izzet has said more than once that he has been close to suicide, which he has attempted at least twice, because of the perilous state that he is in. Indeed, he no longer lives in the United Kingdom because he is so depressed about how he has been treated.

Mr. Tyler: I know that my hon. Friend has been a valiant champion on behalf of not only that veteran, but others as well. It shows the seriousness of many of the cases. Mr. Izzet's case may have a happy ending. I certainly hope so. Perhaps the Under-Secretary can confirm that.

Has the Ministry of Defence learned anything from that muddle and the potentially damaging consequences? Again, the omens are not good. Just a few weeks ago, batches of anthrax and other vaccines were washed up on south Dorset beaches. I asked the Secretary of State for Defence to explain where they came from, expecting him to say that it was nothing to do with the Ministry and that the UK Government did not know the source of the vaccines, as mislaying them at such a sensitive time and in such apparently incompetent circumstances would be peculiar and too mind-boggling to contemplate.

To my amazement, the Under-Secretary replied:

"The anthrax vaccine found on the South Dorset coast is from a batch produced by the centre for Applied Microbiology and Research and purchased by the Ministry of Defence in February 2001. Because ampoules from the batch were issued to a large number of units it has not yet been possible to identify how they came to be in the sea. As far as we are aware, this is the only vaccine found, although a number of other pharmaceutical products, including drugs, have been recovered. Investigations into the source of the items found are continuing."—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 635W.]

That is pretty peculiar. What is more peculiar, however, is that no one has taken the trouble to tell me the result of those investigations.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): A few wags in the press have suggested that the crate of anthrax vaccine on a south Dorset beach might have something to do with the fact that HMS Ark Royal reputedly steamed past that beach a short while before it was discovered. Does the hon. Gentleman think that the fact that the uptake of the anthrax vaccine in the Navy has only been 28 per cent., compared with 78 per cent. in the Army, might have something to do with it?

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman has professional qualifications and more information than I have on that matter. I am grateful to him for his comment.

The critical consideration is that the Ministry of Defence knows that the anthrax vaccines belong to that Department, but it has no idea how they got from A to B. That does not give me much confidence that it knows what it is doing to its service personnel. I want to emphasise that it is our troops who are being treated in such a way. It is extraordinary. No wonder they are losing confidence in the political direction and overall command.

The Ministry does not know what it is doing. To paraphrase the Duke of Wellington, "I don't know what effect our Ministry of Defence will have on Saddam Hussein, but, my God, they terrify me!"

Other hon. Members wish to contribute, and I hope that I have made my central point. The sorry saga of the suffering of the 1991 Gulf war veterans is an appalling reflection on the way in which successive Governments have treated them. Even worse than that would be a failure to learn the lessons and to avoid repeating them now. As I said, I hope and pray that Iraq and its dictator can be brought back to their senses without military action, but if British troops are deployed on our behalf it would be truly scandalous if they were also exposed to an unnecessary risk to their health by their own military planners in the Ministry of Defence. It would be the chemical equivalent of friendly fire.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is advisable to remind the House that it is customary in 90-minute Adjournment debates to commence the first of the three winding-up speeches 30 minutes before the end. We have 41 minutes before that time and six right hon. and hon. Members are present who wish to speak, only three of whom have given prior notice. I appeal to all concerned to make their remarks pertinent, concise and to be brief when receiving or making interventions.

9.49 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on securing this timely debate. My interest in Gulf war illnesses has arisen as a result of a constituency case, like that of so many other right hon. and hon. Members. Also, like the hon. Gentleman, I want to ensure that if we go to war again in the Gulf we do not make the same mistakes that we probably made in 1990–91.

A few days ago, on 20 January, it was admitted in the other place, in a written answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, in response to a question from Lord Morris of Manchester, that the current recommendation from the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research at Porton Down, which manufactures the anthrax vaccine, is that it should be used alone, not in combination with other vaccines. That information is included in the product summary that is provided to doctors with the vaccine. The patient information leaflet also asks patients to inform their doctor if they are taking other medicines.

[Dr. Brian Iddon]

My concern is that, as has been admitted, members of the armed forces were given more than one vaccine at the same time, as well as other medicines such as pyridostigmine bromide, an acetylcholinesterase inhibitor used as a nerve agent pre-treatment medicine. The question is, what limitations are placed on the administration of other vaccines and medicines and, if such limitations exist—especially if they existed at the time of the Gulf war—are they, or were they, taken into account? It seems strange that we went to the Gulf war in coalition with all our allies and yet, while the Americans seem to have accepted that new illnesses have arisen as a result of that conflict, the Ministry of Defence cannot entirely share those views.

On 25 June last year, the United States research advisory committee on Gulf war veterans illness produced an interim report, which pointed out that there is increasing objective evidence that a major category of Gulf war illness is neurological. The US Government at present support 224 research projects, which involves $213 million.

On 28 October, the honourable Leo S. Mackay, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, reported to that committee that Dr. Simon Wessely's research group in London had concluded, in an article published in the *British Medical Journal*, that the ill health suffered by Gulf war veterans cannot be explained by stress or other physiological disorders. That is certainly the conclusion that many British Gulf war veterans have obviously reached.

On page 5 of the American report, we find the statement:

"Most important, we want to send a message to veterans. That science is finally beginning to unravel the mysteries of Gulf War illnesses. That this Administration is committed to pursuing new science, medical breakthroughs and new treatments. And that, finally, there is reason for hope".

I shall examine in more detail the scientific evidence that American scientists have unearthed to support their views. Epidemiological studies have shown consistently that between one in four and one in five of US veterans who served in the Gulf war are ill, suffering from health problems beyond those that could be explained by stress or psychiatric diagnoses and over and above the control population used in the studies.

Professor Bob Haley of the university of Texas has described three Gulf war syndromes, for which he has provided evidence from his research and that of other scientists. At least one category of Gulf war illness appears from the evidence available to be neurological in character. Magnetic resonance spectroscopy suggests a loss of neurons in selected brain areas in ill veterans, in particular in the brain stem and basal ganglia. The same veterans show cognitive problems and/or joint and muscle problems.

The Americans have provided evidence that ill veterans who drive vehicles are significantly more at risk of being involved in road traffic accidents than others. Significantly, the Ministry of Defence recently admitted to me in a written answer to a parliamentary question—it can be found in *Hansard*, 7 November 2002, column 455W—that that is also the case in the United Kingdom.

The heart rate measurements of US Gulf war veterans show dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system. They suffer from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, ALS, at about twice the expected rate. They demonstrate an increase in the cold sensory threshold. Audiovestibular tests show abnormalities of central vestibular function and they exhibit elevated dopamine levels in the brain.

Ill US veterans have low levels of an enzyme called paraoxanase in their blood. The Ministry of Defence has admitted to me in another written answer that that is also the case with British Gulf war veterans who are ill. That enzyme is responsible for breaking down organophosphates. Interestingly, those veterans who worked side by side with those who have become ill, but have not become ill themselves, have normal levels of that enzyme in their blood stream.

As has been demonstrated, organophosphate insecticides were widely used during the Gulf war, for example, to spray the tented areas and the troops themselves—they were issued with insecticide sprays. More importantly, an estimated 100,000 of our troops were exposed to organophosphate nerve agents, mainly during demolition of the Khamisiyah ammunitions depot. There is some evidence that the symptoms suffered by some Gulf war veterans are similar to those of others— for example, farmers who regularly dip sheep have been exposed to substantial amounts of organophosphates.

Let us compare the American conclusions—please note that these were obtained by several research groups—with those of our Government-supported Gulf war illness research unit, which has concluded that many thousands of British veterans who are suffering from illness cannot attribute that illness to agents such as the organophosphates that they encountered during the Gulf war. *The Sunday Times* covered that subject in a story of 24 November.

The MOD-funded researchers at Guy's, King's and St. Thomas' school of medicine in London, however, studied only 49 Gulf war veterans with neurological symptoms and compared them with 29 without problems. While the general health of those who were ill was poorer than that of other ex-servicemen, no brain damage could be detected.

Professor Simon Wessely is quoted as saying:

"In the past we have shown incontrovertibly that Gulf War veterans are sicker than similar groups but what this study shows is that the health effects are not associated with neurological problems".

Professor Malcolm Hooper at Sunderland university, however, said:

"I find this research frankly astonishing, unpersuasive and"—

this is the important thing—

"statistically insignificant".

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): What are Professor Hooper's qualifications for commenting on a clinical study?

Dr. Iddon: I know Malcolm Hooper well because I worked with him at the university of Durham for some time. He was trained as a professional organic chemist.

Who is right? That is the big question now. I suggest to the Government that they should combine their research efforts with those of the Americans and, perhaps, those of other scientists worldwide, to seek the

truth. I was pleased to learn from the Ministry that Professor Bob Haley has been invited to Britain to discuss his work with other British scientists.

We are not spending enough in the United Kingdom on unearthing the truth, whereas the Americans have taken the problem far more seriously. Recently, the Government have involved the Medical Research Council in research, but that effort comes a bit late, especially for those Gulf war veterans who have died, possibly—I stress "possibly"—as a result of their illnesses. I must admit that enhanced mortality is not yet proven, although enhanced morbidity rates are. At present, however, I am inclined towards believing the American results merely because the Americans have not fixed their minds and have invested considerably more pro rata than we have in research.

It is becoming clear that we have made mistakes in preparing our armed forces for the Gulf war. With the precautionary principle in mind, will my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary assure us that the same mistakes will not be made again if we go to war again in that region?

Finally, I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I will have to leave a few minutes before the end of the debate at 11 am, as I am chairing a session of a conference in Church house.

9.59 am

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): I shall be extremely brief. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on the timely way in which he introduced this debate. I serve with him on the Gulf war veterans' disease committee of the Royal British Legion and I acknowledge that the Ministry of Defence is trying, slowly, to get to the bottom of the matter.

I do not yet convict the Under-Secretary of some of the lack of sensitivity and urgency that some of his predecessors have shown, as I believe that he is trying hard to proceed with the matter and to get the facts. I hope that he is as frustrated as we are at the snail's pace with which progress is being made. I do not expect him to say so, but I hope that by urging him to get a move on and to bring this long and sorry saga to a conclusion he will start to throw his considerable weight about at the Ministry of Defence and to urge people to move a little faster.

The real point of my brief intervention is this. There is no doubt that there was a certain amount of shambles the last time that we went to war in the Gulf. There is no doubt that there were reasons for that—we were in a new area and we were not properly prepared, or expecting, to put our troops into the sort of dangers that chemical and biological weapons can cause. There was an explanation for the shambles, therefore. This time round, 11 years later, there can be no excuse, and I hope that the Under-Secretary will give us an unequivocal assurance that all the plans have been properly made, all the research done and all the best opinions sought as to how to protect our troops, should they have to face such dangers—of course, we all hope that they will not. Without that unequivocal assurance—this is a good time for the Minister to give it—our troops should not be sent in to face such dangers.

10.1 am

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Like the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates), I shall be brief. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on obtaining this debate. It is timely, and it gives the Government an opportunity to state what precautions they are taking if our troops in the Gulf are engaged in warfare, and what steps they will take to prevent any such war having a history similar to that of the previous Gulf war.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) have set out the scientific facts. I did not know that many of the words that they used existed. I am aware, however, of the effects of the use of chemicals and vaccinations on Gulf victims.

I have the good fortune to have the headquarters of the Gulf Veterans Association in my constituency. Shaun Rusling is one of my constituents. In the past decade, the correspondence that I have received from him and from others in my constituency who are associated with the GVA has become a small mountain—a mountain that expresses despair and frustration. They despair because they wonder what they have done wrong. They feel that they are victims. Why have they been let down by the Ministry of Defence? Why are their claims that they are now very ill, but that they were not before they went to the Gulf, not being treated seriously and effectively?

In the early stages, correspondence from the Ministry of Defence on the subject almost showed indifference. I hope that that is changing. There seems to have been a change in atmosphere in the past few years. The soldiers thought that they were forgotten. They had or had not got pensions. It was almost as though the Ministry view was, "Sad. We don't know what's happened and we're not really too worried about it." It was due only to the public pressure of Shaun Rusling and others that the Ministry was forced, tardily, to take an interest and to take tentative steps to find out what had happened.

Hon. Members have compared the situation here with what the United States Government have done and the way in which they have treated their veterans. The same comparison has been made with Canada and France. A very different picture emerges here than in those other countries.

I hope that we will get two things out of this debate. I know of the interest that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary takes in the matter and of his professional experience. I hope that there will be a further push and a greater sense of urgency from the Ministry of Defence. As the hon. Member for East Hampshire said, I also hope that none of our troops will face the same shambles if they are engaged in a war, that they will be properly protected and have full knowledge of what is being done to them and that full records will be kept. One of the greatest crimes is that there are no adequate records of what was given to the troops, and they do not always know what they were given.

10.5 am

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on securing this important and timely debate. I am aware that he and other hon. Members present have been assiduous in pursuing a campaign for justice for Gulf war veterans.

[Annabelle Ewing]

I concur with the hon. Member for North Cornwall in his condemnation of the shabby way in which successive United Kingdom Governments have dealt with the veterans of the 1991 Gulf war conflict. I understand that 500-plus veterans have died post-conflict and that many thousands are ill and suffering from debilitating illnesses. Many of them are deteriorating daily, which is obviously upsetting for them, but also for their families.

What has been the Government's response? They have stalled, procrastinated and refused to recognise the problem and to deal with it properly. To deal with a problem, we must first recognise its existence. The Shaun Rusling case is undergoing an appeal and is sub judice, but I wrote to the Minister on 20 November 2002 to ask what budgetary estimates had been made as to the cost of appealing. Unfortunately, I have not yet received a response. Perhaps I shall get an answer today.

Hon. Members who have spoken have mentioned research. The money allocated for research is unsatisfactory. An unfavourable comparison has been made with the amounts being spent in the United States, for example. Will the Minister state for the record whether he is satisfied with the level of funding? Will he explain what the level is for 2003–04 and say what percentage that represents of the entire Ministry of Defence budget?

No proper compensation is available to Gulf war veterans. There is no specially targeted medical support. The pleas of the Royal British Legion for a full, independent public inquiry have been ignored to date, which is unfortunate. The issue is of key importance, as the Ministry of Defence may be about to make exactly the same mistakes again, which would be unacceptable and unforgivable. I and other hon. Members hope that there will not be another conflict in the Gulf, but the Prime Minister seems to be set on that path irrespective of what the United Nations may do. It is not clear that the Government have learned lessons from the 1991 conflict and intend to pursue different measures. Indeed, it seems that they remain complacent. I and other hon. Members want to hear what they are doing differently, in particular on organophosphates and vaccines.

A debt of honour is long overdue to Gulf war veterans. Indeed, a Government who send soldiers to war have a duty of care towards them. It was not exercised in the first Gulf war conflict. That was compounded by the fact that the UK Government have refused since then to take real measures to help those veterans. This time round, I hope that the Government will do the right thing by our troops. I hope that they will have learned the lessons and will act upon them. Surely it is not acceptable for any troops to be subject to the same shabby treatment as the veterans of the 1991 Gulf war conflict.

10.9 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I, too, am pleased to take part in this debate secured by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). I have a feeling of déjà vu, as my first Adjournment debate in 1997 was on this subject. The issue has not progressed very far in terms of our understanding of the causes and uncertainties associated with these illnesses. At the last meeting of the Liaison Committee a few weeks ago, at which, of course, the Chairmen of various Select Committees met my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend was asked whether the necessary precautions had been taken to protect troops being deployed to the Gulf from these illnesses, and the answer received was a rather curt yes. I, too, would like to be reassured that we are learning the lessons from the past.

Reference has been made to the work that is going on in the United States. I have studied the epidemiology, in which other hon. Members are also interested, as we have had these debates many times. Epidemiological evidence must be taken seriously, and it is often hard to prove: let us remember how long it took to prove the associations of tobacco and smoking through epidemiological technologies. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) has also referred to the work that has gone on in the United States on the symptoms, the illnesses and the diagnosis of veterans. Multi-symptom illnesses are associated with each veteran, which makes it difficult to associate one particular illness with one particular cause. There is no doubt, however, as has been admitted for years, that Gulf war veterans are ill and have problems. Although we cannot work out the cause or multiple causes, that does not mean that we should not take the matter seriously.

The United States seems to be ahead of us in this area. The Institute of Medicine, which is part of the National Academy of Sciences, has recommended the setting up of a national centre of war-related illnesses and post-deployment health issues, recognising that many veterans from many conflicts require a unit to examine these problems intensively and not in a piecemeal way.

If I may make an aside, a reference was made to Malcolm Hooper during an earlier exchange. In a letter submitted to *The Lancet*, which I have been asked to review, his title is emeritus professor of medicinal chemistry and his address is given as the school of sciences, university of Sunderland. Although that is true, it is also true that he is chief scientific adviser to the Gulf Veterans Association. I hope that we will not let the initials after our names get in the way of this debate, as we should be examining the evidence. We can all score points in relation to who is a greater expert in a smaller and smaller field.

My final point is about the depletion of uranium, of which there has been no mention whatever. A document on the health effects of depleted uranium munitions has been produced by the prestigious Royal Society in this country. Those munitions were used in the 1991 Gulf war. It is known that they produce harmful radioactive contamination in the battlefield environment, and they contaminate troops who have the insoluble uranium oxides in their systems for a long period, if not for life. It is alleged that the Iraqis learned only 12 months after the war ended that DU—depleted uranium—had been used on them and that no advice was given to troops in the United States or here of that use. UK Gulf veterans have been found to have DU in their urine, although it

is difficult to quantify levels of that internally. Other sorts of cancers are alleged to be associated with it, and epidemiological studies are ongoing.

Dr. Moonie: As a respected scientist, will my hon. Friend tell us what are the differences between the likely clinical effects of depleted uranium and those of ordinary uranium?

Dr. Gibson: If I knew the answer to that, I would have a Nobel prize. Studies are ongoing in that area, and we do not know the nature of what happens to uranium oxide.

Dr. Moonie: Will my hon. Friend accept that there is no chemical or medical difference whatever in the effects of isotopes of a substance?

Dr. Gibson: We do not know that. I am not prepared to get into a scientific debate about the origins and what happens to a compound once it gets in the body when research is ongoing in that field. We need a staged study, and we need to know how much of the substance has been taken in, where it goes and so on, which is admitted in the Royal Society document. In Iraq, for example, depleted uranium levels are associated with cancers in children and birth defects in the Basra region, where levels are three times higher than in Baghdad. Many other birth defects have been associated with that, and finer and more intense research is needed, as there are serious implications of using those compounds. If events in Iraq proceed, and depleted uranium is used, it will end up causing many health effects, about which our troops need to know.

To finish on an anecdote, this weekend I met a young person in the Norfolk area who is going out to Kuwait today to serve. That person had to purchase their own uniform, and many of their associates had not been issued with chemical combat uniforms. That is alleged, but I have no reason to believe that it is not true, and that person is in the eye of storm. The Minister has a job to do to convince many of us that we have learned the lessons and that some of the problems that have been associated with Gulf war illnesses will not happen again.

10.16 am

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Like other Members, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), both of whom made excellent contributions. They are demanding assurances that are being sought by all of us in this Chamber today, and, more importantly, by the men and women who will go to the Gulf area on our behalf, and by their families.

Historically, many people will be going to the Gulf for the second time. I met a young man—he is not so young now—who went to the Gulf the first time round and was there for only a matter of days. He received a cocktail of immunisations, and within five or six days, he was medivac'd out of the area back to Germany, where he was in hospital for some time. When he made a claim, he found that not one record had been kept of him having had the injections and having suffered a bad effect, despite the fact that there was a record of him being medivac'd back to Germany. There was no indication of what he had been given or of the cause and effect of the illnesses that he suffered, and his military career was put on hold for several months.

That man has now gone back to the Gulf—his unit was part of the logistics unit that is already in the area—but he was very nervous about what injections he would be given and he wanted assurances. I sent him a copy of the evidence given by the Minister to the Defence Committee with the hope that that might provide him with assurances that, this time round, proper records would be kept, and that service personnel would be informed in advance of what they would be given, when they would be given, and who would be responsible for the record keeping. We know from evidence that the Minister has given to the Defence Committee that our past performance in relation to keeping medical records is lamentable. To his credit, he has assured the House, the Defence Committee and the armed forces that that situation has been turned around. I hope that that turns out to be true.

As other Members have said, historically the Government's commitment to tell the truth on these issues is poor—it has had to be forced out of them. The answers given have been changed, and apologies have been given. Shaun Rusling and the Gulf Veterans Association have sought three things, which the Government have failed to give them. The first is recognition of the issue that they are trying to raise, the second is for the truth to be told, and the third is for justice to be granted to them. The hon. Member for Perth (Annabelle Ewing) was right to imply that there is a moral stain on this country because of the way in which we have failed to address the historic issues that we have faced.

Excuse after excuse has been put forward for why numbers of these young men and, in certain cases, women, have died. I remember visiting the United States as a member of the Defence Committee, and encountering the argument about the number of young people who have died in horrific accidents or extreme sporting activities. The excuse used then was that that was fairly normal after having returned from war, because they had been excited by the experience and had had an adrenalin rush, and, for a period after coming home, felt that they needed continuous excitement and thrill in their lives. That does not persist for 10 years, however, and people are still dying in those circumstances. The answer that was given as to why so many young people had died in horrific accidents or in suicides has now been virtually ruled out by the Americans. We must therefore return to address those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall raised the issue of protection for people who might use organophosphates in the Gulf on this occasion, but that is not the only question. Will those troops who follow them be properly protected and warned about what has gone on in advance of their move into an area? Are we absolutely sure about what substances our allies will use in any action? One of the difficulties in the previous conflict was the difference of opinion about whether the Americans had told us what they were using at different stages.

[Mr. Mike Hancock]

Those Members in this Chamber today could repeat long lists of their experiences in relation to Gulf war veterans in their areas, but the case of Mr. Alex Izett is a classic one. For 10 years, the Ministry of Defence denied all of his claims. It fought tooth and nail, and letter after letter went from this country, via me and other Members, to Mr. Izett at his home in Germany. He won his case, and received recognition with a vaccine damage award, and within days of that award being given the Ministry of Defence wrote to say that it would not contest it. Why did he have to go through such a traumatic experience? Why was his family life destroyed when, 11 years on, we have recognised that we owed him a debt? Is it so much to ask that those individuals and their families whose lives have been destroyed should be dealt with properly and fairly?

The Minister's outburst today seemed to be an over-reaction to what Members were saying. To be critical of the qualifications of someone who is advising the Gulf veterans was beyond him.

Dr. Moonie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hancock: No. The Minister will have nearly 15 minutes to make his reply, and I will stay to listen as I have listened to his other comments.

Dr. Moonie: Pathetic.

Mr. Hancock: No, not pathetic. Your outburst against your colleague today, when he tried to address the issue, showed me once again that this issue touches a raw nerve as far as you and the Ministry of Defence are concerned. I do not know why, because you were not responsible—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Chair was not responsible.

Mr. Hancock: I am delighted to absolve you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from any of that responsibility and from any implication that I may have hinted at. Just as you were not responsible, the Minister was not responsible, and I cannot understand why current Ministers in the Ministry of Defence will not do what many of them promised to do when they were in opposition, namely to sort out the matter and give support to the Gulf veterans, which is what they asked for, and were promised, six or seven years ago. How sad it is that, today, we are firing warning shots to make sure that our service men and women will be properly protected this time round. I hope that the lessons will be learned, but it is sad that, 11 years on, we are demanding justice for men and women who have not had even an inkling of light in their campaign so far.

10.23 am

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): I must declare an interest. As recorded in the register, I am an ex-service man and a current reservist, and I am a member of the Royal British Legion. I also have relatives serving in the Gulf, so this debate is germane to me, and I welcome the opportunity of contributing to it.

I retain an open mind on Gulf war syndrome and illness. I must confess, however, that having been employed in the Royal Navy in the early 1990s, I recall feeling that we were doing less than we might to take seriously the concerns of service men, and particularly that our record was comparing unfavourably with that of the United States in relation to its service men. It was clear at that time that the USA was taking the travails of its service men and ex-service men a great deal more seriously than we were of our people in the UK. In mitigation, it was probably drawing from its experience in the Vietnam conflict which, fortunately, was an experience that we were spared.

Nevertheless, I was concerned at that time because of the poor record keeping to which other Members have alluded and the general lack of urgency in relation to putting in place research to try to clarify exactly what was going on. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) put his case well, particularly in relation to record keeping, and I hope that the Minister will assure us that measures are now in place to ensure that proper, meticulous records are kept of the state of health of our service men and of exactly what they are exposed to.

As I said, however, I remain of an open mind on this issue, and it is important, in what is evidently an emotive subject, to bring some scientific clarity and light to it. It is important to quote the *British Medical Journal* of February last year. Members who take an interest in this matter will recall that Guy's, King's and St. Thomas's school of medicine has taken a particular interest in Gulf war syndrome and illness and has conducted studies on it. If I may paraphrase the *British Medical Journal*—time is short—it said in relation to illness following war that no single presentation is common to all modern wars, that variations seem to be determined by the nature of combat, contemporary medical knowledge and important health beliefs and fears, and that illness related to the Gulf war does not stand apart from that of other conflicts. That is important because the study considered post-conflict illness from the Boer war to the present day. While no one denies that veterans of the Gulf war are ill, that needs to be examined in the context of other conflicts going back to the beginning of the previous century.

We need to be clear, however, about what we are dealing with this time. I hope that the Minister will assure us in a few minutes that we will put in place the research that is necessary to study that to which our people are being exposed, and that we shall keep adequate medical records. We risk doing the same again because we are exposing our people to much the same risks as in 1991, and potentially more of them. We need assurances that everything has been done to reduce the risk that they face.

I accept that Ministers have put effort into ensuring that we do not have multiple vaccination as we did in the early 1990s, but there is some way to go to win over the hearts and minds of our service men and women. The vaccination rate among our service people is very low: it is less than 50 per cent., as the Prime Minister reiterated in an oral answer to me a couple of weeks ago. The figures are 28 per cent. in the Navy, 46 per cent. in the RAF and 78 per cent. in the Army. To a great extent, that is related to perceived risk—there is no doubt about that—but it would also be interesting to know what the

differential is within the Army. If these differences are due to perceived risk, I would expect those units in the front line—the teeth elements of the Army—to be vaccinated at a higher rate than those in the support arms. I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on that.

Time is short, so I shall wrap up with the words of Colonel Terry English, who has criticised the Government by saying that

"a much earlier investigation of this whole issue would have given today's soldiers the confidence to take inoculations."

The figures suggest that that battle has not been won. I would be extremely grateful if the Minister were to say what he is doing now to ensure that the uptake of necessary vaccinations is going ahead a little more successfully than it has hitherto.

10.29 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Like other hon. Members present, I am experiencing a certain déjà vu, because within weeks of being elected in 1997, I accompanied my constituent, Major Christine Lloyd, on a visit to the Minister with responsibility for the armed forces. Major Lloyd had vaccinated troops and had been vaccinated herself, and had suffered certain effects for a considerable time. We were promised then that the incoming Labour Government would be open and honest in all their dealings with the Gulf war veterans, but, some six years later, the Ministry of Defence's persistent quibbling over terms such as "syndrome" and "illness" and its behaviour in cases such as those of Shaun Rusling and Major Christine Lloyd fall far short of those promises and of the responsible attitude that the Department should adopt.

Although it is accepted that there is no single clear cause or symptom of Gulf war illness, the MOD must acknowledge that the various ailments suffered by veterans are neither mere coincidence nor psychosomatic. Shaun Rusling, the head of the National Gulf Veterans and Families Association, has called for an independent medical programme and investigation into the whole issue of Gulf war illness, taking it away from the MOD and from any possible bias or perceived bias towards its interests. We would support that. By broadening the scope of the medical assessment programme, all soldiers who have served in action would have access to an impartial and expert medical advice centre separate from the military alternatives.

Although the MOD has published figures to show that there is "essentially no difference" between the mortality rates of Gulf war veterans and other service men who were not deployed to the Gulf, they do not take into account the severity and nature of the ongoing illnesses that are being suffered. The widespread suspicion and anxiety about this issue is detrimental to the morale of veterans and of other service men, particularly in the current climate.

I also support the documentation proposals, because we want to know what steps the MOD has taken to ensure that better records are kept of the substances—such as organophosphates—that are being used, or are intended to be used, and what vaccines are being administered to troops, how they are being administered, in what order and according to what timetable. The US Government have made efforts to improve medical record keeping in theatre, and we must do the same. Furthermore, veterans and their GPs must be given swift and uninhibited access to medical records, and more strenuous efforts must be made to keep a better record of all service men when they leave the forces, so that their mental and physical health can be properly monitored.

The seven-year rule for applications for war pensions must be waived in the case of Gulf war veterans. The MOD cannot and must not duck its obligation to make provision for soldiers and civilians suffering ill health as a result of time spent in theatre by focusing on the terminological niceties of these collective ailments. I want to know what lessons have been learned from the last Gulf war—that has not really been spelled out—and how they have affected preparations for possible action in the area in the coming months. We know that the MOD claims not to be administering vaccine cocktails any more, but will that make any difference if the vaccines are still the same ones? What is the medical evidence to support the new action? Have there been any alterations to the protective kit issued to troops and non-military personnel in the light of those lessons? In Saif Sareea, there were not enough NBC—nuclear, biological and chemical—protective suits to go round. I hope that we have now had confirmation that alterations have been made.

The current situation with regard to voluntary vaccinations is difficult to understand. When my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) visited our troops in the Gulf recently, that was clearly their No. 1 concern. United States troops have been vaccinated against anthrax, yet ours are offered such vaccinations as an option. One can forgive them for thinking that the MOD wants to avoid further costly law suits, as it has not yet determined the cause of Gulf war syndrome or illness. Either the vaccination is safe or it is not, and the Government should make a proper recommendation.

Dr. Murrison: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that anthrax vaccination should be compulsory for our troops?

Mr. Breed: It should not be made compulsory, but people should be given clear advice and the Government should give a clear recommendation on whether they believe that the vaccination should be given.

Dr. Murrison: I hate to rise in defence of the Government, but, to be fair, their advice is fairly clear.

Mr. Breed: If the advice is clear, that has certainly not been communicated to the troops.

Dr. Moonie: Yes, it has.

Mr. Breed: I am grateful for the Minister's confirmation that the Government's recommendation to the troops is entirely clear. Perhaps he will explain just how it has been communicated.

The Government must not shirk their responsibilities or place service men in an impossible situation. Their vaccine policy as it currently stands could be interpreted as an abdication of responsibility.

Dr. Moonie: In what way?

Mr. Breed: In the way that I have just described.

[Mr. Breed]

As for the discovery of batches of vaccine on the Dorset beaches, it is totally disingenuous to suggest that the Ministry cannot determine where those batches came from. There are clear scientific methods for calculating exactly where material from ships emanates from, using tides and so on. It is a well-tried scientific means of explaining these things, and it is used for environmental purposes all the time—to decide where oil spills come from, for example. We could easily determine from exactly which ship those batches of vaccine came.

Yesterday, we were in this Chamber discussing tragic deaths in Army barracks. Today, we are talking about Gulf war illness. Does the Minister accept that there is a growing view that the MOD appears to follow a clear strategy when dealing with these problems? First, it denies everything. Secondly, under pressure, it apparently agrees to a review. Thirdly, it strings out the process, prevaricates and tries to convince everyone that there is nothing in the allegations, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. That does nothing to enhance the reputation of the Government or of the MOD, and it seems to many people that the Government will spend whatever is necessary to defend themselves against any action or any claim for compensation from anyone at any time.

10.37 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I also congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on raising this subject. He has long experience of and dedication to the cause of the Gulf war veterans, as do many of the hon. Members here today. The purpose of this debate is to address the concerns of the Gulf war veterans and their families, especially as British troops are being deployed for a possible conflict in the Gulf even as we speak.

I spent a large part of my professional career as a military historian, writing about the first and second world wars and interviewing thousands of veterans of both. Their experiences were the same as, and often far more traumatic than, those of the veterans of the Gulf war. I was also a special adviser at the Ministry of Defence in the lead-up to and during the Gulf war. I am only too aware of the decisions that had to be made very quickly and often with inadequate information, and, in the case of vaccination, with the most appalling option of difficulties. That is offered not as a defence, but merely as an observation.

Mr. Hancock: The hon. Gentleman has just told the Chamber that he was present during those deliberations. Will he explain why the decisions about inoculations were taken in such a rush, when the planning was several months in the making? It would appear that he is now suggesting that the decisions on what inoculations service personnel would have was rushed through without proper information being available.

Mr. Simpson: No, I am making two points. First, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and a decision had to be made very quickly to deploy British troops, so many of the actions taken had to be rushed. Secondly, we were aware at the time that Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological capability. That represented an option of difficulties. It is never easy to make such decisions, as anyone who has experience in government will know. I hope that if the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) becomes a Minister one day, he will realise what the consequences of his decisions may be.

Tens of thousands of Gulf war veterans in the United States and the United Kingdom, and their families, are convinced that there is such a medical condition as Gulf war syndrome. The debate that we are having today covers five points. First, is there a definition of Gulf war syndrome or illness? One of the things that has come out of this debate, as well as all the previous debates and the medical evidence, is that there is no agreement on this. The Ministry of Defence genuinely believes that there is no such thing as a syndrome that is unique to the veterans of the Gulf war. However, the pensions appeal tribunal last year accepted the term "Gulf war syndrome", finding that the condition was attributable to a veteran's service. So there is major disagreement on this matter.

Secondly, is it possible medically and scientifically to identify a specific Gulf war illness or syndrome? Again, there is mixed evidence. There is disagreement between the MOD and the veterans over its origins and over the specifics. There is even disagreement among the medical and scientific experts and those with a background in this field. That has been displayed today, given the backgrounds of the Minister and the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). These are major problems, and they are not simply academic. They go to the root of the question. My hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) has referred to the fact that the United States Department of Defence's war syndrome study found that Gulf war syndrome was a manifestation of established post-combat syndrome, which arises out of all combats. That is rejected by many Gulf war veterans.

Thirdly, have the Gulf war veterans shown medical symptoms and levels of mortality higher than the control group? We have just had the latest MOD figures for the period from 1 April to 31 December 2002, which showed that 571 Gulf war veterans had died, but 574 people in a control group of service personnel had also died. So, is there any real difference? We have to get into the specifics, and a number of hon. Members have done so. A recent study in the United States showed that US military personnel who served in the Gulf were twice as likely to contract motor neurone disease as others. That study must be reviewed by an independent scientific panel. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs—a very powerful organisation, which has money and political clout—immediately offered disability and survivor benefits to veterans with the disease.

Fourthly, has the MOD shown a willingness to investigate this issue, to be transparent and to consider awarding further compensation when necessary? There is no agreement on this. Colleagues who have spoken in the debate so far have accused the Ministry of being slow, ignorant and more concerned about financial compensation, and said that information has to be dragged out of it little by little. I am a little more

sympathetic, having been inside the Ministry and seen that it is often more a question of cock-up than conspiracy.

Mr. Tyler: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Simpson: I am trying to give the Minister more time to speak, but as the hon. Gentleman initiated the debate, I will give way to him.

Mr. Tyler: The admission of a former senior adviser in the Ministry of Defence that a cock-up could have caused this problem just as much as a conspiracy is amazing. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that.

Mr. Simpson: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, we are perhaps becoming a little hysterical. I am saying that when it comes to administration, it is more likely to be a cock-up than a conspiracy. The logistical problems involved, with the medical records and everything else, are absolutely enormous. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Westbury, I conclude that the onus is on the Ministry of Defence. It must now recognise that not only Gulf war veterans but many independent observers no longer automatically believe what it is saying, and that we may have to have, at the very least, an independent review of the evidence available from the Ministry and from the Gulf war veterans.

I want to give the Minister as much time as possible to respond to this debate, so I shall make my final point. As hon. Members have said, there is no doubt that the information that is available from the last conflict should be considered rationally, and that the onus should be on the Ministry of Defence to provide that information to the military personnel who are now being deployed to the Gulf, and to their families. If there are any major problems or weaknesses, it is right and proper that they should be identified. Equally, those of us who have relatives or friends about to be deployed to the Gulf will know that it does not help them or their morale if issues are raised for which there is no scientific or medical background. A fine balance has to be struck, but I accept that the onus of responsibility lies with the Ministry of Defence.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): It is difficult to know exactly where to start when winding up a debate such as this. I am certainly grateful for the opportunity to set Members' minds at rest, although I suspect—I shall check my records—that all of them have at one time or another received one of my eight-page letters on Gulf war veterans' illnesses or on depleted uranium. If any hon. Members have any questions of any kind, or if there is anything that they do not understand—which, I am afraid, seems clearly evident from their contributions today—my door is always open. They can come and see me to discuss it. They can tell me their concerns and I will discuss them frankly and openly. I do not want to get involved in a qualifications parade, but as someone with higher qualifications in psychiatry and in public health, I am probably uniquely qualified in the House to talk about many of these subjects, with the possible exception of the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison), with his medical background.

I want to dispose of the argument about depleted uranium as quickly as possible. Depleted uranium has exactly the same effects as ordinary uranium. No scientist in the world could provide any basis for suggesting anything else. There is no difference in the chemical effects of isotopes. There are differences in the radiological effects of isotopes, because some decay more quickly than others and produce more radioactivity. Depleted uranium—as its very title would suggest to anyone with even modest intelligence—has less radiation in it than ordinary uranium.

Dr. Gibson: My hon. Friend is very distinguished and promotes himself very well, but has he read the Royal Society report, which accentuates the measures that I suggested should be taken on the different isotopes, what happens to them in the human body, whether they are filtered out, and so on? A huge area of research needs to be done on this subject, and my hon. Friend has no right to say that we know anything, when an august body such as the Royal Society says that we need to put more time and effort into this research and to find new methodologies to assess what isotopes—

Dr. Moonie: That is quite long enough, I think, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If my hon. Friend wants to send me any documentation, I shall be happy to look at it. In fact, I shall read it with great interest, but, frankly, anyone who tries to suggest that there are medical differences—other than those due to radioactivity—between the effects of isotopes is talking out of the back of his head.

I have a passionate desire to get to the bottom of any problem such as this one. It is utterly abhorrent to me—it is anathema—to think that we might be ignoring any medical effect that could be taking place as a result of anything that we have done. I would not for a moment countenance the Department in any obfuscation, any delay or any attempt to push this matter under the carpet. It would be unthinkable to do that.

I hope that the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) will accept that there is a recognition that people are sick. There is no denial of that whatever. There may have been in the past; there is none now. I believe that if we talk about a syndrome, it is incumbent on us to show that there are scientific reasons for saying that such a syndrome exists. So far, no evidence whatever has been produced to back that up. I cannot find any reputable medical source that will accept that a separate syndrome exists. To me, it is unthinkable that one should call it that. There is no medical reason for doing so. That is not to say—

Mr. Tyler: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: No. I do not have time.

That is not to deny that people are sick—of course they are. That is not to say that they should be denied treatment for their illnesses when we can find something to give them—of course they should be treated. That is not to deny that they should be compensated if they are disabled as a result of their illness. So far as I know, anyone who has a disability, irrespective of what it is

[Dr. Moonie]

labelled as, receives the compensation due to them. If they have not, they must come forward and check with the—

Mr. Tyler: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: No, I will not.

Those people must check with the veterans' agency or through the Department to see what else can be done. If they are disabled, under our regulations, they should be compensated for the disability in exactly the same way as anyone else is.

Mr. Tyler: The Minister will have noted that I very carefully asked for a debate on Gulf war illness, not syndrome, so I am with him on that. Will he give an explicit assurance, in response to the points that were made earlier, that if anyone takes any vaccination, the Ministry will take full legal responsibility for any consequent illness that may occur?

Dr. Moonie: May I cover vaccines as I go through my text? Otherwise, my speech will get even more disjointed. I take due note that the hon. Gentleman has used the term "Gulf veterans' illnesses". I think that it has been used by everyone today and that is correct.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: I do not have time to give way again. I want to cover as quickly as I can the points that have been raised. Many hon. Members have rightly referred to the arrangements for current deployments. I stress that the well-being of the personnel whom we deploy is of the greatest importance to us. We have made some important improvements since the 1990–91 Gulf conflict. We have made improvements in medical record-keeping through the introduction of a new operational medical record form, which is now in use. That should ensure that health events while on deployment are recorded much more systematically than in the past.

Again, like any other record, it is up to those in the field to maintain records properly. That is something over which I have much less control. I cannot look over everyone's shoulder when they are conducting a medical examination, much as I would like to occasionally, but we have strengthened the central administration of our medical services appropriately. That strengthening and the recognition by the vice-chief of the defence staff of the importance of medical issues have ensured that the chain of command has been left in no doubt as to the importance of maintaining accurate historical records of deployment, where people go, what they are given and what happens to them. I hope that that will work much better than it did at the beginning of the 1990s.

The Gulf conflict revealed shortcomings in medical preparedness. A number of personnel were not up to date with their service standard vaccinations. The standard of vaccinations is the same as the standard of vaccinations given to everyone in the population. An adequate body of literature shows that, in general use, those are absolutely safe. One can never give a 100 per cent. guarantee on anything, but the widespread use of normal vaccinations is well documented. It is no different for our people. What we have ensured this time is that forces that are being deployed have had all the routine vaccinations that they should have. There should be no requirement this time to give anyone a cocktail of vaccinations in the Gulf.

I cannot give a 100 per cent. certain answer on that. We have a voluntary programme. Although I and my colleagues have agonised over this, I still think that we should retain a voluntary programme, despite the difficulties it gives us with differences in uptake, particularly on anthrax. We have maintained the voluntary programme.

When vaccines are administered, informed consent is given. There seems to have been some doubt in people's minds as to whether they have recently been asked to sign a waiver in relation to any effects that might arise. That is not the case. They have been asked to sign a form saying that the effects of the vaccinations and the reasons for giving them have been made clear to them and they have refused to have them. A proper record of that should be kept. People may get to the Gulf and change their minds, in which case they may be given inoculations more quickly, and they ought to be. It should be a tiny percentage of the people being sent there.

We have greatly improved the briefings that are given to personnel on health-related matters. Up-to-date medical intelligence briefings are now routinely commissioned for the area of the world where it is judged that our forces might operate. Personnel deployed in operations receive pre-deployment and in-theatre briefings on health and hygiene matters based on the assessment of the conditions that they may meet. The briefings include information on things such as protection against biting insects, personal hygiene, how to acclimatise, operating in arduous environments and malarial prophylaxis, which is important.

There are also briefings on the nature and management of combat reactions and other psychological stresses of conflict. Arrangements are made to try to limit the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder in the armed forces. We have been trying to do that for many years. I have no idea yet whether that will be effective, but we are aware of those effects and are trying to make progress in the light of what is still very limited medical knowledge of how to prevent them.

Health and safety instructions have been issued to the crews of vehicles loaded with depleted uranium ammunition and to the units that support them. Those instructions make it clear that the risks from DU are far lower than those from other hazards arising from military operations, but they include advice on procedures for minimising contamination by use of respiratory protective equipment, protective clothing and other procedures, particularly for those who may end up going into a vehicle that has been struck by a DU round.

I should mention in passing that 35 United States soldiers have fragments of depleted uranium buried in them as a result of friendly fire during the last Gulf conflict. They have been followed up ever since, and not one of them has shown any signs of heavy metal poisoning, which is what one would expect as a result of

such contamination. It is amazing how little effect a relatively large amount of the substance can have. One would expect heavy metal poisoning, which as everyone knows is usually characterised by effects on the kidney. So far, they have found no effects on the kidney whatever.

On anthrax vaccines washed up on beaches, I must admit that that would be a monumental embarrassment to any Government. I assure hon. Members that there is nothing I would like better than to find out who was responsible for it. Until now, despite strenuous efforts by my Department, we have been unable to do so. I assure hon. Members that those efforts are continuing and will continue until we get to the bottom of it, if we ever do. However, I cannot work out why that would imply a dereliction of duty towards our soldiers. It is not a case of the Navy throwing the vaccines away rather than administering them. As a former commander in the Navy said, it is much more likely that sailors do not think that they are exposed to those risks on board ship, so they are much less likely to take up the vaccine. We have noticed that the uptake of anthrax vaccine among strike units that are likely to be deployed is very high compared with other units. Perceived risk in a voluntary situation is always likely to lead to a higher uptake.

Anthrax should be administered alone. The procedures that we have introduced should have ensured that it has been. Again, I cannot say that that will be done in 100 per cent. of cases, but if it is administered alone in the vast majority of cases we can set our minds at rest.

Anthrax vaccination will be given alone. It is fairly extensive: four injections over six months. Full protection is not achieved until the end, but significant protection is achieved with the first dose. It is important to realise that there has never been a case of a serious reaction to our anthrax vaccine. Although it is voluntary, if personnel feel that there is any chance of their being exposed to anthrax, they should certainly take the vaccination to get protection.

It was argued that research is being carried out at a snail's pace. Indeed, the research has been very slow. That is not in our hands. We have no control over the speed of research. If people come to me and suggest any line of research that we should follow up, and there are good scientific reasons for doing so, we will fund it. I give that absolute assurance to hon. Members today.

I recognise the strength of feeling about this matter, and the depth of feeling among veterans. We will do whatever we can. If hon. Members have any constructive suggestions to make to us, we will consider them with the same care as we are examining Professor Haley's work from the United States. We have asked the Medical Research Council to review that work and to see whether any further research can be done. Good research must always be properly—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. We have arrived at the time when we must move on to the next topic for our consideration, which is agriculture in West Dorset. I regret to say that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), is not in his place to listen to the debate. Perhaps some of his colleagues might transmit that news to him. *[Interruption.]* He has just arrived, to my great relief.

Agriculture (West Dorset)

11 am

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that your relief on seeing the Minister arrive is nothing as compared to mine. For the purpose of the record, he is indeed prompt, just. It would have been sad had he not been present, as the purpose of these debates is to bring matters to the attention of Ministers.

I am somewhat in the position of Dr. Martin Luther King, who once had a dream, which I am glad to say has been almost entirely fulfilled. My position differs from his, because I have a dream that is almost entirely unfulfilled. My dream is that there may come a year when I no longer need to ask for a debate on agriculture in West Dorset, because it is in good condition. The previous years have not been such years, and this year is not such a year.

I hope that the Minister will already have heard many times everything that I say today, because it is certainly true of many other parts of rural England. I hope that the Minister is so well aware of the problems that he is already tackling them, but in case some of them have escaped his attention, I shall explain again the problems that currently afflict my farmers.

The first is straightforward: it is lack of profitability. It has been a problem for many years. I say a problem, but for many of my farming constituents with small and mid-sized farms it has ceased to be a problem and has become nostalgia. Many of them are no longer in the business. For others, it is a daily struggle, and many of them are on the point of giving up.

Of course, the lack of profitability is most striking in West Dorset in the dairy sector. It remains afflicted by pricing that neither the Minister nor I, were we currently in the business, would be able to sustain, except with the most monumental efforts. He must be as aware of that as I. Although there is no doubt that there has been a significant effort to push the supermarkets into increasing the prices that they pay, the effect on the farm-gate price of milk is limited because only about 50 per cent. of production is going into liquid milk. For dairy products, I regret to say that there is little sign of improvement.

That is a long-running sore. If that were all, and if there were no side effects and no noise going on that caused additional problems, I suspect that the Minister's task, my task and indeed that of my farmers would be much lighter. A series of items that goes beyond the fundamental economic malaise is addressable, and I hope that the Minister will tell us that he is addressing those problems.

The first relates to the reform programme, so-called. The Minister must have tracked, as I have over some years, the thoughts and tergiversations relating to modulation, digressivity and all the rest of it. Unless the Minister can assure me to the contrary, I do not believe, and my farmers do not believe, that the present proposals will have any effect other than to diminish significantly the economics for many of my farmers.

I do not see any sign that the money that will arise from whatever form of modulation is ultimately adopted will come back to West Dorset. It still seems that there is significant asymmetry, to the disadvantage

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of British agriculture, and, while we are at it, significant irrationality. There is no rational argument for modulation, because modulation is trying to move in the opposite direction from that in which the Government have been trying to move for many years to increase efficiency. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that he is working hard to avoid those dire effects.

Many of my farmers went into organic production encouraged by schemes. That is no fault of the present Government; many of the schemes pre-date the present Government. They were also encouraged by some extremely well-meaning individuals, many of whom write to me. No doubt many more write to the Minister. They argue that we should establish much more aggressive targets for organic production.

I have an unbroken record of having written back to such individuals, sometimes to their dismay, saying that they are engaged in a process that is all too likely to be self-defeating. If the target is set high and the production level is sufficient for the production of organic produce to exceed demand, the effect will be to remove the premium.

I have been saying that for some years and, lo and behold, many of my farmers are in that absurd position. They have converted, they are producing perfectly accredited organic produce, and the premium has disappeared. Indeed, some of the produce is being sold on the open market as if it were non-organic. We clearly need to have some rational policy to arrive at a situation in which we are not disadvantaging people twice over: first, because of the extra costs of organic production and, secondly, because they are not getting the premium.

I said five years ago that the pig industry was one of the few rational sectors, in the sense that it had not been systematically destroyed by the lunacies of the common agricultural policy. Alas, it has been systematically destroyed by other lunacies since then, not all of which started then but which have been aggravated. The asymmetry of regulation between the United Kingdom and competing countries—Poland, Denmark and the Netherlands—in the pig industry has reached levels that exceed those that I warned about in previous years, so far as I can see from West Dorset.

I have in West Dorset—sorry, I had in West Dorset—probably the most efficient and sophisticated operation in the British pig industry. Denhay Farms was a process industry that related pigs to dairy and used cycles of production—in effect, it was in a combined cycle. It is a highly modern operation based on niche marketing. One can buy Denhay produce in the most expensive shops in Britain at high premiums. It is a tightly organised business on a very large scale. It would be impossible to imagine a business, other than the very large Velcourt-type operations, that is more modern in its approach than Denhay.

I do not know how we can hope that there will continue to be a pig industry if Denhay has given up pig production, as is now the case. It is still producing bacon and the excellent smoked ham but it has no pigs, because it no longer makes sense to have pigs in Britain. It makes sense to import the pigs.

When we import the pigs, we export the cruelty. Because the asymmetry of regulation is so great, countries have animal welfare standards of pig production well below those that previously obtained in the UK. They are producing pigs and dumping them. I persist in believing that there is a significant case for assessing that as predatory pricing on the part of some producers in other countries. They are using low-cost production to engage in predatory pricing to destroy the British pig industry, and once destroyed the costs of entry are considerable. We are still under pressure that would increase the likelihood that no pig industry will exist in Britain. People write to me—as they probably do to the Minister—about the need to end the use of farrowing crates. That would be the final blow. I also discover from constituents in Tolpuddle that they, as small organic outdoor pig producers who are just surviving thanks to their organic status, will no longer be allowed to engage in cutting on farm. As a result of some meat products regulations, they will have to use an approved abattoir miles away. Why add another level of regulation that will end up by destroying what little agriculture is left?

I have said in previous years, and I will say again, that the crisis will come in bovine tuberculosis. It will be greater than anybody presently imagines, because consumer confidence will be affected to such a degree that Ministers will not be able to contain it, if there is a serious outbreak of bovine TB. However untrue it may be that bovine TB affects the quality of milk—I do not offer a scientific opinion on that, because I have no scientific background from which to do so—the hysteria will generate a huge fall in consumer confidence if a widespread outbreak occurs.

The Krebs tests have gone well beyond an appropriate time scale. We still do not have any reason to believe that they will produce a sensible policy on badgers in any reasonable time. We do not have any sign of the development of accurate tests or proper vaccinations, but I hope that the Minister can tell us that something can be done about that promptly.

Many farmers in my constituency will not be able to afford the cost of the new scheme for fallen stock that is due to start in April. The Government have talked about partial funding, but we need to know more, and quickly, because it is now February. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that the partial funding will in fact be complete funding.

The Minister will be aware from his correspondence records that I—and, I am sure, many other Members—have written to him repeatedly about the problems with the British Cattle Movement Service. The organisation continues to provide aggravation that is farming's equivalent of the Passport Agency or the immigration and nationality department, although it does not reach quite the same levels. The problems caused by BCMS cross-checking with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about non-payments and delays have left some of my farmers tearing their hair out. I hope that the DEFRA review will lead to improvements, and I would be grateful for the Minister's comment on that.

I may be a ludicrous optimist and, indeed, the fact that I am talking about agriculture in the area of west Dorset at all suggests that I probably am, because the pessimists do not believe that it will exist in future.

However, I have long harboured the hope that many of the problems that I have outlined could be significantly ameliorated in the long run by a movement towards biofuels. It could have huge environmental consequences, as I am sure the Minister agrees. Therefore, in my area we welcomed unreservedly the biodiesel changes in the Budget of a 20p reduction in tax per litre. I also welcome the pre-Budget report suggestion that the tax on bioethanol will be similarly reduced. I am conscious of the fiscal constraints on the Chancellor and I understand that they are getting tighter, but industry estimates suggest that the cost differential between biofuels and ordinary fuels is more than 20p—it is more in the region of 25p to 30p a litre. That explains why we have not yet reached the tipping point and why the uptake of the opportunity to produce biofuels has not yet become significant.

I hope that the Minister shares my belief and is willing to lobby the Chancellor on the point. It will be a case of Treasury myopia if 20p per litre is not increased to 30p, or at least to 27p or 28p. If we could reach a tipping point, the benefit would be felt in the environmental effects and the huge advantages for my farmers in west Dorset, and it would also make a significant fiscal impact. If the industry could develop significantly, it would add, to the direct taxation on the sale of fuels—which is classed, oddly enough, in Treasuryspeak as indirect taxation—the indirect tax, which is known in Treasuryspeak as direct tax, on the corporations that are making money by producing the fuel. If the two are added together and compared to anything other than North sea production, such as imported fuel or allowing increased exports of North sea production, the fiscal equation begins to look very different from that on which I imagine the Treasury mandarins are currently basing their calculations. I hope that DEFRA will use its endeavours to persuade the Chancellor that it would make sense to try to reach that tipping point. We are almost there. It would not require much further effort, but it would make a huge difference to my farmers if they could see that light on the horizon.

I have taken 16 minutes, and I leave the remaining 14 minutes to the Minister to provide—I hope—the answers that will make my farmers happy for the first time in a long time.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) on obtaining the debate and on making an effective case. He has dealt with a range of issues affecting his agricultural constituents and I understand and share many of the concerns that he has raised.

Milk prices have been poor for a range of reasons. Prices are influenced by world prices, as well as home demand, production levels and the exchange rate. We have tried to provide assistance for our dairy sector through the mechanisms of the common agricultural policy, but the real problem is supply and demand and the volatile nature of the market. In the aftermath of foot and mouth, it was calculated that the dairy sector would experience a dip in production and a potential rise in demand. However the dip did not materialise, and an increase in production has led to price falls. Other innocent victims were those people who had converted into organic milk production, who were caught by the same problem of supply and demand. The right hon. Gentleman was right to point to the danger of targets, which can play a role in driving policies, but care must be taken not to apply them too rigidly. If targets are applied too rigidly, production starts to be focused on just hitting the target, instead of responding to market demand, and that risks having an effect on the premium.

I am glad to say that we have produced an organic action plan that contains the flexibility that the right hon. Gentleman wishes to see. It has the support of the organic bodies, the National Farmers Union, consumer groups and environmental groups. I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman has had the chance to see the plan, but I can ensure that he is sent a copy. I am sure that it will be of interest to him.

The right hon. Gentleman also rightly raised the issue of the current negotiations in the mid-term review. We think that the Commission is heading in the right general direction, especially on decoupling, the problem of production subsidies and the need for changes to the CAP. We will not achieve any of our objectives in the World Trade Organisation negotiations unless other countries see us making progress on agricultural production subsidies that distort the market, affect developing countries and do not even deliver for our own farmers in their artificial effect on prices.

I understand and share the right hon. Gentleman's concerns about the modulation elements of the proposal. Modulation is not ideal, because the ideal outcome would be the removal of all production subsidies, which would allow the freedom to apply the rural development policy and environmental policies without that rigid framework. However, we do not live in an ideal world and, as part of a transition, a case can be made for modulating the direct support payments and putting the money into the rural development fund framework. In that way, the money would go back into the rural economy. It is an opportunity for farmers and it would use the money more constructively than simply using it for production subsidies, with all their attendant problems. At present, the way in which the modulation proposals are unfolding in the mid-term review is not logical and would work against the nature and structure of UK farming. Nor would they deliver the money in the same way to the rural development programmes. We will try to change that.

I have much sympathy for the points that the right hon. Gentleman raised about pigs. The pig industry is strong in my area and I have much regard for the industry for precisely the reasons that he advanced. It has always operated without subsidies, it is efficient and good at marketing and, left to its own devices, has been a successful sector of agriculture. Unfortunately the industry has faced similar problems with prices as other sectors have. Prices are stable, but do not provide the sort of return that the industry needs and deserves. When the industry went through a very difficult period a few years ago, the Government made £66 million available over three years to assist it through the restructuring scheme. It was taken up by many sectors in the industry.

I understand that the Commission introduced private storage aids in December 2002, which are also designed to stabilise the market and improve prices. That is a

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considerable commitment from the Government in recognition of the particular problems that the pig industry faces. We are also trying to re-open some of the important markets for pig meat products that have been lost over the years for various reasons. For example, Japan used to be a high value market for a range of pig products, and we are working hard to re-open those markets. DEFRA is also sponsoring the world pork congress, which is designed to stimulate international trade—something that our industry has always been very successful in achieving.

We are also trying, with some success, to improve the market for genetic products. That market has been subject to some restrictions, but embryos and semen have been high value exports for our industry in the past. When I attend international conferences, I always take the opportunity to meet the Agriculture Minister of the country to press the case for semen and embryos, so I have become something of an expert on the international trade in those products. I perform the same service for the beef sector, and for ovines—other areas in which we have traditionally had high quality and high value, if limited, exports. We will do our best to assist the pig industry within the rules that apply.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned bovine TB. It is a difficult issue, but I do not believe that we may face a potential consumer problem. TB in cattle posed a real problem before pasteurisation, but since its introduction milk has been absolutely safe. Bovine TB cannot be passed on through pasteurised milk and that protects the consumer.

Mr. Letwin: I took pains not to challenge that scientific view, but does the Minister agree that the hysteria of the tabloid press and the fears of those who are no longer convinced by the scientific evidence are likely to lead to a scare that we are unlikely to be able to counter, no matter how rational our explanation?

Mr. Morley: I understand that point, and it is fair to say that we cannot predict how food scares will take hold. However, there is no rationale for any such scare, and we can demonstrate that. The existence of the Food Standards Agency has also made a huge difference to consumer confidence. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the credibility of Government scientists and Departments has been damaged by food scares, especially in the days of the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The FSA, which has an independent role, has been successful in providing well-balanced and rational opinions on food issues.

We have introduced extra measures to deal with the backlog in TB testing that built up during the foot and mouth crisis, when we diverted all our staff and resources, and we are making progress. We have also recently introduced a new package of control measures, which involves the licensed movement off farm of non-reactor cattle, in certain circumstances; the imposition of movement restrictions on herds with overdue tests; and a pilot project to assess the effectiveness of the gamma interferon blood test, which is what I think the right hon. Gentleman meant when he talked of better and more accurate tests. The test is relatively new and we are introducing it in several areas to test its effectiveness. We hope that it will be faster and more accurate, which would certainly assist our TB control strategies.

As the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, we also have the Krebs experiment and the independent scientific group, chaired by Professor Bourne, which does an excellent job in advising the Government. We also have a stakeholder group on animal health issues, and a TB forum on which the industry is represented. That gives farmers an opportunity to raise their concerns.

It is true that we presently spend £30 million on fallen stock collection, including over-30-month stock, fallen cattle under our BSE monitoring and the result of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy monitoring in sheep. We made an offer to the industry to set up a national organisation. We are already committed to collecting the money, but we could use it to put in place the framework of a national collection service. We are also willing to provide up to £500 million to set up the organisation. We would require a contribution from the industry but we could keep it to a minimum. At the moment, the industry feels that the Government should pay 100 per cent. of the costs, but we cannot do so under state aid rules. We feel that the industry should make some contribution. We are still discussing the issue and the offer is still open if the industry wishes to take it up.

The BCMS has experienced some problems with computer control. I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern and we will try to ensure that the problems are addressed and rectified.

I share the right hon. Gentleman's optimism on biofuels. The range of biocrops potentially has a bright future. The 20p cut in tax on biodiesel has stimulated the market. Indeed, the local garage in the village of Winterton, where I live, sells biodiesel and I fill my diesel Land Rover with it. I am slightly disappointed that it is the same price as ordinary diesel—I thought that it might have been cheaper. Nevertheless, because it is an environmentally friendly fuel, I am keen to use it. Biofuels could have a greater role to play and a case could be made to consider further the fiscal incentives. As the sponsoring ministry, DEFRA wants to see a good future for biofuels. If there is a good argument for further fiscal inducements, we are prepared to consider them and make representations to the Treasury accordingly.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the way in which he put his case. The issues that we have discussed are important and DEFRA is trying to address them. It is an ongoing process, although I am encouraged by the latest signs of increases in some farming incomes in some sectors. There is a long way to go, but it is better to see figures going up rather than down.

Sitting suspended till Two o'clock.

Unitary Authorities

2 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss unitary authorities in the broadest sense. They have been with us for several years, and it is now time to take stock of their efficacy and their operation. After all, local government reform and local government review seem to happen almost continuously. We have a review, some changes are made, and almost immediately the next review is upon us.

County councils, which almost seem like a part of history, have not been a local government unit for all that many years. For example, when Berkshire county council was abolished a few years ago, there was much breast beating and hand wringing—if it is physically possible to do both at the same time. People said that our county was being abolished, taking part of our history with it—but that was not really true. It is true that Berkshire, as an entity, existed for centuries, but its boundaries have changed from time to time. Its county town used to be Abingdon, but with boundary changes, that rightly became Reading, which is, of course, the capital of the Thames valley—and which should be a city, as I am sure hon. Members of all parties will agree.

In fact, Berkshire was an artificial county, very much a creature of the Local Government Act 1972, and the move towards unitary local government was the right approach to adopt at the time. Most counties vary in character from urban through suburban to rural, and Berkshire is no exception. It has the urban centres of Reading, Bracknell and Slough, the rural expanse of west Berkshire with its racecourses and rolling downs, and the suburban and commuter towns and villages of Wokingham district. Many other counties are largely rural but contain large towns, so their character varies.

In the 1960s, Bedfordshire, the county in which I grew up, varied from the urban car factories of the south through the brickfields at the centre to the onion fields of the north. It has changed somewhat, and I would not presume to trespass on the territory of the hon. Members who represent the communities of Bedfordshire now, so I shall discuss the unitary authorities of Berkshire, particularly Reading and Wokingham—areas that I have the honour to represent.

I would like to air issues about the provision of services by local government and try to reach a view on the optimum size of population per unit of local government, and on the closeness to the population of those who are elected as representatives and determine council tax and spending.

Let us consider the purpose of local government. Historically, county councils have been responsible for education, personal social services, libraries, museums and art galleries, structure plans, highways and parking, refuse disposal, the control of mineral and gravel extraction, fire and rescue services, civil defence, weights and measures and consumer protection services—a heavy responsibility.

Shire districts have been responsible for housing, environmental health services, refuse collection, local plans and development control, markets, land charges, parks, recreation and leisure facilities generally, museums and art galleries—often jointly with county councils—crematoriums and cemeteries and a variety of licensing and registration functions, including public entertainment licensing and taxi driver licensing. They too have a heavy work load and a heavy responsibility, quite different from those of county councils.

Most county councils, because of the variety of communities that they have the duty to represent, will have a variety of representation. A county council member who represents a rural district or division may not be particularly knowledgeable about an urban part of that county and may not be inclined to vote resources in that direction, or wish to divert them there. That is a historical problem that affects county councils as units of local government.

The review of local government really got under way in 1990, when the then Environment Secretary rightly said that the review of local government would

"rule nothing in and rule nothing out"—[*Official Report*, 5 December 1990; Vol. 182, c. 318.]

That led to the establishment of the Local Government Commission and to the enactment of the principle that where possible, there should be single-tier government, because two-tier government is likely to produce excessive bureaucracy and duplication of effort. In practice, the process, which tied up councillors and officers for several years in efforts to arrive at sensible solutions for their areas, produced workable unitary authorities only in mainly urban areas.

Outside the metropolitan conurbations, most counties acquired unitary authorities. Cambridgeshire contained Peterborough unitary authority, Bedfordshire contained Luton and so on. I will not weary the House with an account of the lengthy and at times acrimonious debates that took place in Berkshire about the future of its local government. Should there be four, five or six unitary authorities? Should Berkshire county council stay or should it go? If there were four or five unitary authorities, the existing districts would have to expand their boundaries. Would that result in a change of political control in those councils? Did that matter? Berkshire, in common with much of the south of England, is not a one-party state. Its eight hon. Members in the House represent all three main parties and its local authorities are similarly situated.

In Berkshire, we faced the dilemma of arriving at a consensus between those who wanted to retain their existing political control—a natural instinct on the part of anyone who has been elected—even at the expense of effective local government, and those who were prepared to jeopardise their personal political futures, as it might have been seen, to achieve effective representation and provision of services. To cut a long and tedious story short, there was furious lobbying and debate, and the occasional exchange of threats and promise of reward. That was all done in the most punctilious fashion; nothing improper took place.

Eventually, the Secretary of State decided that although the Local Government Commission had recommended the creation of five unitary authorities, there should be six within the existing boundaries of the shire district. In 1996, Berkshire county council was refused leave to appeal against the ruling. Thus were born the Berkshire unitary authorities of Bracknell Forest, Newbury—now renamed West Berkshire—

[Jane Griffiths]

Reading, Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Wokingham. Although not typical, in that throughout Berkshire there is only one tier of local government, the Berkshire unitary authorities provide a useful pointer to the future of effective local government and should inform the inevitable review of local government that will, and should, take place sooner or later.

I remind the House of the guidance that was given to the Local Government Commission in relation to carrying out its work. The commission was told that, although reorganisation should be worth while and cost-effective over time, it was not

"precluded from recommending an option which would be more expensive than the status quo if it believes that the cost would be outweighed by other considerations".

The commission was

"instructed to look at representation and the provision of services from the viewpoint of the citizen, not the authority. It should take into account the extent to which a possible structure might improve responsiveness to local people. For example, it should consider the potential effect on elected members' ability to give political leadership, and on the level of understanding of local government, and participation in it, by local people and organisations".

I would suggest that that part of the guidance is salutary for us all to consider, even now. The Local Government Commission did some excellent work, but much remains to be done. How wide and how deep is understanding of local government among ordinary council tax payers?

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): My hon. Friend is making a good point, and drawing the attention of the Chamber to the fact that it was a Conservative Secretary of State who chose to ignore the recommendations of the Local Government Commission. I have two points on the lessons to be learned from that. First, is the Conservative party not being completely hypocritical when it mourns the impending demise of the counties, because it was a Conservative Secretary of State who abolished Berkshire county council? Secondly, the decision to create six unitary authorities in Berkshire was criticised at the time as a political fix. What are my hon. Friend's views on those matters?

Jane Griffiths: My hon. Friend is right to make those points. The Secretary of State in the Conservative Government of the time was the ultimate decision maker on the future of local government in Berkshire. The decision was indeed criticised as a political fix, and I recall that the two Conservative Members representing the two Reading constituencies applauded the demise of Berkshire county council and the creation of those unitary authorities. It is not for me here to comment on or seek to analyse Conservative party policy; that is for Conservative Members. However, my hon. Friend's points are well made.

The commission was told that when it recommended the creation of unitary authorities, it should aim to make them responsible for all local government functions rather than passing existing authorities' functions to joint boards—an idea that was considered at the time. That is because the potential benefits of unitary authorities are lost if those authorities, and the communities that they represent, do not have direct responsibility. Although it was probably right to jettison the notion of joint boards in almost all cases, the aim of making a unitary authority responsible for all local government functions, although it has technically been achieved, has not really been fulfilled in terms of local council tax payers' appreciation of how such services work.

We have all failed in some measure if what we want is truly participative local democracy. The local government that we now have is an improvement on the previous structure—certainly in Berkshire it is—but there is a very long way to go.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Does the hon. Lady have any data to hand on participation rates in elections in unitary authorities compared with those in two-tier authorities? If so, it would reinforce her point.

Jane Griffiths: I know that participation rates in local elections are higher in unitary authorities than in county council elections. County council elections are often held on the same day as other elections, perhaps general elections. That affects participation rates. Most unitary authorities are largely, if not entirely, urban, and participation rates tend to be a little lower in urban than in suburban or semi-rural areas. I am not sure what conclusion can be drawn from those points, but participation rates in different types of district would merit further study.

The commission was guided as follows:

"Any new structure should enable functions to be performed in a way which is cost-effective, is responsive to local needs and conforms with statute, EU directives and regulations and national policy requirements."

Did that happen with unitary authorities and the new structures? Do they enable those functions to be performed cost-effectively? I shall explain later that in some ways they do not. That is not necessarily the fault of unitary authorities, and certainly not usually the fault of elected members and officers of those authorities, but in some cases the fact that they are unitary can work against cost-effective provision of local services.

There are problems in Berkshire—I am referring to Reading and Wokingham rather than the other local authorities in Berkshire. Two areas in which unitary authorities face particular difficulties are transport infrastructure and education provision, as well as the ever vexed question of local government finance. Just about every unitary authority, and many others, will tell anyone who will listen that they believe themselves to be underfunded, but it is difficult to make judgments about that from the outside.

Reading is typical of small unitary authorities in that in this era of parental choice, its secondary schools cannot accommodate all its school-age population. There is no comprehensive school in east Reading, so 11 to 18-year-olds, by and large, go to school in Wokingham district. The present nature of local government finance means that Wokingham receives less for each child it educates than Reading does. The reasons for that are various, but largely concern particular needs that are suffered by more young people in Reading than in Wokingham district, because the

character of those two districts is different. Thus Reading children travel outside the borough to school and Wokingham must consider the needs of Reading children when it plans its education services. Under Berkshire county council that was not the case—although Berkshire county council as an education authority had serious deficiencies.

Three quarters of my constituents live in Reading borough, but considerably fewer are educated there. It is logical for any local education authority to plan to educate the children of its council tax payers. Neither Reading nor Wokingham can do that, so the arrangements must be examined again. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider the difficult issues that face small authorities when they are trying to plan education provision. Perhaps he will discuss the matter with his colleagues.

Mr. Salter: On education provision, my hon. Friend will recall that the recommendations of the Local Government Commission for England in respect of Berkshire, particularly Reading, envisaged a sensible expansion of Reading's outdated 100-year-old boundaries, which would have picked up many of the schools built subsequently on the periphery of the urban area of Reading. Had the absurd decision to create six unitary authorities not been made, many of the education problems to which my hon. Friend refers would not have occurred.

Jane Griffiths: That is certainly the case. My view at the time was that the six proposed unitary authority boundaries were much too tightly drawn. Many thousands of people who do not live in the borough of Reading consider that they live in Reading, because they work and shop there. Their children may be educated in Wokingham, but they use Reading to meet just about all their other needs.

I have referred to schools in east Reading, but the problem is greater in south Reading. I apologise if I sound parochial, but the issues facing Reading and other authorities in Berkshire are pertinent to unitary authorities—throughout England, at least. South Reading has two comprehensive schools: Reading girls school and Thamesbridge college, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter). Just over the border in Wokingham is Ryeish green school, more than 60 per cent. of whose pupils live in Reading borough. Wokingham needs secondary school places elsewhere in its district, and has been considering whether Ryeish Green school should be relocated to meet that need. That proposal, which was considered by Wokingham quite recently, led to a campaign, run by Reading councillors and by my hon. Friend, for the school to be retained in its present location in the interests of the children who go there. The future options for that school and others in Wokingham district are being considered. Wokingham had hoped for a private finance initiative for its schools, but that has not so far been authorised. I hope that, with his colleagues, my hon. Friend the Minister will find an opportunity to reconsider that.

My view is that the two schools in south Reading within Reading borough are not well served by the existence of Ryeish Green school in its present location. We are left with that piece of history: there are three schools, the people of south Reading need to send their children to school, and the money is in the wrong place—I believe that one of the schools is in the wrong place too.

The families who have the greatest choice in educating their children, because of transport and other factors, tend to choose Ryeish Green and other schools outside Reading borough. That makes it extremely difficult for Reading girls school and Thamesbridge college to fulfil their potential and that of the children who attend them. This factor creates a burden for Reading borough council, which is responsible for those two schools. That means that things are difficult for Reading borough council in the present funding regime, and my constituents who live in south Reading are not well served. Education provision is a continuing problem for Reading and Wokingham unitary councils, and could usefully be scrutinised by my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues. Size does matter; education does matter.

The transport infrastructure is also a burning issue for unitary authorities.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Lady has just said that size matters. I shall ask the Minister later about size in relation to unitary authorities. From her experience, and that of her neighbours and colleagues in what used to be Berkshire, does the hon. Lady have a view on the minimum size, and perhaps the maximum size, of an effective unitary authority?

Jane Griffiths: It would be difficult to arrive at a population figure and say no fewer than that—or no more than that. That could cause problems. The density or sparsity of population would affect the number of people who could receive good governance from a unitary authority. The population of the borough of Reading is about 150,000, whereas the usership of the borough is a quarter of a million, possibly more. That anomaly needs to be addressed.

Mr. Salter: Before my hon. Friend moves away from the subject of education, I thank her for drawing attention to the successful campaign, run by myself and by local councillors and parents, to allow freedom of choice, and to allow the people of south Reading to choose Ryeish Green school for their children. Does she acknowledge that the campaign was supported not only by the Labour party in Reading but by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and by the Minister, who made the position of the Department for Education and Skills clear to Wokingham council? The proposal to move Ryeish Green school some eight miles to Finchampstead has now been dropped. That has been acknowledged in a press release from Wokingham district council. Will my hon. Friend clarify her position? Does she believe that parents in south Reading should be denied the opportunity to send their children to a school outside the boundary, such as Ryeish Green?

Jane Griffiths: I would never say that parents living anywhere should be denied the opportunity to send their children to the school of their choice, whether it is in the borough in which they lived or not. My point about Ryeish Green school is that the other two schools in

[Jane Griffiths]

south Reading are not well served by its existence. The fact that more than 60 per cent. of its pupils live in Reading borough shows the choice that parents in Reading are making. That is their privilege, and I would not seek to deny anyone that choice.

Under the Greenwich judgment, it would not be lawful to limit the geographical origin of the pupils of any school. I do not believe that the question arises. At Ryeish Green school, things have moved on and various options for the future are being considered. When the debate being held behind closed doors emerges and conclusions are reached, it will be salutary for all of us, because that debate goes to the heart of the problems of small local authorities. This is a question not of the quality of the schools concerned, but of where the money goes.

I want to talk about transport infrastructure, which is a burning issue for unitary authorities. The near impossibility of planning and implementing transport infrastructure projects for unitary authorities, especially small authorities, is well known. That is one reason for the widespread support for regional government, which I share—but we are not here to debate regional government today, although I hope that there will be opportunities to do so in the future; we are here to debate unitary authorities.

The Thames valley is one of the most affluent areas of the country, and as a consequence has one of the severest traffic congestion problems. It is imperative that the local authorities in the Thames valley work together to plan, manage and minimise that congestion.

The Thames runs through the north of my constituency. There are only two crossings of the river in Reading, which contributes greatly to the traffic congestion in the north and centre of my constituency. Much of the traffic does not need to be there, but is there because there are only two realistic ways to get across the Thames. There is almost no public transport alternative across the Thames, if one lives outside the borough of Reading. People drive in from South Oxfordshire because they work in Reading. The catchment are of Reading is about a quarter of a million people, some of whom live in villages in South Oxfordshire.

The issue of a third Thames crossing has been debated among the various local authorities in their changing guises since the 1920s, and no solution has yet been found. Most local authorities in the area favour a new road bridge across the Thames, but the more rural authorities to the north do not want it to be in their territory. That position is untenable. If we want a road, it has to go somewhere.

In transport planning, as hon. Members will know, there is never one solution to a problem. There is always a range, each of which will do something—but not everything—to reduce congestion and make journeys easier. My own solution is a light rail system. Light rail is an excellent transport mode for urban areas such as greater Reading. In Reading, we are greatly envious of the excellent system enjoyed by Croydon—and we felt better able to commiserate with Croydon when both towns failed to achieve city status. We will get over it.

Light rail, however, is unlikely to provide a good solution in sparsely populated rural areas. That is why the Berkshire unitary authorities, and the neighbouring authorities in Oxfordshire, cannot agree. While they fail to agree, traffic congestion increases week by week. Parts of my constituency, such as central and east Reading, achieve—if that is the word—severe pollution and dangerously low air quality on far too many days of the year. All the best efforts of Reading borough council to encourage alternative modes of transport, excellent though they are, will never remove the problem. Unitary authorities will never be able to plan transport infrastructure effectively acting alone, because there are too many factors beyond their control.

Upon the demise of Berkshire county council, a body was set up—the Reading urban area package, comprising Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire councils. If small unitary authorities were really the answer, why was the package necessary? The Reading urban area package does some very useful work of benefit to all, which none of the unitaries could have done alone. This is not an argument for the return of Berkshire county council—far from it. Unitary authorities need to join together to achieve outcomes that are of benefit to all. It may be difficult for them, with different political colours and strategies, much like the three councils that I have just mentioned.

Mr. Hammond: Is the hon. Lady sure that she has drawn the right conclusion? She said that she was not calling for the return of Berkshire, but that the unitary authorities within the county were too small. Is she sure that small unitary authorities working together is the right solution? How did she arrive at the conclusion that larger unitary authorities—perhaps countywide—are not the solution?

Jane Griffiths: Our experience in Berkshire leads to my strong conviction that a county council model is not the right solution. I will not waver from that. I tried to highlight the problems faced by small unitary authorities. If they were larger—obviously there would be fewer of them—the problems would be less difficult to tackle. However, they would still be there, and there would still have to be joint working. The realisation that joint working had to take place was an immediate acknowledgment, upon the demise of Berkshire county council, that the new authorities were too small. Some of us said that all along, but it fell on deaf ears.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I apologise to the hon. Lady for arriving in the middle of her speech. Perhaps she could help me with two questions. First, has the Electoral Commission reviewed the boundaries of the unitary authorities in Berkshire, or is Reading making such a proposal? Does she feel that there could be a better arrangement of unitary authorities in Berkshire? Secondly, what would be her advice to authorities that do not have adjoining unitary authorities?

Jane Griffiths: We do expect a review of the boundaries in Berkshire, but exactly when we shall have one I do not know. Part of the reason for today's debate, ahead of any review, is to highlight some of the issues. I appreciate the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman

might face. For geographical reasons, his unitary county—I believe it is the only one—has no other to join with and so works alone. I also appreciate that he might have a very heavy constituency work load, because he represents more people than most of us do. He has my sympathy. I am sure that he does an excellent job.

We must find a new way to encourage unitary authorities to work together, or to oblige them to do so if they are unwilling. Otherwise, all their council tax payers are let down. Central Government take full account of that. Ministers often receive delegations and are lobbied on issues that, if local authorities were of sustainable size, could be resolved at local level, without the need for ministerial intervention.

Some small local authorities own land and property outside their boundaries. It might have come to them from the previous county council or might simply be there for historical reasons. That is the case in Berkshire. Reading borough council owns a considerable number of properties in Woodley, in the Wokingham district, which is in my constituency. I doubt that that situation is unique. The residents who live there find it difficult to understand why they must pay their council tax to Wokingham and their rent to Reading. If they have nuisance neighbours they must contact Wokingham to complain about noise or environmental health hazards. If they need housing repairs they must contact Reading. That is not a customer-friendly provision of local government services. I mean no disrespect to Reading borough council when I say that there is no great incentive for Reading, with its limited resources, to prioritise putting money into property that is outside the council's boundaries. The brutal political reality is that no one who lives in those houses can vote in the Reading borough council elections. Tenants of one council who live in another often lose out on services, through no fault of their own. We must do whatever we can to tackle that problem.

That was the experience of my constituents in Woodley. Fortunately, the matter has now been resolved, and I am glad to say that they are getting their housing repairs. However, such circumstances must exist elsewhere to a considerable extent. I am sure that hon. Members of all parties often encounter such problems in their casework.

I would like to highlight another issue that particularly affects Reading and other small unitary authorities with urban centres that attract a great many people for work, shopping or entertainment. The people who come in do not pay council tax to the authority. Although they make a welcome contribution to the economy of towns such as Reading, they place a considerable burden on local services, for which the people who live in the town must pay.

There are more people on Minster street in Reading, which is pub and club land in my constituency, at 1 am on Fridays and Saturdays than there are at 1 pm. Managers of local authorities did not anticipate such inflows of people, but they are increasingly common. Few people would want Reading to return to the sleepy market town that it was many years ago, but at any given time most of the people on the streets of Reading are people who live outside the borough, but fairly close to it.

I was very pleased by the recent launch of the business improvement districts, which will include Reading. That programme, which is very welcome, will go some way to redressing the balance, but it does not entirely solve the problem. Size does matter. How should the council tax payers of Reading reconcile their wish for a lively local economy with the fact that they are subsidising residents of Wokingham, West Berkshire and South Oxfordshire councils who want to have a good time?

Mr. Hammond: Is the hon. Lady suggesting that the people who flood into Reading do not spend any money or contribute to the local economy?

Jane Griffiths: Not at all. They contribute greatly to the local economy and create job opportunities. Reading university is popular, partly because students who are struggling but do not wish to incur large debts know that they can get jobs. The entertainment economy—the evening economy—in Reading is staffed by students. It is an asset to the town, but services such as the police, and, to some extent, general emergency services, are called on in places with a lively evening economy.

Reading also has a rock festival and the Womad festival, to which tens of thousands of people come to enjoy themselves. The cost falls disproportionately on the council tax payers, many of whom may not be able to afford to enjoy themselves in the pubs and clubs of Reading. That is a problem.

That brings me to the vexed issue of local government finance. The population of Berkshire is growing, as it is in much of the south of England. There is a problem of data lag—a new piece of jargon—in areas in which the actual population is greater than the planned population. If one uses census figures to project house building and to plan how many people will live in a district, they will always be behind. If the population is static, there is not a problem. If it is declining, there may be empty homes. We do not have a significant number of empty homes in Reading and Wokingham.

I can do no better than share with the House a letter that was sent by Wokingham council to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It is headed "Revenue Support Grant 2003/04":

> "In general the Council welcomes the proposals. The recognition that the costs of providing services in Wokingham are higher than authorities in the "other south east" block and the introduction of the "Berkshire Non Fringe" is particularly welcome."

We can see that a whole flurry of jargon is threatening to overwhelm us. The letter continues:

> "We are also pleased to note that a number of the other changes in methodology supported by the Council have been adopted. In addition the census population data has shown the degree to which the previous data used in the distribution process understated the true demands on this Council's services. This is clearly good news for Wokingham and reinforces our previous representations on the inadequacy of Wokingham's grant...Whilst the floors and ceilings concept is fully supported by the Council the magnitude of grant entitlement being held back has serious implications. It represents £6m or 5 per cent. of our budget requirement and will mean that, in spite of the good news, real and damaging service cuts will be required to keep the rise in Council Tax to a reasonable level. We cannot believe that this is an intention of the floors and ceilings mechanism."

[Jane Griffiths]

I am sharing that with hon. Members because Wokingham is a small unitary authority in an affluent area. It incurs high costs when providing services, because skilled workers are hard to find. However, low-paid workers, such as care workers, are even harder to find, because they cannot easily afford to live in such districts. That is also largely true of Reading—although we were pleased to find that the rise in council tax may not, after all, be as prohibitive as we had thought.

Mr. Hammond: That problem exists throughout the high-pressure areas of the south-east. It certainly exists throughout Surrey. It has nothing whatever to do with unitary structures. We have two-tier arrangements throughout Surrey, and we have exactly the same problems in recruiting and retaining lower-paid staff.

Jane Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I simply mention the issue in passing because unitary and other authorities—regardless of whether they are single-tier or two-tier—tend to raise it with Departments when they discuss finance levels. I did not highlight it earlier, because, as the hon. Gentleman said, it is not specific to single-tier local government. None the less, the issue does arise.

After it became clear that I would be introducing this debate, I was contacted by Telford and Wrekin unitary authority, which is very concerned about the issues before us, and I am happy to share a little of what it had to say:

"If data lag on population is not addressed the new formula is still no fairer to growing authorities. We still have to provide services to the population growth for two years without any Government support. This is not rough justice—it is a fundamental flaw in the formula."

I am inclined to agree. The authority continued:

"The Growth Areas Group suggested that the population figures used for the 2003/04 settlement should be updated from the 2001 data by estimating population growth for 2002 and 2003 based on the average known growth for the last three or five available years."

It noted that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

"felt this was too complicated and suggested the use of a targeted grant instead—outside the floors and ceilings methodology. The Formula Review Group accepted this in principle without objection and this formed the basis of the consultation option."

However, the effects of the census have skewed population numbers. The data are not real—they are rapidly outdated.

The authority continued:

"the census shows previous population figures used for RSG"—

rate support grant—

"have been understated. The Council has lost grant over the years as a result. Now that the population figures are correct for 2001, it is difficult to explain to the public that the Government is not willing to use them to address the data lag anomaly, because the previous years' figures were wrong! That is surely penalising the Council twice."

Speaking as someone from outside Telford, I pass the authority's points on at face value, because they show that the issues that affect unitary authorities in Berkshire also affect many other authorities in England.

The final issue that I shall mention is licensing, which will place a disproportionate burden on small unitary authorities. We may see a change in legislation—I hope that we do—to modernise licensing laws in the near future. When that happens, the decision-making burden will fall on local authorities. Much of what was previously done by magistrates will be done by local authorities, but people who live in Reading, for example, will expect the enforcement of licensing laws to continue at least at the same level. It will be difficult for small unitary authorities, which have a limited tax base, to fulfil their responsibilities, and I shall raise that matter again on other occasions.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider those issues. I look forward to hearing from him whether he agrees that small unitary authorities often experience many difficulties, not of their making, in providing local services effectively. I hope that he will agree to discuss with his colleagues ways in which good and effective unitary authorities, such as Reading and Wokingham, can be helped to become even better and more effective.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. It might be as well if I reminded hon. Members that it is customary practice in 90-minute Adjournment debates to commence the first of the three winding-up speeches 30 minutes before the conclusion, which means that there are 14 minutes left for general debate.

2.46 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I assure the Chamber that I shall not speak for 14 minutes. I imagine that my colleagues have heard more about Reading than they ever thought they would, and I apologise for the fact that they are about to hear a little more. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on securing the debate. Frankly, given the number of unitary authorities that exist, and notwithstanding the obvious difficulties that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) would have in contributing to the debate, I am surprised that more hon. Members have not decided to participate. Unitary authorities have been in place for sufficiently long for us to conclude certain things about their inception and operation. Perhaps we can learn lessons from the past and rectify mistakes. I am certainly looking forward to a boundary review in Reading, but I shall deal with that later.

My hon. Friend talked about the optimum size of an authority, and discussed the matter with the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman. I have not researched the subject, but I seem to remember that the criteria to which the commission was working, or which it published, referred to a unitary authority with a population of no fewer than 120,000 people and up to 250,000 or 300,000. I have a similar relationship with West Berkshire to that which my hon. Friend has with Wokingham, in that one third of my constituency is in West Berkshire—and has the misfortune of coming under Liberal control, although I am not sure for how much longer—and the other two thirds are well represented by Reading borough council. The recommendations of the Local Government

Commission did not envisage that West Berkshire and Wokingham would exist in their current form. Two options were proposed: one was a four-authority option and the other was a five-authority option. Wokingham did not exist in either option. It is worth putting it on record once again that a political fix occurred. The fact that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) had an influential position in the Government, which he was able to use in alliance with the then Conservative leader of Wokingham council, is a political fact of life, but it led to the creation of that political fix of unitary local authorities created outwith the criteria that the commission set down.

Mr. Hammond: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but I shall not rise directly to the bait. However, I shall ask him whether he will tell the Chamber his view on the maximum viable size of a unitary authority in an area the size of rural and suburban Berkshire.

Mr. Salter: I was not attempting to bait the hon. Gentleman; I was merely reading a bit of political history into the record. I am a great believer in making statements when I actually know something about the subject. I know a little about local government in Berkshire, having been a Reading borough councillor for 12 years and deputy leader of the council. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East was a senior councillor there at the same time.

I must say that one look at the map of Berkshire would suggest that the natural expansion of Reading council's boundaries would take in Greater Reading, which includes areas under Wokingham and West Berkshire councils and a few other places besides. That would give Reading a population base of more than 200,000. It may vary elsewhere. Medway Towns council is considerably larger, and it would be an entirely different question were we to look at the old metropolitan boroughs and districts in the midlands and north-west. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

However, as my hon. Friend was saying, there is an issue of economic scale. Is it possible to deliver an efficient tie-up between housing and social services if there is an unnaturally small boundary? Can people be provided with the educational choice that we would like to give them without there being internecine war across the boundary divide?

One of my favourite campaigns was for a unitary Reading in which my hon. Friend and I were heavily involved. I have still got the stickers that say, "One town, one council and a third Thames bridge." It was a very punchy campaign. One of my favourite photos of my hon. Friend, and I have many, is of her holding a huge bag of petition forms outside the civic offices in Reading in support of the campaign. I may have taken the photo.

Sadly, we have not got our third Thames crossing, although we have our one council. We have not got city status, and Reading council remains built on 100-year-old boundaries. We are hemmed in. We cannot deliver park-and-ride services to the west of the town without getting co-operation from Liberal Democrats in West Berkshire. Anybody who has worked with Liberal Democrat councillors knows that it is like herding chickens—it is impossible to get consensus. A former leader of a Liberal Democrat-controlled council gave me that soundbite. He knows how difficult it is to herd chickens so he should be believed.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East said, it is absurd that we have housing stock outside our borough boundaries and conflict over where children should attend school. I must tell my hon. Friend that our well-publicised difference on the Ryeish Green school has now been given another public airing. The fact remains that had Wokingham been able to get away with moving Ryeish Green school from south Reading to Finchampstead, the catchment area would not have included the south Reading area. Many of my constituents—and hers—would not have had the option of choosing schools, which would have been a great shame. That said, the education provision in Reading must be resolved and it is a victim of our absurd 100-year-old boundaries.

How absurd are those boundaries? I have a constituent who pays, I think, 25 per cent. of her council tax to West Berkshire council and 75 per cent. to Reading council because the boundary goes through a corner of her house and across her garden. She pays Reading for a few hundred bricks and West Berkshire for a garage and a shed. It was a moot point, of course, as to whether she was entitled to a bus pass or 75 per cent. of one. As one can imagine, there is tremendous difference between the standard of public services delivered by a Labour-controlled authority in Reading, which has one of most generous bus pass schemes in the country, and the paltry token service that the Liberals in West Berkshire offer. I was able to get common sense to prevail and, despite only paying 75 per cent. of her council tax to the people's republic of Reading, she obtained a full bus pass. That is another triumph that we can tick off.

Mr. Andrew Turner: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr. Salter: No, I will not; I am just warming to my theme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East made a pertinent point that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) failed to grasp: the burden on the council tax payers of the urban centre. This is not just about Reading; I am sure that it applies to Nottingham and to many other towns. Yes, it is great that people come into our town centres to use our pubs and clubs and to shop. Sadly, that revenue does not necessarily flow into the coffers of the local authority. Every piece of litter dropped in Reading by a resident of Wokingham, albeit accidentally, is picked up by a council tax paid employee of Reading borough council. The police funding formula is often based on the residential economy as opposed to money generated by passing trade. A great many issues must be bottomed out on that front. That is not to say that we disagree with or condemn our town centres for being lively and exciting, but we must acknowledge that the funding formulas do not reflect reality. I will give way to the hon. Member for the Isle of Wight and then to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge if they will be brief.

Mr. Turner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am interested to hear that his local authority can

[Mr. Turner]

distinguish between litter that is dropped by residents of Wokingham and that dropped by residents of Reading—*[Interruption.]* A different class of litter.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is easier, albeit that it has not yet happened in Reading, to define the boundary of an urban area than it is to define boundaries in rural areas? To create a rural unitary authority large enough to be viable often means extending it beyond people's reasonable travelling distance.

Mr. Salter: Yes, I certainly do, and I will come to that point in my conclusion.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Member for Reading, East also referred to policing costs. I did not intervene then but I wish to now since both Members for Reading mentioned the subject. Perhaps there is something peculiar about police funding in the Thames valley. However, my understanding is that the Thames Valley police were funded by all the council tax payers in the Thames valley, so people living in Wokingham will be contributing to the policing of Reading. Is that not correct?

Mr. Salter: I refer the hon. Gentleman to a speech that I made last year on police grants. I think that it may be coming up again today. It is not just about the funding of the police; it is about the allocation of police resources. We end up in the absurd situation whereby my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East pay the same as everybody else towards the precepts levied by the police authority on the council tax. In effect, because of the requirements of policing Reading town centre, we end up with one police officer per—and I used this figure purely for example—2,000 head of population; whereas somebody else will be paying precisely the same and get one police officer per 1,000 head of population. As I say, I use those figures purely for illustration, but the point is clear.

We talked about the absurdity of the boundaries of Reading; we talked also about some of the problems in education, transport, joined-up services and economies of scale and about the need for a boundary review and for change. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East, I welcome the creation of business improvement districts. This is an opportunity for a little bit of municipal socialism, if we are still allowed even to conceive of such a thing. Of course, it must be done with the consent of the business community, but how I would love to see an opportunity for Reading and for other lively, vibrant urban centres to be able to levy a modest tax on some of the profits of the breweries, the clubs and the other centres of entertainment to help to fund CCTV, extra police and all the other measures that are needed to keep the population of the town centre, visitors and residents safe and secure. It is far too easy to profit from lively town centres yet not put enough back into the security that we all seek.

As a nation, our record on local government reform is pretty poor. I remember my days as a politics student studying the Redcliffe-Maude report of 1974 on the reorganisation of local government. Sadly, we fudged it last time round. I believe in the unitary format; I believe it needs to be large enough to create economies of scale, and sometimes that means grasping the nettle of a local authority. After all, it did apply to county authorities being beyond the normal scope of people's travelling patterns. I believe in strengthening parish and community councils and I believe in effective regional government with real powers that could bring together the disparate boundaries that affect health, education, the police, the fire service and strategic planning.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East for giving us the opportunity to debate this issue. I hope the Government will accept that what was done by the previous Administration was only half done, and that there is much further to go if we are going to have proper, radical and effective reform of unitary local government.

3 pm

Matthew Green (Ludlow): We have heard a great deal about Reading; it was most interesting, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on securing the debate. However, wider issues are at stake, and some that are pertinent to Reading are also pertinent to other parts of the country.

We are talking as though the term "unitary authority" appeared on the face of the Bill, but I recently discovered in Committee that the term does not exist. The definition is "districts in areas in which there is no county"—or some such phrase.

Mr. Hammond: I think that the hon. Gentleman is thinking of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill—and he may know that the Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), has now corrected his assertion that the term did not exist in legislation: it exists in the Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996.

Matthew Green: I thank the hon. Gentleman; I am delighted to hear that.

In principle, unitary authorities are probably the best way of delivering local services. However, local needs and considerations must always be taken into account before unitary authorities are imposed. There should not be a top-down solution. I shall now touch on the reasons why unitary authorities are a good way forward.

In two-tier areas, housing and social services come under different authorities. We need joined-up thinking. In some areas that can be achieved with local authorities working together, but in general it works better in unitary authorities. It has sometimes been linked with health. In Herefordshire, before the strategic health authorities were set up, the unitary council had housing and social services under the same roof, but the chief executive of the Hereford health authority was also the chief executive of the council. It was a tight-knit authority. In Shropshire, the director of social services is the deputy chief executive of the primary care trust, and is currently acting chief executive as well. That close synergy makes a great deal of sense.

On other matters such as environmental health, economies of scale would mean some of the smaller districts disappearing into the unitary authorities, but that makes a great deal of sense. The same applies to

waste management, which is currently divided into waste collection and waste disposal. That division has resulted in a number of perverse effects—but again, unitary authorities get round the problem.

We have mentioned the history of Reading and the local government review, but I have a great deal of sympathy with Shropshire, which suffered similar perversities under the last local government review. It has been said before, and it is worth saying again, that the pressure in Berkshire was for four or at most five unitary authorities. The Local Government Commission's recommendation was for five, but political pressure from local Conservatives, including a Berkshire Member of Parliament, resulted in there being six unitary authorities, which was probably too many.

Now that we have those six unitary authorities, the problem is that Reading wants to expand. I understand that it approached the Deputy Prime Minister for a local government review but was turned down. I know exactly why the Deputy Prime Minister did that: he does not want local government reviews, except when regional referendums are due. We have mentioned that in Committee on the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill. Another problem is that the neighbouring unitary authorities are not keen on Reading expanding and taking over parts of their areas. That is an ongoing, long-term problem.

Should there be reviews of local authority boundaries outside the scope of the Regional Assemblies (Referendums) Bill? Of course there should. In some areas there is demand for changes to existing unitary or two-tier authorities. In Shropshire, we want a unitary authority to cover the area currently covered by Shropshire county council. There are five district councils and the county council. All three political parties would like to see the abolition of the five districts, and a unitary authority. However, we have been told that there will not be a chance of doing that until there is a referendum in the west Midlands, which could be years away. The mess that the Government have made of their regional policy is causing a problem at a local level.

We now need a unitary authority in Shropshire, because in the last review Telford was taken out, against the recommendation of the Local Government Commission, which recommended the then current two-tier system structure of six districts and one county. Taking Telford out of the equation left the rest of Shropshire without a large chunk of the population of Shropshire, which made less economic sense. We now need a unitary authority in Shropshire, to make the economies of scale work.

The Government have missed out on an opportunity. The Minister needs to address how they will deal with the various demands for reviews of local government outside the regional process. In the south and the midlands, it will be many years before we get to that stage, so it would be useful if the Minister gave us some encouragement that there might be some reviews outside that regional process. With our amendments to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill we gave the Minister in the Standing Committee opportunities to decouple the process of local government review from the regional reviews. It is unfortunate that the Government did not take up that opportunity.

We have heard a fair bit about the appropriate size of unitary authorities. We should be cautious about saying what the appropriate minimum size should be. The Local Government Commission's preferred size was, I think, between 150,000 and 300,000. Herefordshire is below that size, and is a successful, efficient, Liberal Democrat-run unitary authority.

Mr. Salter: I have spent some time in Herefordshire, and I agree that it is well run. I make a public plea for the hon. Gentleman to come to West Berkshire and do a workshop for the Liberals there on how to run a successful council.

Matthew Green: I am not sure that my schedule would permit me to do that—or, even if it is what is needed, that I am the person to do it.

Herefordshire is a successful unitary authority with fewer than 150,000 people. If the Government are too dogmatic about the minimum size, places such as Northumbria, when they are considered in the review of the north-east, will be split up into large unitary authorities—large in terms of area, that is—in order to achieve the minimum population. Those authorities will be so large that people will not naturally feel part of that community, and could be a long way from their nearest centre.

Mr. Andrew Turner: The hon. Gentleman has spoken at some length about reviews. However, did he not say earlier that unitary authorities have to be the best way, and that there should be local consultation before they are imposed? That suggests that under Liberal Democrat policy, they would be imposed.

Matthew Green: That is not quite what I said. I said that the unitary authority was the best way forward, but should not always be the solution, because local considerations needed to be taken into account. That is why we have sought the decoupling of local government reviews from the regional process. If the Government carry out their regional process along those lines, all two-tier authorities will eventually go, for no other reason than the form of local government that has come in.

I have covered most of the points that I wanted to make. I welcome the fact that we have been able to talk about unitary authorities again, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we might have reviews without having to wait for the regional reviews.

3.9 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on having secured the debate on unitary authorities, although it has occasionally seemed to be a debate on the woes and opportunities of Reading. I thought that I knew the area well, but I have been apprised of the woeful state of my geographical knowledge. I now know about Ryeish Green school, and I shall take the opportunity of mentioning it to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), in a display that will astound him. While the two hon. Members who represent Reading were intervening on each other, I felt rather like a voyeur at a

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meeting of the management committee of Reading Labour party—but I am sure that they will sort out their differences.

We have heard about the pros and cons of unitary authorities from the hon. Members for Reading, East and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter). The hon. Member for Reading, East focused on the diversity within counties and suggested that smaller unitary authorities might have a better focus. She also mentioned the "diseconomies" of small scale, and made particular reference to the problems of small education authorities. She made many interesting points, and I shall address the Minister about them shortly.

Both Reading Members mentioned institutional change and institutional structures. Those are important. In this country, we have a bit of a history of thinking that we can solve problems by changing the institutions that deal with them. Experience has shown, however, that changing institutional structures does not necessarily solve the real problems that bother people. The conclusion is clear: there is no "one size fits all" policy, and structure must be locally determined. If it is a widely held view in Shropshire that people want to have a unitary county, then we in Whitehall and Westminster should be cognisant of it.

A unitary structure might be best in urban areas, where distance is not a great issue. I was reminded yesterday that the largest metropolitan authorities have populations well in excess of 1 million, and function very well. However, they have the benefit of high density of population, and thus relatively small geographical areas. When we consider more sparsely populated areas, the minimum size of unitary authority required to deliver effective and efficient services might well, as the hon. Member for Ludlow (Matthew Green) suggested, be too large to allow people that essential sense of relationship with the place from which they are governed that is the advantage of district councils—our lower-tier authorities in the current two-tier areas.

I want to talk to the Minister about two issues. The first is choice. We can conclude that the Government think that unitary authorities are the structure of choice, because they propose to impose them on any region opting for elected regional assemblies. I understand the Government's natural desire not to be lambasted for creating an extra tier of government in existing two-tier authorities, but in some regions—certainly in the north-east, likely to be one of the first regions to have a referendum—some 68 per cent. of the population already live in unitary authority areas. In those areas, an extra tier will be created by the introduction of elected regional assemblies. That is slightly peripheral, however.

It is extraordinary that the Government have introduced a double hurdle for a yes vote in a referendum. I am still quietly puzzled as to their motive for making it more difficult to achieve a yes vote for a principal Government policy project.

Presumably we all agree that change is traumatic and tends to undermine the principal function of local government—good, efficient public service delivery. However beneficial the outcome of the change may be, the process is difficult. One problem that may arise from the Regional Assemblies (Referendums) Bill is constant uncertainty about whether that change will take place.

Worse still, in my view, is the fact that the Government's proposals for a boundary committee review of areas opting for referendums for regional assemblies may produce a sub-optimum pattern of unitary government, because the Government will not allow the current unitary council boundaries to be reopened. In other words, the existing two-tier areas in the north-east, which contain 32 per cent. of the population of that region, must be organised into unitary authorities that fit round the existing ones. That may not in every case be the most logical solution.

My question to the Minister mirrors one put by the hon. Member for Ludlow: do the Government propose an alternative mechanism for achieving unitary status, if that is what a local community wants? It would be bizarre if the Government were to say that a community must have a unitary authority if it is to have an elected regional assembly, but that it cannot have a unitary authority without opting for an elected regional assembly. If they did, it would be inappropriate and lop-sided. The Government may argue, although I would not agree with them, that a unitary structure is necessary to accommodate elected regional authorities, but they cannot argue the other way round, because unitary authorities already operate in areas that do not have elected regional assemblies.

My second question to the Minister is about size. That is an important issue, and I have tried in a couple of interventions to draw out hon. Members' views on the size of unitary authorities. With few exceptions, the creation of unitary authorities of a workable size in the shires will sound the death knell of the counties. It seems to me—we have heard some evidence for it this afternoon—that a minimum size will be required to enable them to work. However, there should also be a maximum size—perhaps not in population terms, because in our metropolitan areas there are large populations in a single authority area, but in geographical terms—so that people are not too distant from the point from which they are governed.

If an authority such as Wokingham, with a population of 150,000, is acceptable at the bottom of the size scale, it is difficult to imagine that an authority such as Essex or Kent, with a population of 1.3 million or 1.4 million, could be a plausible unitary county. That is why I assert that the Government's "unitarisation agenda", as part of its elected regional assemblies programme, necessarily means—in some cases at least—the death of the counties as we know them, because they are too big to be effective unitary authorities.

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions has gone to great pains to muddy the water on that issue, and to suggest that nothing has been ruled out in advance and that counties could be unitary authorities. Perhaps Shropshire could be; I do not know the detailed facts. What work has the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister done on the effective size of unitary authorities at the top and bottom end of the scale? Has it considered the minimum size needed to deliver public services economically, and the maximum size, in terms of population or geographical area, necessary to ensure that local government is still local government and will be delivered close enough to the people to ensure that

there is a genuine sense of ownership? I should be grateful to the Minister if he would address head on the position of the counties in an all-unitary structure, and tell the Chamber bluntly whether he is asserting that a county the size of Kent or Essex is a viable and plausible unitary authority area.

3.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): I am not sure whether, in the time available, it will be possible to address all the wide-ranging issues raised in the debate. I place on record my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on securing the opportunity to debate so many issues, especially on the wonderful town, area and district of Reading and the various people living therein.

Common themes among all speakers have been the nature of local authority institutions, and structural and boundary issues. It is important to say at the outset that at the heart of the Government's approach is performance and whether local authorities—regardless of their composition, nature and size—can perform and deliver high quality services for their people. Our aim is systematically to achieve a more uniform and higher level of local government performance throughout the country. That is why we have put in place reforms such as best value and new constitutions and are building on those reforms by embarking on the process known affectionately as comprehensive performance assessments—CPA—and performance management. We are committed to higher performance and determined that local councils should deliver quality public services. People want them, and have a right to expect them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East raised questions about education and the nature of schooling in her council area. I was interested to note, when reading the formula for allocation of education funds, that characteristics of the block for education spend reflect not only population but deprivation and the costs of paying people in high labour cost areas. That has all come together in my hon. Friend's constituency to result in a comparatively good settlement. Reading has had an 8.8 per cent. grant increase and Wokingham an 8.4 per cent. grant increase, which are towards the upper end of the scale for unitary authorities throughout the country.

Mr. Salter: We are extremely grateful for the very good grant settlements in the Thames valley, but my hon. Friend the Minister must bear it in mind that for many local authorities, this year saw the end of other income streams from central government. Reading is actually losing some £3 million as central Government funding for other projects comes to an end. On the face of it, the settlement seems wonderful and one might hope for a council tax increase of 1 or 2 per cent. but, sadly, other factors have been brought to bear.

Mr. Leslie: I assure my hon. Friend that that is still a wonderful settlement. We have moved away from ring-fenced grants, which have, in a sense, tied local authorities' hands, because we want to give more in general grant to those councils so that they can make their own local decisions, as they are best placed to, on how to allocate and spend money. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East referred to the PFI bid and the question of capital for education, and I shall certainly draw her comments to the attention of the Department for Education and Skills. She also mentioned population growth statistics, how those feed into the formula and the time lag in feeding the data into the system. The new formula grant arrangements are based on the most up-to-date data and evidence that we could muster. The new census figures are accurate and the Office for National Statistics is proud of them. The per head element of the formula gave her local authorities a relatively good result.

My hon. Friends the Members for Reading, East and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) mentioned the extra costs for Reading of daytime and, in particular, night-time visitors. We have tried to take that into account in our allocation of resources to local authorities, and I can tell them that the formula allocation for environmental services, highways services and policing reflects the number of daytime visitors. For highways and policing, that also applies to night-time visitors. We have not been blind to that point and have taken the issue into account.

Performance cannot be improved simply by considering issues such as local government structure, boundaries or the size of local authorities. Structure and boundary reviews can, in some circumstances, distract local government from the real work at hand, which is the delivery of quality local services and the provision of leadership to communities. Of course, there may be some evidence to suggest that some functions can be more easily delivered by larger authorities. We recognised that in the draft guidance that we gave to the boundary committee about the local government reviews that might take place before any referendum on an elected regional assembly.

The guidance states that many of the most significant factors that determine the ability of authorities to deliver quality services have little direct relation to the geography, structure or size of the authority. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the quality of political management, a willingness to innovate and a sound corporate structure and capacity are the most significant determinants of high-performing councils. None of that means that quality services are beyond smaller authorities, albeit that they might sometimes work in partnership with others.

Indeed, the recent CPA results on the quality of performance of local authorities show that there are smaller authorities—Reading is one—that are judged as being of good quality. Hartlepool is nearly the smallest unitary council in England, yet it is in the excellent category. The same is true of Blackburn with Darwen, which is similar to Reading in size. Some large authorities are classified as weak or poor. Conversely, there are small authorities that are not performing and larger authorities that are performing well or better. To coin a phrase used by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East, size does not always matter in that respect.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister is concentrating on the economies of scale and service delivery. Will he address the issue of potentially large unitary counties, such as Northumbria, in terms of geography, and Essex and Kent, in terms of population? If they were to become

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unitary authorities on a county-wide basis, there might be a problem of remoteness from the people and communities that they are supposed to serve as local government.

Mr. Leslie: I am not quite sure what point the hon. Gentleman is making. Does he think that unitary authorities need to be large in order to preserve the county characteristic? Or does he think that they should be small? I shall come on to the fact that we have not been as prescriptive as he might like when giving guidance to the boundary committee about structural reviews that might take place in relation to elected regional assembly referendums.

Partnership between authorities is important and can take place. My hon. Friends have touched on some of those issues. Regardless of size and boundaries, joint working is always welcome. There will always be an element of local discretion. Local authorities are independently elected, autonomous bodies; each local authority has its own priorities. However, they need to work together on more strategic issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East raised the question of transport. I understand that there is some feeling that the size of Berkshire authorities might be hampering their ability to co-ordinate transport provision across authority boundaries. However, each of the six authorities produces its own local transport plan and I note that, although Department for Transport guidance urges neighbouring authorities to consider having joint plans, the Berkshire authorities have not done so. I would encourage Berkshire authorities to carry out more joint work in that area, which could lead to more joint local transport plans.

Structure and boundaries are not central to the delivery of quality local services. However, we recognise the importance of getting boundaries right. Although other factors, such as leadership and corporate capacity, are critical to the creation of high-performing local authorities, we accept that the ability of authorities to develop or sustain those attributes may be affected by their geography, structure and size. Nevertheless, before we could alter structures or boundaries of local authorities, including the boundaries of existing authorities, we would have to invite the Electoral Commission to carry out a review. Only if and when it recommended change would the Government act. At present, we do not believe that such reviews should be a priority for the Electoral Commission. There are other issues to be addressed such as periodic electoral reviews, which are a priority. In considering that question, structural reviews are not on the agenda, but we have not closed the door for ever on boundary matters. We have a strong agenda of reform and improvement in local government that will benefit all our constituents. I urge all hon. Members to focus on that agenda.

Sugar Industry

3.30 pm

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): May I start by saying what a privilege it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It is also a privilege to raise such an important issue on behalf of my constituents. It is some time since I secured an Adjournment debate, although I have responded to some over the years.

The issue is about sugar production in the United Kingdom and competition in the sugar industry. It is crucial in my constituency, where more than 600 people are employed at the Nestlé confectionary plant in Fawdon, Newcastle, making such well-known products as pastilles, Fruit Gums, Jellytots, Tooty Frooties, Rolo, Blue Riband, Breakaway, Yorkie biscuit and Caramac, which are covered by the sugar regime.

The sugar regime has many consequences, the first of which is that British consumers pay a high price for their sugar. That is also true throughout the European Union, but the price in Britain is higher than that in other European Union states. According to the UK Industrial Sugar Users Group, in our country prices are consistently 20 to 30 per cent. higher than the intervention price. On 27 January, sugar cost £677 per tonne compared with an intervention price of about £400 per tonne. The price of sugar in other European Union states is only between 8 and 22 per cent. higher than the intervention price. Anyone who depends on sugar to manufacture a product in the UK is not only at a relative disadvantage to other parts of the world, but at a relative disadvantage to other European Union states.

A second consequence is that the British taxpayer must pay a significant share of the €800 million in annual subsidies. British confectionary producers must pay an excessive price for an important ingredient. If there is a movement, or an incentive to move, by international manufacturers away from the United Kingdom, there is a risk that British jobs such as those at Fawdon, Newcastle will be lost to other parts of the world.

What has created the inflated profitability in the sugar industry, which I consider to be economically inefficient? The profits of the two major British sugar companies—I shall come to them—are significantly higher than those of any other manufacturer in the food processing industry. I would argue that that is because of the monopoly—more accurately, duopoly—situation in the industry. The root of the problem is the rules in the common agricultural policy. Those, including myself, who have had some contact with the CAP have tried to drive through reform.

The duopoly of the two manufacturers in the United Kingdom is equally important. British Sugar, which is part of Associated British Foods, processes sugar beet and Tate and Lyle processes sugar cane. The situation in the United Kingdom has grown up over many years under successive Governments. The duopoly exists because Governments have been unable to refer the companies to the competition authorities, which has resulted in a change in the market situation within the industry. It is worth noting that the producers have been fined by the European Union on a number of occasions

for anti-competitive price-fixing policies. Even when they have had an opportunity to reduce prices because of fluctuations in exchange rates, they have failed to respond. During the period between May 1996 and April 2000 there was a significant movement in favour of sterling away from the euro currencies. The price of sugar fell during that period by 33 or 34 per cent., but the processed sugar price in this country fell by only 14 per cent., which demonstrates that there has not been the response that might have been expected if the market had been competitive.

The industry is not small. Its size is considerable in this country. The sugar processors employ about 2,000 people; the farmers who grow the beet that is linked to quotas employ about 7,000 people; and the food processing industry employs about 90,000 people. About 100,000 people in the industry are directly affected by whatever regime governs the price of sugar in this country. The companies involved are widespread and include Nestlé in my constituency, Cadbury Schweppes, Mars and United Biscuits. It may not always be recognised but sugar is a substantial ingredient in the soft drinks industry and companies such as Britvic, Coca-Cola and dear old Barrs in north-east England and Scotland are also affected.

How does the anti-competitive duopoly work? First, sugar is regulated with an intervention price and quotas are linked to it. Theoretically, that is to prevent overproduction, but it actually creates an anti-competitive situation resulting in a certain amount of production above the intervention price, but the subsidies go with it and that is very much in the interests of the two main sugar processors.

Consumers who buy sugar also suffer, but the food manufacturers provide the main market for sugar. Those companies historically pay two to three times the world price for their sugar, although currently they pay more than three times the world price. I recognise that there are fluctuations around the two to three times level. Taxpayers foot the bill for export subsidies and tariffs keep out competition. That not only causes excessively high prices in this country and an anti-competitive position, but damages the ability of most developing countries—some are allowed to export to the European Union—to sell an amount of sugar that would make a major contribution to the demands of people in the European Union and beyond.

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the sugar regime costs British consumers £750 million a year? There is a Cadbury's factory in my constituency, as well as ones belonging to Brooks Soft Drinks and Malvern Water. I have witnessed the way in which sugar is brought into such factories. I hope that the hon. Gentleman would agree that the way that it is delivered is incredibly efficient. Those delivering it seem to have a way of knowing when to turn up to keep the amount of sugar in the factory at the right levels. That monitoring process is carried out remotely. The sugar companies are doing a good job, but anything that would make ingredients cheaper for the soft drink and chocolate industry would benefit all our constituents considerably.

Mr. Henderson: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. It is true that consumers in this country suffer because of the increased prices that they pay, and the taxes that they pay towards the sugar regime. I am not sure that I would ascribe efficiency to the sugar producers. If they could not produce sugar at a profit under their rules, they would have to be very poor at it. I am sure that they do try to be as efficient as they can. Given that there are profits at stake, they would be silly to do otherwise.

Oxfam has played an important part in explaining the damage that can be done to developing countries. I would like to cite some of the Oxfam submissions on the subject. It says:

> "European consumers and taxpayers are paying to destroy livelihoods in some of the world's poorest countries. Through the sugar regime of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), they are paying for a system that rewards a handful of sugar producers in Europe"—

so it is not only in the UK—

> "while undermining markets and opportunities for farmers and agricultural labourers in the developing world. No agricultural sector is in more urgent need of radical reform. Yet sugar is not even included in the European Commission's latest reform proposals."

That is one of the most iniquitous aspects of the regime. Once the British demands have been met, the excess sugar produced by the two duopolists with subsidy is then dumped on the world market, often to third-world countries. Nigeria was cited as one such country recently. The regime is directly subsidised by the British taxpayer, and it keeps the production of developing countries out of those other markets.

In this country, the regime adds between 2p to 3p to the price of a typical product such as a packet of pastilles or a packet of Rolos, compared with the price that would apply if the confectioners in this country were able to buy sugar at the world price. I recognise that the world price would rise a little if there were more of an open market. That would have to be taken into account. However, it would still leave people who buy sugar in this country at a great advantage, compared with the current situation.

I raise the issue now because the current regime is wrong. There has been debate about it in the past. We are at a crossroads concerning agricultural policy in the European Union. Some say that what has served us well in the past should be reinforced in future. Others say that there must be change if the European Union is to progress in its development. Protectionism in the United States leads to the same impact as does the regime in Europe.

The next major reform of EU agricultural policy is in 2006, which is when the big arguments must take place. A mid-term review will take place this year. The Commission will be taking on board ideas and suggestions from March until the early summer, and it is expected to make some sort of recommendation in midsummer or early autumn. If I am wrong about the dates, I am sure that the Minister will put me right. It is appropriate that there is a debate in this country and in the European Union about the sugar regime.

The Commission's study covers virtually everything, but its terms of reference require it to consider the impact of European Union enlargement. One of the big questions is whether, if the sugar price in such countries as the Czech Republic is much lower than the price in the UK, producers have an incentive to move to the Czech

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Republic. Clearly after enlargement the relationship will be different, although the argument about moving to a lower-cost sugar-supply nation would still apply, but outside the European Union. There will probably be a rise in prices in the countries that accede to the European Union, but it will probably—this is guesswork—be over a period of time. A great deal of negotiation must take place on the phasing in, and that will be an ideal opportunity to raise the question of the sugar regime.

The Commission is also considering the relationship of products to developing countries. The agreement has the name "everything but arms", a typical piece of Eurospeak and the lowest common denominator that everyone could agree to. It deals with the relationship between products produced in the European Union and those that can also be produced in developing countries. To what extent should there be free trade? To what extent should there be restrictions? At present sugar is excluded from the considerations, even for the poorest countries, some of which are sugar producers. It would be very progressive if the Government tried to get that definition changed in the Commission and succeeded in bringing sugar structures into the discussion. Even if no progress is made, let us at least have the discussion.

I know that the Minister will want some time to reply on those issues. I do not wish to hog the floor much longer, but I want to ask him some specific questions, which I ask him to deal with today or, if not today, perhaps later.

First, do the Government recognise that there is a problem and are they prepared to take any of the actions suggested by me today and by other pressure groups in the industry?

Secondly, even if it is difficult to achieve change in the European Union—I do not claim that it is easy—can action be taken in the United Kingdom at least to bring the sugar price here in line with that in other European Union countries? Can something be done in this duopolistic situation to free things up and allow more competition? We are not suggesting that sugar producers should be denied their profits, but can those using the product have a better deal in this country?

Thirdly, are the Government committed to removing the sugar exclusion clause from the everything but arms agreement and will they take action in the Commission to achieve that?

Fourthly, will the Government insist on a phased reduction of export subsidies, which would be part of the proposals for the mid-term review of the agricultural policy?

Finally, are the Government prepared to commit themselves to a major restructuring in 2006 and to say that the main objectives are to bring competition into the sugar industry, reduce prices to bring them nearer to world prices and allow more competition from developing countries—in other words, bring prices down and give sugar consumers in this country a better deal? That would be good, because it would not only follow the general drift of the Government's policy and their desire for a more competitive economy but help to guarantee jobs in such companies as Nestlé in my constituency.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) on securing the debate and on the thorough and knowledgeable way in which he set out the complex issue of the effect of sugar prices on manufacturing and processing.

Sugar beet is a very important crop in this country and region. It is an important crop in my constituency in north Lincolnshire. I sometimes wish that the people who defend the status quo would listen to the other side of the argument and consider the impact on processors and on the many jobs in this country, including those in my hon. Friend's constituency. He made his case clearly and strongly. I shall try to deal with the points that he raised.

I can deal straight away with the everything but arms agreement. Sugar is not excluded from the EBA, but provisions relating to it are phased in, as is the case with rice and bananas. The Agriculture Council agreement allows for an increasing quota of duty-free sugar imports from least developed countries until 2009. This year, 85,000 tonnes of sugar will enter the European Union under the arrangement.

Between 2006 and 2009, there will also be stage reductions in import duty for unlimited quantities of sugar, with a view to full liberalisation by 2009. To many manufacturers, that is not exactly a speedy agenda. I sympathise with them, because the Government's general approach towards sugar and other products is to encourage vigorous competition. The framework of competition law in the United Kingdom has been thoroughly revised since 1997 by the Competition Act 1998 and the Enterprise Act 2002. My hon. Friend mentioned the duopoly. Measures have been put in place to ensure that it is not abused.

The real problem is prices, which my hon. Friend rightly stated are affected by the CAP. We believe that strong competition is the best way to ensure that consumers get a good deal from lower prices, increased choice and higher quality. Vigorous competition puts pressure on firms to find ways of reducing costs by increasing innovation and organising their production efficiently. It is a key driver of productivity. Changes are inevitable for the sugar beet sector as well and are being phased in to give people time to adjust.

We recognise that the present situation leads to considerably higher prices. My hon. Friend was right in saying that the price of sugar in the EU is three times the world price—that is significant. One can understand why drinks and chocolate manufacturers, who are big sugar users, are concerned. As I said, the price is high because sugar is part of the subsidised and quota-controlled sector of the CAP.

I assure my hon. Friend that the Government recognise the problem. That is why we are committed to CAP reform. The policy has been largely unchanged for nearly 30 years, and it does not deliver what farmers, the rural economy, consumers and the environment need. The distortion of world prices has not helped farmers. The policy has caused all sorts of problems in this and other countries, it is hugely expensive for EU consumers

and it does not meet the challenges posed by the World Trade Organisation negotiations or, as my hon. Friend said, enlargement of the EU.

We are committed to reducing the overall burden of the CAP. The mid-term review of the CAP is a good start in the right direction. We have some concerns about the detail, because we want to move away from price and production support and provide more money for the so-called second pillar—rural development and agri-environment scheme support—which benefits agriculture and the rural economy generally.

As things stand, sugar is not yet part of the mid-term review discussions, as my hon. Friend said, and I can understand his frustration about that. The reason why it does not form part of those discussions is that, when the existing sugar regime was renewed in 2001, it was decided that the new arrangements should run until 2006. Following pressure from the UK, we succeeded in getting a formal commitment to a further review this year, which the Commission has now openly linked to the MTR process by promising a report and proposals by June. As my hon. Friend rightly said, if one is going through the MTR process and looking at decoupling, it is difficult to ignore the sugar regime. The report will have to take account of what is now being proposed in the MTR for other sectors. The Commission has said openly that that is its intention, and we welcome that.

We do not believe that there is a case for the sugar regime remaining outside any such changes. The UK will argue vigorously that any MTR decisions will have to apply to sugar at the earliest opportunity. I agree with my hon. Friend that the sooner we tackle those issues, the better for all concerned. We are committed to taking action on price. We also want to see a reduction in subsidies as part of the MTR process, because they are not helpful to European consumers or to world prices, or consequently to developing countries and poorer countries, which want market access.

I understand my hon. Friend's point about the Oxfam report entitled "The Great EU Sugar Scam", and we have a great deal of sympathy with what Oxfam said about the impact of heavily subsidised and protectionist regimes on developing countries.

Mr. Henderson: As my hon. Friend will recognise, these are complicated issues. Would he be prepared to meet a delegation from the industry before the end of March to discuss the British submissions to the European Commission?

Mr. Morley: I certainly have no objection to that in principle. I should point out, however, that my colleague, Lord Whitty, is responsible for food and farming at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and it is all too easy to make commitments on behalf of people who are not here. I deal with debates in this Chamber as part of my multi-functional role in the Department, and because my colleague is a Member of the House of Lords. I know that he shares the Government's views on the matter, however, and has been a strong campaigner for the changes that I have described, so I will put my hon. Friend's proposition to him. I am sure that he will be happy to talk to him about the progress that is being made and about the details of the MTR, which are complex.

It will be no surprise that there are differences of opinion between member states, but the UK has consistently taken the lead in pressing for the urgent adaptation of the internal market to the circumstances that full market access for developing countries will bring. We believe that that is in the best interests not only of our processing sector, for which my hon. Friend made a good case today, but of agriculture, in terms of adapting to the changes and considering the opportunities that a more liberalised market may present.

My hon. Friend did not raise the subject, but I know that sugar growers are interested in industrial crops and the use of sugar for ethanol production. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has introduced changes in duty to encourage biodiesel and bioethanol production, which offers some potential in the long term.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way in which he made his case. I will take up his request with my colleague, Lord Whitty. I hope that I have reassured him that we sympathise with the points that he made and are committed to advocating these changes in the European Union, which are long overdue.

Beechwood Lodge, Basingstoke

4 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I welcome the opportunity to raise in this short debate an issue that is of grave concern to me and to a significant number of people in the constituency of Basingstoke and in the wider borough of Basingstoke and Deane. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) is with us in spirit, but business elsewhere demands his attention. I know that he identifies himself with the broad thrust of the comments that I propose to make.

Almost a year ago—on 4 February, to be precise—I wrote a letter to the Secretary of State for Health in which I expressed my profound concern about the deaths in the community in Basingstoke of five former residents of Beechwood lodge. I should explain that Beechwood lodge is a Stonham housing association hostel for single men. Four of the deaths happened within a few weeks of one another around Christmas 2001, and the body of one man lay undiscovered for three weeks or so. They followed the death in the community early in the year of another former resident.

In my letter, I asked the Secretary of State to set up an official inquiry into the five deaths and the way in which Hampshire social services, Stonham housing association and the borough council had acted. I also tabled parliamentary questions. The Secretary of State replied that he was not planning to hold an inquiry, but he did not totally rule out the possibility that one might be held. He implied, or so I understood, that he hoped that the inquiry instigated by the borough council would serve the same purpose. I regret to report that it has not. Concerns about what happened to former residents of Beechwood lodge have not remotely subsided during the past 12 months, perhaps because of the efforts of some to remove the issue from our local agenda. I return to the issue without apology and repeat my request for an official inquiry.

The five men died after being moved into the community following Stonham housing association's controversial decision to close the hostel. Their deaths gave rise to a storm of local protest over the lack of care and support that they had received after being moved out of the hostel. While the residents of Beechwood lodge were being moved into the community, Hampshire social services and Stonham housing association gave solemn assurances that residents' needs were being assessed and that appropriate care packages would be put in place. It later transpired that many of the residents were given no support in the community, but were left to fend for themselves.

On 7 February—three days after I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health—Basingstoke and Deane borough council announced that it had commissioned a review, not an inquiry, in partnership with Stonham housing association and the other relevant authorities and agencies. The review, which was labelled "independent", examined the procedures that had been followed in implementing the closure of Beechwood lodge. The independent review was also to make recommendations as to further action that might be taken to assist former residents and to advise how such processes should be carried out.

There was immediate concern locally. First, there was to be a review, not an inquiry. There is a fundamental difference between the two: by definition, an inquiry is inquisitive, whereas a review is an overview. The terms of reference focused too much on what had happened rather than on the whys and wherefores and where responsibility lay. There were also well-founded concerns about how genuinely independent a review could be if it were set up by the involved parties. It was also realised that the reviewer would have no statutory powers to summon witnesses or to demand papers, and it was uncertain what resources would be at his disposal and whether evidence would be heard in public or in private, and over what period of time. Not only were there many misgivings concerning the conditions surrounding the independent review, but the reviewer had no powers to compel the various agencies and authorities to implement any recommendations.

The task of conducting the review was given to Mr. Frank Rust, the chairman of the community health council and a past member of an area health authority and much else. I wish to state unambiguously that Mr. Rust's personal integrity and commitment to the task are not in dispute. He is rightly respected for his contribution to public life in many fields. The quarrel is not with the reviewer, Mr. Rust, but with the terms of reference that were imposed on him and the consequential limitations of his report. Furthermore, the borough council has subsequently handled the report. I emphasise that the review was the initiative of the borough council.

There was an early manifestation of concern. Mr. Rust was tasked with providing the council with an interim report prior to presenting his final report. He did so in April last year. We now know that the interim report was the only one that he provided. It was, in the words of a leading councillor,

"polished and padded a bit".

Some members of the council felt that it was lacking in substance and detail, but it became the actual report. Moreover, copies of the interim report were sent to the various agencies and authorities involved, but not to individuals whom Mr. Rust had interviewed in the course of preparing it, such as Mrs. Anne Ritchie, who has played such a dedicated role in representing the interests of the residents of Beechwood lodge. The comments of those agencies were taken into account. It is truly alarming that the polishing and padding was provided by the council, an act that brings into serious question the ostensible and declared independence of the report.

A fortnight or so ago, Lord Laming made public the findings of his inquiry into the horrific suffering and death of Victoria Climbié. That tragic case has a number of points of contact with the Beechwood lodge saga, the most striking being the proliferation of responsible bodies. With the advantage of hindsight, one can see that each body tended to minimise its own responsibility and to maximise that of the others. Where there should have been multi-agency co-operation, there was multi-agency failure. At the time, I described the Rust report as

"an anaesthetised analysis of a human tragedy which should never have happened."

The report inadequately stated that the tragedy was wholly avoidable. Some of the most vulnerable people in our community were grievously let down. Mr. Rust's

report appears to imply that prime responsibility lay with Stonham housing association. The report is essentially non-censorious. Stonham's appalling shortcomings are listed as a matter more for regret than for blame. Social services emerge in a poor light. At times they are more concerned about the resource implications of their involvement than the needs of residents. Mr. Rust recently reminded me that letters survive from social services and Stonham asking one another for extra resources. Not least, social services failed to complete assessments within the promised time.

The report acknowledges the pivotal role of the borough council in providing accommodation for Beechwood lodge residents in the community, including sheltered housing schemes. The council could have influenced events far more than it did. It almost wholly ignored warnings—the correspondence survives. The report also finds that the Housing Corporation

"could have taken a more proactive, even a strategic/leadership role".

It does not make it clear when that could or should have happened. Mr. Rust recently wrote to me, saying that the crux of the problem was the decision by the Housing Corporation to reduce the revenue grant for Beechwood lodge and its failure to fund the closure programme. As in the case of Victoria Climbié, each lapse may not of itself have been fatal, but taken together they were lethal. The catalogue of failure is chilling. One of the glaring weaknesses of the report is the absence of any testimony from former residents. The inquiry's terms of reference did not demand its inclusion, nor did they require the reviewer even to speak to former residents. The absence of such testimony detracts greatly from the completeness of the report.

In fact, the report tells us nothing that we did not already know. The closure of Beechwood lodge and the ensuing tragedy was a ghastly saga of multi-agency failure for which no one has been held responsible. It is a classic instance of the no-blame culture that bedevils modern society, but individuals formulated those strategies, and individuals took the decisions. They should have been held to account, but they were not. They could still be held to account.

Although every agency and authority involved bears some responsibility, there is particular concern about the borough council's attitude. It is summed up in the repeated assertions heard so often in public and in private: "We must not blame anyone; we must put this behind us and move on." The impression is given that some wish to sweep the whole horrific and tragic affair under the carpet.

It is piously hoped that the new "supporting people" strategy will prevent a repetition, and I share that hope. However, "supporting people" only formalises what should have happened in the past; it is no guarantee of delivery. Moreover, in Basingstoke, the "supporting people" strategy will be implemented by precisely the same agencies, and in some cases by the same people, that failed the residents of Beechwood lodge so badly.

A sizeable body of informed local opinion believes that, despite Mr. Rust's good intentions, his report inadequately analysed the complexity and the full horror of what happened in Basingstoke after Beechwood lodge residents were rehoused in the community. There is much unease that the agencies and authorities responsible may have escaped too lightly. There is genuine concern about the council's perceived attitude. For these reasons, it is hoped that, even now, the Government will instigate a fuller inquiry to find out what went wrong and why, so that from the mistakes of the past we may learn lessons for the future.

I do not ask the Minister to pronounce judgment immediately; this is a matter for thought and reflection. I ask her to give serious consideration to setting up such an inquiry, and I hope that in due course the Government will agree. The tragedy that followed the decision to close Beechwood lodge was both predictable and predicted. I have made the point that it happened because every involved authority and agency failed. Consequently, some of the most vulnerable people in our local community were grievously let down. The seriousness of what happened and the imperative of ensuring that lessons are learned demand an official inquiry.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Social Exclusion and Deputy Minister for Women (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I start by saying to the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) that I understand his great anxiety about the issue and the individual cases. I know that his concerns are deeply held and have been for some time. I thank him for giving me prior notice of some of the issues that he wanted to raise today. I also understand that when the hon. Gentleman speaks about the matters, he is representing the views of ex-residents and the members of Basingstoke Action for Single Homelessness. As he said, there is real local concern.

I want to describe the circumstances that I understand to have been in place and the reasons for the closure of Beechwood lodge. A regular three-year review of Beechwood lodge by the Housing Corporation found that many residents had alcohol issues that did not require the intensive support that would justify payment of the supported housing management grant. Beechwood lodge also had a void rate of about 30 per cent., which was below funding guidelines set by the corporation. The decision to close Beechwood lodge was taken by Stonham housing association, with the support of the Housing Corporation, Hampshire social services and Basingstoke and Deane borough council following consultation with stakeholders, including the local health authority.

A structural survey also showed problems with design to the extent that the cost of routine maintenance for the building was no longer sustainable. Basingstoke and Deane borough council had already provided £148,000 of housing association grant in 1995 to repair a building that was not even 10 years old.

My information is that residents were consulted about the decision to close the hostel, with more than 70 per cent. responding that they would prefer to move. I also understand that the closure was planned over a four-year period to July 2001 to ensure that appropriate placements were found for all residents. However, despite joint working, the information given to my officials was that some people did not accept the care packages that were offered to all residents by the agencies as part of the re-provision arrangements and preferred to move into independent accommodation, which was perfectly within their rights.

[Mrs. Barbara Roche]

Consultation with the residents highlighted the fact that 74 per cent. would prefer to live in flats, bedsits or shared accommodation. As half of the bed spaces were permanent and the home was running at 80 per cent. capacity, there were only 40 bed spaces for which vacancies could occur. The borough council and Stonham planned re-provision around finding alternative accommodation for the long-term residents and providing an equivalent number of other bed spaces in the first instance, followed by a programme of expansion based on the needs of the individual in line with the "supporting people" requirements, to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

In 1998, Stonham assessed 77 residents and found that 32 needed further health and care assessments. The council's health and housing committee subsequently put in place an initial re-provision plan to increase the number of move-on nominations to 13 each year, in order to assist residents with little or no support needs—needs that could be met through floating support in alternative accommodation.

I understand that by June 2000, the borough council had submitted a multi-agency strategic plan to the health and housing committee; four months later, it was approved by a panel of elected members. The result was that multi-agency assessments with social services could ideally match the remaining residents with appropriate accommodation. In the months leading up to the closure, joint assessments took place for about 20 residents with high support needs. The residents were accompanied to viewings of alternative accommodation by Stonhan or council housing officers, who worked to find housing options that met the needs of and were acceptable to residents.

Our information is that all residents were rehoused in other schemes more appropriate to their level of need. Since the announcement of the closure of Beechwood lodge, the 40 lost bed spaces have been replaced with the equivalent of more than 140 new bed spaces, including Mary Rose court. I have not had the advantage of visiting Mary Rose court, but I understand that the hon. Gentleman has been there and I believe that he was impressed by what he saw.

Additional bed spaces have been provided through a number of initiatives, including local authority social housing grant, and floating support. By that I mean workers who provide support to help people to live independently and to support tenancies for those with low support needs. That should either prevent vulnerable people from becoming homeless or enable them to sustain a more independent tenancy.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the review commissioned by the council. It was run by Mr. Frank Rust, the ex-chairman of the community health council. The report made a number of recommendations. It recommended, first, that all vulnerable ex-residents should be contacted to assess the level of support that they receive; secondly, that Basingstoke Action Against Single Homelessness and other supporting agencies should be included in developing the borough council's homelessness strategy; and thirdly, that the agency should lead on commissioning services for those vulnerable to homelessness. My information is that the council has implemented all those recommendations.

I understand that health and social services both advise that it is no longer appropriate to provide one large-scale institution in the area, where residents may become deskilled. That was confirmed by a recent survey into the housing needs of single people, in which the hostel residents were well represented.

The hon. Gentleman, as he has said, asked the Department of Health to investigate the circumstances leading to the deaths of former residents of the hostel, and to assess the performance of agencies providing care and support at Beechwood lodge. The Department declined to undertake an inquiry into the circumstances of the deaths of four men following the closure of Beechwood lodge because it was judged that such an inquiry would not add value to the inquiry already commissioned, and that a separate inquiry might have impeded the progress of the internal inquiry. The social services inspectorate has maintained contact with Hampshire social services on the progress of the inquiry and received a copy of the report in July 2002. I understand that the local agencies have continued to discuss the outcome of the report, and that the local council discussed the matter in its overview and scrutiny committee in January.

At that community overview and scrutiny committee, the council agreed that it was content that the housing strategy addressed the issues of vulnerable residents within the borough. However, the social services inspectorate is continuing to liase with Hampshire social services department to ensure that appropriate actions are taken to implement lessons learned from the inquiry and its outcome.

Improved joint working between agencies coupled with new provision across the borough for men and women has resulted in housing support being more tailored to the needs of individuals. The introduction of the supported housing panel also ensures more appropriate housing together with appropriate support in future. It is supported by the borough council, the Housing Corporation and the "safer communities" programme in investing more than £4.4 million in accommodation for vulnerable people.

Funding has also increased to develop floating support services. The borough council has invested £1.5 million to purchase 31 houses for statutory homeless households and provided other funds for a 14-bed hostel, which is due to open in July, which can accommodate single homeless people or homeless households. The borough council is also undertaking a feasibility study on the provision of a day centre as part of its review of homelessness provision in the borough. I know from my experience what valuable work day centres do.

Tackling homelessness is about considering individual circumstances. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is not just about seeing whether people have a roof over their head but about considering their special needs and supporting them. The homlessness directorate within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has provided more than £100,000 to help

Basingstoke and Deane to put in place some homeless prevention projects such as a rent deposit scheme for intentionally homeless people, a mediation service and a supported lodgings scheme for 16 and 17-year-olds. Funding is also being used to employ a specialist housing advice officer and a new homelessness and resettlement officer.

Today the Government announced their proposals in "Sustainable Communities: building for the future" to provide a major programme of affordable homes for key public sector workers and those in priority housing need. In that document there is a commitment to continue with the work on homelessness outlined in "More than a Roof", which goes into detail about how people's individual needs are to be considered when dealing with homelessness.

Our objectives are to develop more strategic approaches to preventing homelessness and to consider how to deal with the subject; to encourage new responses to tackling homelessness such as mediation schemes; and to strengthen the help available to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

We have passed legislation to strengthen the help available for people who need it and from April the "supporting people" programme will provide support services to vulnerable people and help them to stay in their homes. I hope that the hon. Member for Basingstoke will be reassured when the programme is implemented and developed.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising some interesting and important points, which the Government will consider. It is important that we improve our services, especially when they are provided to vulnerable people. There is a greater range of provision for homeless people in Basingstoke and Deane, which is supported by the Homelessness Act 2002 and from April by the "supporting people" programme.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the borough council is one of the district councils working in partnership with others as part of its "supporting people" strategy; although it does not come in until April, a great deal of preparation is going on to ensure that it is implemented properly. Hampshire has always worked well with its district councils and with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and continues to do so.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising the issue and I hope that I have been able to reassure him.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Four o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 6 February 2003

[MR. EDWARD O'HARA *in the Chair*]

Southern Africa Food Crisis

[Relevant documents: Minutes of Evidence taken before the International Development Committee on 29th October 2002, HC 1271-i, 25th November 2002, HC 116-i, 3rd December 2002, HC 116-ii, 14th January 2003, HC 116-iii, 23rd January 2003, HC 116-iv, together with memoranda received by the Committee.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Derek Twigg.]*

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Ms Sally Keeble): I welcome a debate on the southern Africa humanitarian crisis, which has gripped public consciousness, combining as it does some of the worst natural disasters with some of the most chronic human disasters. I want to set out some of the latest developments and explain how Britain's assistance has helped those most in need. The world is of course very concerned about the immediate humanitarian disaster, but underlying it is a long-term problem of food security in southern Africa, which we need to address urgently.

I shall set out some of the history of the crisis, which has been the subject of considerable debate in the House and among the wider public. Seven countries in southern Africa—Angola, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe—are facing food shortages. The crisis began with poor rains throughout the region in the 2001–02 growing season. Reporting from non-governmental organisations that started in August 2001 stated that many families in Malawi and Zimbabwe would face major food insecurity during the following year. In Zimbabwe, that view was corroborated by evidence of disruption to agriculture and of late planting. However, the Government of Zimbabwe continued until early 2002 to predict high levels of maize production. In Malawi, the Government and donors agreed in August 2001 that action needed to be taken, but the Government decided not to ask for outside help. An emergency was finally declared in February 2002.

The World Food Programme launched an appeal in July 2002 for $507 million to cover nearly 1 million tonnes of food for six of the seven countries of southern Africa. Angola was handled separately because of its particular requirements linked to the end of the civil war. WFP planning assumed that additional food aid imports of 200,000 tonnes would flow through channels other than the World Food Programme, and that Governments and commercial suppliers would import further supplies. In many cases, it was assumed that governmental and commercial supplies would be much greater than the level of food aid.

When the WFP appeal was launched, it was widely recognised that the crisis was not only about food supplies. Health and other issues were affected too, including disease, water and sanitation services and, perhaps more significantly, HIV/AIDS. The appeal for food aid was part of a wider United Nations appeal to cover those other needs as well.

There has been considerable debate about the scale of the crisis. By any standards, it is large. Assessments made by international teams in September 2002 show that more than 10 million people throughout six countries were in immediate need of food aid. They also agreed that that number would rise to more than 14 million by March 2003. Subsequent assessments have found an even higher number in need when taking into account some urban populations, particularly in Zimbabwe. In addition to the sheer number of people involved, the complexity of the crisis is unique.

The countries involved face different problems. Malawi has chronic food security problems, but, traditionally, Zimbabwe has food surpluses. Mozambique has had both chronic food shortages in the south of the country and surpluses in the north. On the whole, the region was less used to and prepared for a major crisis than other regions, such as the horn of Africa. I am referring to some of the least developed countries in the world as well as to one of Africa's few middle-income countries. The crisis has covered countries in which there have been significant problems of poor governance. In terms of the range of problems that the international community has had to deal with, the number of countries involved and the relative lack of preparedness, the crisis was, by any measure, severe.

The causes of the crisis were also complex. Poor rainfall was a central factor, but that alone should not have caused the scale of suffering that we have seen. Two factors have played a crucial and aggravating role. The first is poor governance, most notably in Zimbabwe, as all hon. Members know. Of a total population of about 11.5 million people, more than 7 million Zimbabweans are now receiving food aid. Sadly, that number could become even higher over the next 12 months if economic conditions do not improve. The Government's handling of the economy has been truly appalling: gross domestic product has shrunk by 25 per cent. in the past three years; inflation is 150 per cent. and rising; the official exchange rate is wildly out of line with reality and has resulted in a foreign exchange crisis; all prices are controlled; fuel is almost unavailable; and even people who have money cannot buy food.

Most worryingly, there has been poor co-operation from the Zimbabwe Government with the international aid agencies—those trying to help most have been hindered most. Import permits for food have been delayed, charities trying to distribute food at community level have been obstructed, and access to some of the most vulnerable groups, particularly displaced farm workers, has been blocked. Although the United Nations has ensured that international food aid is distributed in strict accordance with humanitarian principles, the distribution of food through the Government-owned grain marketing board has been distorted for political reasons and the Government have so far refused to allow independent monitoring of their work.

The second aggravating factor has been the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world: 34 per cent. in Zimbabwe, 33.4 per cent. in Swaziland, 24 per cent. in Lesotho, 20 per cent. in Zambia and 16.4 per cent.

[Ms Sally Keeble]

in Malawi. We are still trying to understand the full impact of that, but some things have already been made clear. HIV/AIDS strikes at the heart of the coping mechanisms that people have developed. Those whose contributions are most needed are those least able to contribute. Millions of households throughout the region have lost one or both working-age adults and many of the adults who are alive are too ill to work in the field, scavenge for food or seek work elsewhere. Children and the elderly are bearing the burden of providing for those households in such difficult times.

I draw attention to the prospects for those with HIV. Good nutrition is essential for prolonging life and delaying the onset of AIDS, and that is obviously impossible when food is scarce. Information is still poor, but there are signs that mortality rates from HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe have increased from between 1,500 and 2,000 a week to between 2,000 and 2,500 a week over the past 18 months or so. There is a vicious two-way circle: food shortages impact by weakening the resistance of those with HIV and tipping them into full-blown AIDS, while illness and early deaths from AIDS of many adults make it harder for communities to cope with food shortages. That is a key area for all of us who are committed to development.

The international response to the crisis has been effective, if perhaps limited in scale. As of this month, $396 million has been provided in response to the UN consolidated appeal—65 per cent. of the total requested. The UN has distributed more than 200,000 tonnes of food aid to 5.5 million people in the six countries covered. The number of deaths directly attributable to food shortages has thankfully been relatively small, and that is the best testament to the success of the relief operation that we could have hoped for. We believe that there are now adequate supplies to cover the needs in the region throughout March and therefore up to the next harvest.

The UK has provided very substantial help to the UN, both in funding and staffing, and the effectiveness of Department for International Development humanitarian operations is widely respected in the international community, as hon. Members of all parties recognise. We have played a strong and leading role in responding to the crisis. In funding, only the United States and the European Community have provided more. Of the EC response, 20 per cent. is provided by our Department. Since September 2001, we have contributed about £130 million. In addition, our contribution has been entirely in the form of cash and not food commodities, which is far more useful to the agencies and allows for a much more flexible response.

We have also been the most active donor in pushing for improved co-ordination, providing practical help and trying to address the underlying issues affecting the crisis. The response from the rest of the international community has been patchy, and we have urged others to increase their contributions. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for International Development wrote to colleagues in other countries to press for contributions. The British public have been typically generous in their response to appeals for funds by organisations working in the regions. The organisations have also received funding from the Government and play an essential role in the delivery of help to communities in the regions. So far, we are the single biggest funder in Zimbabwe and we feed about 1.3 million children a day.

The severity of the crisis has rung warning bells in many parts of the international community. Normally, the region has coped with poor rainfall; several places are not used to dealing with such food shortages. However, the region is becoming less able to cope. A combination of poor governance, high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates and less predictable weather patterns could send the region into a downwards spiral from which it would be difficult to recover. That would damage all our development efforts, and especially those of people in the countries concerned. We therefore need to work with others, including Governments and communities, to find solutions to a range of problems. We need to improve agricultural techniques, to encourage better management and to ensure that markets work properly so that food can be bought and sold.

It is crucial that we scale up our work to tackle HIV/AIDS, and local leadership is essential for that. The reversal of the infection rate in Uganda—it is now down to 5 per cent.—shows what can be achieved by strong commitment throughout the system. However, all the development achievements in the region will be undermined if that does not happen.

The crisis has been a major test for the international community and the families whose lives have been scarred by the famine. At least we have been able to prevent the crisis from becoming a complete disaster, and Britain has played an important part in that effort. We need to continue to work with international agencies and the countries in the region in order to deal with the underlying issues that the crisis has exposed and to prevent the vicious circle that I described.

There are key issues that must be addressed. First, we must improve the food security of people in southern Africa. Variation in rainfall is a fact of life and we must get better at coping with that. Higher incomes and functioning markets will enable communities to cope with poor harvests. Secondly, we must ensure that we find regional solutions, with leadership from within the region. The Southern Africa Development Community is examining a regional strategy for improving food security and we hope to support that, including through funding if that would help. Thirdly, we need to recognise the dimension that HIV/AIDS has added to the food crisis.

The agenda is large and represents a major challenge for us and the rest of the international donor community. I hope that all hon. Members will agree that the issue is vital for the poor people in southern Africa and Africa as a whole.

2.43 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): We are all glad that the Government have called this debate on a real, massive and terrible crisis that is being overshadowed by two other humanitarian crises nearer home—in Palestine and, of course, in Iraq.

In southern Africa today, 14.4 million people are at risk from starvation. They face a food deficit of 1 million tonnes until March 2003. There is indeed a crisis and, as

the Minister said, it has been taken to a new level by the impact of HIV/AIDS. One in three adults in southern Africa is infected. The crisis needs immediate and long-term commitments. We recognise the achievements of the Secretary of State, her Minister and her Department, but many challenges are still not met and many questions remain unanswered.

As the Minister suggested, the grim spectre of AIDS is ever present and intertwined with so many of southern Africa's problems. Sustainable food production requires strong and healthy people to till the soil and to nurture the next generation. However, 60 per cent. of the population in the region are aged under 18. Those countries have the highest HIV infection rates in the world—it is over 40 per cent. according to Save the Children. The infection rate of young women from the age of 15 is usually four to five times higher than that of young men of the same age, which highlights gender and economic inequalities. More children become heads of households, but they lose family rights to property and land, they have less access to social services and they become more marginalised. If they migrate to find food or work, they are more open to health hazards and they have less education, which reduces the human capital producing food. It is our duty and it is in our interest to help these countries break their downward spiral.

When talking water, we British must snap out of our obsession with having too much of it. We are so lucky. Somewhere, a child dies every 15 seconds from waterborne diseases. The World Health Organisation and UNICEF say that worldwide 1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people are lacking basic sanitation facilities. That means that in Africa one third of the population lack water or sanitation facilities. Dirty water and poor sanitation compound the effects of the lack of food and of AIDS. Weakened HIV/AIDS victims are more likely to die from infections, such as cholera or malaria. In southern Africa, the short-term health of 14.4 million people depends not only on food, but on the supply of clean water and the provision of sanitation; currently, they have neither.

In March 2000, the Secretary of State announced that the Department for International Development's financial assistance for water and sanitation would be doubled. That undertaking has barely been met. The current expenditure plan suggests that water and sanitation budgets, particularly in Africa, will continue to fall from their peak in 1999–2000. In this, the international year of fresh water, DFID's water expenditure is significantly less than that of some other donors, such as Germany and Japan and there are, according to the National Audit Office report published last Friday, few substantive country water programmes. That NAO report highlighted the need for DFID to focus the investment of official development assistance on sustainable solutions. WaterAid argues that if investments in water and sanitation are to have a lasting and sustainable impact on the lives of poor people, a significant share of DFID funding should be spent on training local people to administer, deliver and maintain water and drainage systems and on training the trainers. The lack of human capital in such countries is one of their greatest handicaps. Does the Minister agree with WaterAid's analysis?

We cannot avoid coherent discussions on genetically modified food aid, nationally and internationally, nor should we wish to. The United States of America supplies more than 50 per cent. of all food aid and DFID, in its memorandum to the Select Committee of 7 October 2002, said that that US food aid contains genetically modified material, and with drought predicted in America that major source of supply may literally dry up and other sources will have to be found. Non-governmental organisations, such as Christian Aid, suggest that the US should replace its food aid with cash, which they could use to try to buy GM-free food.

We respect the fact that the decision whether to accept GM food lies with individual Governments, but we must have a clear and informed debate. In terms of feeding people in a crisis such as the one that we face in southern Africa and being challenged by long-term population growth, GM technology provides a wealth of opportunities. Dr. Ray Mathias, at a Scientific Alliance conference last month, said that GM crops could be resistant to pests, disease and environmental stress, including drought, and that they produce higher yields more safely without the need for agrochemicals; he added that they could also lead to novel, easy-to-administer medicines, such as vaccines. For example, 80 hectares of greenhouse could provide enough hepatitis B vaccine for the whole of south-east Asia every year.

For those who will not accept GM, there are problems. Over the years, GM food aid has not just been eaten; it has also been planted. It is now estimated that a significant proportion of food sourced in Africa contains GM—as much as 80 per cent. in South Africa, according to the World Food Programme. Where do we get enough GM-free food from? If countries refuse GM food, do they surrender the "right to food"? When they refuse GM food, what provisions are in place to ensure its swift re-allocation? In Zambia, World Food Programme food aid was shipped in but the Government refused it and would not let it out again without export licences, which took a long time to get.

Genetic modification affects everyone in the food pipeline. It is not the only answer to the problem of feeding the world, but it is a very important one. No nation should reject GM food solely on the grounds of ignorance or prejudice; no nation can afford to do that. If we could focus our energies on determining our vision for the environment, agriculture and food supply across the world, we could get both sides of the GM debate together and find a viable solution. I hope that the Minister and the British Government share my view on that.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I apologise for arriving late and missing the Minister's introductory remarks.

Countries reject GM food for two reasons. They might have a principled objection to it. They might also have a strategic view: if GM crops are planted or if GM gets into the environment by mistake, they will be blacklisted if and when they want to supply food to other parts of the world that have a GM-free policy. That is why Africa is in a double bind.

Mr. Key: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. His comments highlight one part of the hypocrisy of those

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who are arguing against GM; they argue as though it was not there, but it is—and that is the problem that we have to manage.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): Zambia was offered GM-milled maize, which would have had no impact because it cannot germinate. Therefore, it could not have affected future Zambian exports.

Mr. Key: The hon. Gentleman is right, but I am also fairly sure that I am right *in saying that Zambia refused* oil or soya or anything else that may have come from GM crops. As the hon. Gentleman said, that is totally illogical. That is why we must have a proper debate about this all around the world, which leads me to my next question: what are the Minister and the Government doing to promote the GM debate in developing countries? Even in our country we are strapped for cash with regard to trying to have a GM debate: our Government are allowing £250,000—although that figure has now gone up to nearer £500,000—but the New Zealand Government spent over £2 million on a GM debate. I hope that the Minister will consider that one of her responsibilities is to promote the GM debate in developing countries.

The large-scale provision of free food aid in southern Africa is imperative to address the immediate crisis. What plans have been set up—not only in individual countries, but across the entire region—to manage the effect on prices that this free food will have come harvest time? There has already been a threefold increase in the price of food in some southern African countries, but elsewhere large quantities of imported grain lead to prices in local markets dropping through the floor—or, which is worse, grain is left to rot because there is no need to buy it.

People might also get used to food aid if it is offered to them year after year, with the attendant risk that a dependency culture develops. If food aid is abandoned in favour of cash aid, imports bought from grain-surplus countries such as Tanzania or South Africa cause prices to rise sharply back home, with consequences for the population of the exporting country; that is the case even if the imports are from genetically modified plants.

If we are to work towards long-term solutions, we must provide sustained and strategic support for rural livelihoods, rather than exacerbate the problem by undermining local farmers and their markets: nor can we afford a repeat of the Malawi grain stores fiasco, when the International Monetary Fund advised the Malawi Government to sell most of their grain reserves when the country was facing major harvest failures. The IMF has never been held to account for that. I know that the Secretary of State has said that the Malawi Government accepted the advice and took the decision, but we should question the quality of that advice, and recognise the enormous pressure on African Governments to do what they are told by the IMF.

Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): The International Development Committee went to Malawi and asked that question. The International Monetary Fund firmly denies ever giving such advice. In fact, all the evidence that we received suggests that the decision was taken by people who administer the grain store and was not the responsibility of the IMF.

Mr. Key: I am relieved to hear that, but how did the story get about in the first place, given that an awful lot of people believe it? I hope that this debate will provide an opportunity for people to take a more rational approach and refer back to the evidence put by the hon. Gentleman. That is the benefit of these debates. There is much merit, as the Minister suggested, in a food programme with food stores owned by the Southern *African Development Community. Christian Aid* says that that would cost less to run and be less prone to corruption.

When poverty reduction strategy programmes were introduced, we all had high hopes for them. Sadly, opinion seems to be growing that they are falling well short of expectations. The world development movement, Christian Aid, Jubilee Research and WaterAid have all been critical of them. There is a consensus that food security and rural livelihood should get greater emphasis in PRSPs.

Following the IMF involvement, it has now been alleged—I look to the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Tony Worthington) to correct me—that the IMF is withholding debt relief to Zambia, where nearly 3 million people are at risk of starvation, until its Government privatise their national commercial bank. Is that true? Once again, many people believe that it is. It would be a strange way for the international community to address the food crisis in southern Africa, much as I would like the bank to be privatised.

In Zimbabwe, 7.2 million people are at risk from starvation. Half of all the people in southern Africa who may die of famine have the misfortune to exist—I can hardly say live—under the regime of President Mugabe. The country that was once the bread-basket of the region is now facing disaster. Political instability, the terror associated with land reform policies, economic incompetence, corruption and indifference to the problem of HIV/AIDS can all be laid at the door of Mugabe's Government.

In Zimbabwe alone, there are about 3,000 AIDS-related deaths a week and a horrendous 35 per cent. of adults there have AIDS. Prostitution is increasing as food security is decreasing, thus exacerbating the AIDS epidemic. Food is being distributed via schools, and thank goodness for DFID's aid programme for the children of Zimbabwe. When children are removed from education as their families struggle with AIDS and famine, how do we ensure free and fair food distribution? We cannot.

In answers to written questions, the Secretary of State has told us that the Department has not had discussions with representatives of the Government of South Africa or the Opposition parties in Zimbabwe about the serious effects of the political situation in Zimbabwe on the national and regional food crisis. Perhaps the Secretary of State will rely on President Chirac of France to have a word in President Mugabe's ear at the Franco-African summit in Paris the week after next. Yes, he will be there. Yesterday, EU Ministers were unable to agree on renewing the sanctions against Zimbabwe, which is disgraceful and shameful.

As the Zimbabwe Opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, said on 23 January:

"Any avenue granted to Mugabe to attend international meetings at which he is treated as a statesman and an equal is an affront to the people of Zimbabwe. It amounts to a recognition and support of Mugabe's gruesome record at home."

To be fair to the Secretary of State, she told the International Development Committee on the same day that she found it "unimaginable" that the French could consider inviting Mugabe to Paris. She said:

"I can only think that in Paris they are not following what's going on. People have got it into their heads that this is just Britain and Mugabe in conflict over white farmers. They are not attending to the reality and the suffering of the people."

We agree, but once again, the Secretary of State has lost the argument and the Government have lost the argument in Europe.

Today, we have focused on southern Africa, but we do not forget the crises, problems and challenges of the rest of the continent. The Sudan peace agreement signed earlier this week gives real hope. The Bishop of Salisbury is in southern Sudan this week, reinforcing the solidarity of our diocese with the Christian communities there. Ethiopia is teetering on the edge of famine. There is dangerous instability in the Maghreb. West and central Africa continue to give cause for real concern.

Mr. Drew: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Sudan, but I should like to talk about Ethiopia. I went on an Inter-Parliamentary Union trip to Ethiopia before Christmas, and one of the sad things was that because of the crisis in southern Africa's food security, donor countries had been reducing food supplies to Ethiopia, which seems scandalous. However, that is the nature of the way that donor countries work. They sometimes deal with what they think of as the most immediate problem, and forget that they cause other problems as a consequence. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that that is unacceptable.

Mr. Key: That is precisely why I put that in my speech—so that we do not forget those countries. Of course, the hon. Gentleman is right about Ethiopia. One of the great ironies about that country is that although it is suffering from famine, the Nile flows through it. The problem is more a question of failure to manage water. In Sudan, too, food has been a problem from time to time.

In spite of all the distractions, great and small, that grab our attention in Britain, Africa is never far from our hearts and minds, and we are engaged. In most countries in southern Africa, there is not only hope, but real progress. I have seen it myself in Mozambique and in Zambia. Only in Zimbabwe have I seen a sharp decline. We are willing the people of Africa to win, and we must continue to will them the means to win.

3.1 pm

Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key). I remember the two visits that I made many years ago to Sudan, and the tribute that was paid there to his diocese for the work that it did in that country over many years. I do not think that anyone appreciates the loneliness of Christians in some parts of Sudan.

In my contribution to this debate, I shall draw heavily on the visit that the International Development Committee made to Malawi, and I shall quote the example of that country more often than any other, although there are lessons to be learned from across the region. It is time that we got frank about the problems. The tendency in such debates is to concentrate on the particulars of a crisis—which deliveries were made, what the climate was like, and so on—but such problems arise so often that we should concentrate on what is endemic. A great deal can be done, and most food crises are down to human inadequacy in one way or another. I shall start with the issue of governance.

The quality of governance in many southern African countries needs drastic improvement. There are more formal democracies than there used to be, but they have not yet delivered the better governance necessary to avoid famine. Democracy is a necessary condition for progress, but it is not sufficient in southern Africa. I should like to suggest some of the things that the New Partnership for Africa's Development should do if a genuine partnership between north and south is to develop, and if we are to avoid such crises.

The system of political parties in southern Africa and Africa generally is woefully weak. Parties are united not by an ideology but by a determination to win the spoils of the state. I used to get hauled off to give lectures on Her Majesty's loyal Opposition—I am not called to do so any more; no doubt the hon. Member for Salisbury is instead—but there is no culture of opposition in southern Africa. Parties fight an election to win. No one knows what to do if they lose, so they join the governing party. Parties are cobbled together by rich men as a result of obligation or for a pay-off. We must seriously tackle why people in Africa go into politics in order to get rich, why it is difficult for anyone other than a rich person to gain a seat, and why politicians need to have money beyond their salaries to fulfil their duties as an MP.

We will not avoid crises until the quality of government in African countries and elsewhere is improved. The hopes that we had for the Government in Malawi a few years ago have declined. They have been obsessed with gaining a third term, contrary to the constitution. Roughly translated, that means maintaining the food chain—not for the people, but for the politicians at the trough. With perhaps just a few exceptions, the motivation for a third term is not the fulfilment of public policy.

We can tackle the problem with traditional methods such as establishing an independent judiciary, a free press, a thriving civil society, an anti-corruption bureau that has teeth, and ensuring that civil servants are paid enough to live on—but new measures are also necessary. Complete transparency over the payments passing from western firms to African Governments is necessary, more in some countries—Angola or Nigeria, for example—than others. With greater transparency, we could have cracked corruption a long time ago. When are we going to wake up to the fact that African elites take far more out of the continent than western investors put in? We must tackle that problem.

The hon. Member for Salisbury helpfully mentioned the grain store. Corruption associated with Malawi's grain store perfectly illustrates my point. The grain store should have been the means by which the state helped

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the poor, but it became instead a nice little earner for those with access to the grain. It was no doubt sold off at low prices. No one can show where the grain went. It disappeared, doubtless to reappear and be sold back to the Malawians at a higher price. How could the man in charge of the parastatal ADMARC, who presided over this fiasco, resurface as a Finance Minister? How could the director of the anti-corruption bureau be removed from his job and placed in another unspecified one, just when the Finance Minister and other Ministers were being interviewed about the grain store?

Mr. Colman: Does my hon. Friend agree that corruption among African elites is often matched by the collusion of elites in Britain, particularly the Corporation of London? I applaud the Government's work to stop up several avenues down which money moves out of Africa, but more needs to be done to prevent such collusion.

Tony Worthington: I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's speech, as he knows much more about corruption in the City of London than I do.

How do we explain the fact that the chair of the Malawi agriculture select committee, which was examining corruption, was harassed, detained and imprisoned by the state? Because he was investigating the fiasco, his very status as an MP was questioned.

The situation in Malawi is, in fact, modest, in comparison with what we tolerated for years in Angola, where the Government were financed by oil and the Opposition were financed by diamonds, providing the basis on which the rival armies were maintained. The country might formally have been referred to as a democracy. Action in the UK on the declaration of resources going into the country could have helped to tackle the problem. That could be done with Nigeria today, but we do not do it. Nigeria discovers oil and, with the active connivance of oil companies in the developed world, hurtles towards being one of the poorest countries on the planet. What the ogre Mugabe is inflicting on his people is even worse.

We must examine the political parties in Africa and find ways of structuring democracy so that it is no longer primarily a means of getting rich. We never appreciate just how unbelievably lucky we are in this country, in that the vast majority of us go into politics not in order to make money but because of our political beliefs or out of some idea about public service. That is not true in Africa.

It is striking just how little Governments and Parliaments have done in the past few years to put in place the building blocks for democracy. For example, Malawi, where people are overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture, has never recovered from Banda's repressive regime, with the consequence that there is not a thriving national civil society in Malawi. In such a civil society, people would be linked to professional groups, human rights lobbies or gender groups, but there is no counterbalance in Malawi to malfunctioning politics.

A land registration scheme, which enables title to be proved, is fundamental to agricultural policy and the production of food. The absence of such a scheme is another illustration of the lack of progress. That is especially important now that there are so many male deaths from AIDS and women are unable to retain their land because there is no legal system.

Malawi is a good example of a tiny country that has a rapidly rising population, a huge percentage of which are dependent on peasant farming. It has virtually no industry to employ surplus labour, no land system and virtually no discernable agricultural policy. The country is landlocked and has virtually no air services outside Africa, so production for wealthy overseas countries cannot be achieved. Each year, the population soars, so that the same amount of land has to support even more people.

How can it be—this intrigued us—that Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world, nearly became a net contributor to the World Bank this year? Why is it difficult to see what strategy there is in the country, 20 per cent. of which is Lake Malawi, for better irrigation? Why is it that the only World Bank programme that we discovered was an untargeted maize-distribution scheme to be administered by a parastatal body in election year? "Vote for me, and I'll feed you", that is what we objected to. How will Malawi solve its problems when it has no substantial indigenous source of fertiliser and the land is already seriously depleted because of overuse and crop rotation? My colleagues and I could find no answers to those basic questions.

The fact that those questions had not been faced meant that the country was vulnerable to the food crisis that hit it. It is difficult to see where a strategy for agriculture will come from. The Food and Agriculture Organisation does not seem to do that sort of work, although its title would seem to imply that it should. There is definitely an impression that agricultural policy by the donor community is being put on the back burner while resources are, rightly, put into education and health. I am pleased that DFID is now producing new policy papers on agriculture and land policy, on which I hope we can build.

We always go on about tariff barriers, but many non-tariff barriers should also be tackled. I do not want to take up too much time, although this is a favourite subject of mine, but I want to consider how Malawi's problems have been worsened by poor reproductive health services and the impact of HIV/AIDS. Malawi has to feed more people every year. According to the United Nations Development Programme, Malawi's population stood at 11 million in 1999 and will rise to 15.7 million by 2015—an increase of 42 per cent. in 16 years. The food production per capita in Africa, never mind in Malawi, is falling and is lower than it was 10 years ago. As the hon. Member for Salisbury said, Malawi already has one of the worst records in Africa for access to safe water. About 50 per cent. of the population do not have access to safe water and 97 per cent. are without access to safe sanitation.

Africa is the least safe place on earth to be born. Africans are five times more likely to die before reaching the age of five than any other people in the world. It is abundantly clear that the intensely rural country of Malawi does not have access to decent reproductive health services such as mother and baby clinics. If it had, mothers would be given the choice over how many children to have. The likelihood is that they would make the same choice as women throughout the world. It will

take many years before their birth rates fall to the same level as those in countries such as Italy and Spain, to cite two at random, where the population is diminishing because of the choices that people have made. The people of Malawi should have that choice. There is no chance of their meeting many of the millennium development goals, such as a decline in maternal mortality or infant mortality, all children going to school or a decline in poverty—unless southern Africa gets much better access to maternal health services.

Into that already appalling set of circumstances, we have to factor in HIV/AIDS. Southern Africa is already the most afflicted part of the world. HIV/AIDS affects more than 30 per cent. of the adult population, who are often the wealth creators and who leave behind a population dominated by orphans and old people. I have deliberately brought up AIDS directly after dealing with reproductive health because one of our biggest mistakes in dealing with AIDS has been to separate in our minds its treatment and the provision of reproductive health services.

Developing world family planning associations were very uncomfortable about dealing with AIDS because their traditional clients are mothers and small children, not adult males behaving irresponsibly. Even vasectomies are not suggested because they are seen as threatening in a male-dominated society. It is always more difficult to deal with the powerful.

In the developed world, we put all our resources into managing the disease. Gruesomely, repeat prescriptions of extraordinarily expensive drugs are far more profitable for the pharmaceutical companies than finding a vaccine that cures or a barrier method that prevents the transmission of the disease that is under the control of women. All the private money went into drugs such as anti-retrovirals. Very little private money went into vaccines and next to nothing into microbicides to prevent women from being infected by their husbands. I am delighted that DFID has put money into microbicides. There is something severely wrong with the pharmaceutical industry and our values when we put so little into prevention rather than into management.

I should like to spend a little time on President Bush's extraordinary but welcome statement that he is going to ask Congress to commit $15 billion over the next five years, including $10 billion of new money, in order to turn the tide against AIDS in the most afflicted nations of Africa and the Caribbean. He terms that:

"a work of mercy beyond all current international efforts to help the people of Africa."

It is an extraordinary sum, especially given that a few months ago he was trying to cut funds in AIDS legislation going through Congress. The fact that Senator Bill Frist, who was promoting the Bill, had just become Republican leader in the Senate might have helped.

I have some apprehension, however. Only $1 billion is to go into the global health fund; the rest will be distributed bilaterally by the United States. Why does Bush have so much difficulty with being a team player? He was involved in setting up the global health fund. It makes an enormous amount of sense to have a unified policy and to cut down on the bureaucracy associated with multiple donors.

Mr. Key: Is not the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question that the President would avoid, if possible, financing the United Nations Population Fund, Marie Stopes International and other bodies which do enormous good around the world by tackling the problem? For political reasons, he simply cannot provide the funding. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a terrible shame?

Tony Worthington: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to learn that I am going to deal with that.

President Bush introduced the theme into his state of the union speech when he referred to the welcome and incredible fall in the price of anti-retroviral drugs from $12,000 a year to less than $300 a year. He said that he would treat at least 2 million people with life-extending drugs, and that is welcome. However, it is also very ambitious, and I hope that he realises that it is not just a question of dishing out the drugs—a lot of support work has to go on as well.

We rejoice at the fact that the cost of drugs has fallen to less than $300 a year, but that must be seen in context. Total health expenditure per person in Tanzania is between $3 and $4 a year, so we are back to the need for investment in reproductive health. I am afraid that the President's action must be seen in the context of Doha, where the United States recently vetoed a deal, on which all the other participants had agreed, to bring cheaper drugs to the poorest in the world.

I come now to the point that I hope will interest the hon. Member for Salisbury. President Bush claims that the comprehensive plan will prevent 7 million new AIDS infections, but what kind of prevention will it be? It is quite an extraordinary claim. The President is saying, "We are going to prevent 7 million people in Africa and the Caribbean from being infected with AIDS." However, we must see the initiative in the context of his policy on reproductive health. He has stopped contributions to the UNFPA worldwide and has therefore withdrawn money for reproductive health. He has done that because of false allegations that the organisation supports abortions in China as part of the one-child policy.

As the Minister knows, Bush's representatives are attempting to unpick the epoch-making Cairo conference on reproductive health. At the recent Asian and Pacific regional conference on population and development, in Bangkok, which I think the Minister attended, the United States delegation objected to attempts to prevent AIDS by promoting the use of condoms among adolescents on the basis that that would encourage under-age sex. Abstinence is the goal, say the Administration. Mercifully, the wise Asian and Pacific delegates saw off the American proposals by votes of 32 to one and 31 to one. However, hon. Members can see why I am apprehensive when the Americans talk about preventive methods.

We also need clarification in another respect. I was relieved that Mr. Steven Mosher, the president of the Population Research Institute—the other side, as it were—expressed concern about what would happen under Bush's $15 billion AIDS relief plan for Africa. He said:

"the condom-promoting aspect of this campaign is troublesome as well. The massive distribution of condoms in Africa has not only not stopped the spread of AIDS, it has put millions more at risk of infection in the name of prevention."

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That is the view of the Population Research Institute—the biggest of the pressure groups that persuaded Bush not to support the UNFPA. Here, however, is what Mosher said in an article about Bush's $15 billion for AIDS:

"Only groups that are solely dedicated to abstinence—and therefore have no hidden agenda—should be tasked with implementing this program."

It will be very interesting to see the battle that takes place in the United States over AIDS.

The proposed $15 billion is a huge sum, which puts enormous pressure on Europe to reciprocate. When Bush talks about prevention, however, what will it be? In other policies, he has withdrawn condoms—one of the only mechanisms that we have—from Africa. Is AIDS to be controlled simply by abstinence or are methods such as using condoms to be allowed? There is no doubt that when we discuss famine or food crises in Africa, AIDS and our policy on AIDS must be at the centre of our thinking. I hope that the Minister will take that into account in her reply.

3.25 pm

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West): It is a pleasure to follow the Minister's opening remarks and two thoughtful and well-informed speeches. I will not spend too much time on the subject of AIDS or of genetically modified crops, as both have been covered in the debate.

I want to pick up something that the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) said: although the debate is about southern Africa, the food crisis is not limited to that area, but affects other parts of Africa. I agree wholeheartedly with what was said about groups and organisations having to tackle the reluctance to promote condoms, as they are a major factor in preventing the spread of AIDS.

As much of the world's attention is focused on the possible war in Iraq, it is important not to take our eye off the ball in the continuing food crisis in Africa. Reports from Ethiopia and Eritrea say that half the population have been affected by drought and it is estimated that approximately 500,000 tonnes of food aid will be required there this year. In Mauritania, 56 per cent. of children are suffering from malnutrition, and in Madagascar significant levels of malnutrition have been reported. There may be crises in other areas that have not yet hit the headlines.

Often, what keeps a news story on the boil is the presence of television cameras and journalists on the ground. The fact that we are debating the issue today will no doubt be overshadowed by the Defence Secretary's announcement that more aircraft are being sent to the Gulf ready for military action. Continuing the debate in Parliament is important, as it is our duty to keep the subject on the agenda when it is not a hot news story.

The current military build-up shows that where there is political determination resources can be found. Whenever possible, we must continue to highlight the importance of the issue which, sadly, will continue long after a war in Iraq is over. This country has a small but important role that is part of a much wider effort, as the Secretary of State for International Development said. Unlike the situation in Afghanistan, there is much talk of a commitment to keep the peace and to rebuild Iraq after military action. Development budgets are always stretched and there are many questions about where to draw the line between finding resources for military and for humanitarian expenditure, but they are closely linked.

The blurring of budgets was an issue when questions were asked about whether the money spent on humanitarian aid in Afghanistan should rather have been spent on reconstruction. The Secretary of State gave detailed answers on the issue at Select Committee sittings. The budget headings may be fine for accountants, but for the hungry they are of little importance as long as the problem is being tackled. Funding and education projects, for example, which then provide the money to allow someone to buy food to feed the family are one example of the blurring of budgets, and there are countless others.

Just to say that there is a food crisis in southern Africa is a problem in itself, because that might imply that if enough food was delivered the problem would be solved. Many other factors contribute to the current crisis. Problems of drought, erratic rainfall and changes in the global climate all add to the issue's complexity. The problems related to HIV/AIDS and other health issues make the crisis deeper and more difficult to cope with.

There are problems with governance, as has been said, although that is so in many countries worldwide. That would be a major problem in its own right, but it is magnified in developing countries. The availability of support systems is made much more difficult, especially in areas without a good infrastructure, and the magnitude of the problems takes on a different scale. In this country, we are able to cope better with an emergency because we have a good road network, a transport system, a regular power supply and a telecommunications system, as well as the democratic structures and financial might to cope. Sadly, the systems in many of the countries in southern Africa, and many of those most in need of support, have great difficulty in maximising the effect of outside aid. One example is the problem of transporting food aid to remote areas, which can be cut off during the rainy season. The need to repair bridges and roads may not look like a top priority during the dry season, but if food aid cannot be distributed on the ground because of a poor road system and lack of bridge repairs, the hungry will starve.

When the Select Committee visited Malawi last year, we were able to see what life is like in villages and what people are up against. We saw a compound of Red Cross trucks, ready to be used to distribute aid, but we were told that they were the heaviest and most expensive trucks to run. They were designed to be used in areas of conflict and could withstand heavy use, but locally available smaller vehicles were more suitable and cheaper to run.

We met NGOs and spoke to Department for International Development staff about what they were doing. We also met Government officials, MPs, the President and representatives from other countries—many people with a lot of local expertise. I must mention the high regard that we found for the Department's

work, and I add my own appreciation for the work of the Secretary of State, whose staff had a level of expertise and commitment that could not be faulted. Naturally, we want more resources to be made available to improve the situation, but it would be hypocritical of me not to give credit where credit is due.

Often the situation was described as a crisis within a crisis, the other crisis being the effect of HIV/AIDS. The huge number of orphans and households with either a child or grandparent at the head was there for us all to see. We saw the inability to prepare the land, even if the seed and fertiliser were available, and the effect of AIDS on the health service, not only on demand, but on the doctors and nurses who suffered themselves, resulting in an already overstretched system losing key workers. The children's malnutrition ward that we visited looked busy enough, as most of the beds were full, but we were told that during the busy season there would be two or three children in each bed. We also saw the effects of tuberculosis at a TB clinic when we visited Lilongwe.

The food and AIDS crises have become interlinked in many southern African countries. Nowhere is the link highlighted more than in discussions about the use and availability of anti-retroviral drugs. To be able to cope with the medication available, people need a good diet and to be relatively strong. For many who are too weak, the use of some medication is out of the question, even if it is available.

Questions about the governance of Malawi have already been asked, and they remain unanswered or only partially answered. I was never convinced that the answers that we received about the sale of the strategic grain reserve were truthful, and I am convinced that some individuals have done very well out of the suffering of others. People's bank accounts have swollen as the stomachs of others have. Whether they are business men, truckers or politicians, there is no excuse for using the food crisis as a method of getting rich.

The prize for the worst example of exploiting the food crisis must go to Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. What started as a doubtful election result has now grown into a full-scale humanitarian crisis, with half the population—an estimated 7 million people—suffering from food shortages. As we hear about deaths, adults collapsing and children fainting in schools, there are repeated reports of political bias in the distribution of food aid. In a country that has the capacity to produce food, the expertise to employ people on the land and the possibility of exporting food to neighbouring countries, what is happening in Zimbabwe is a crime against humanity. If ever there was a case for a United Nations resolution, this is it. Robert Mugabe is definitely a weapon of mass destruction.

There is no time today to explore the issue of GM crops, which has already been covered, and the issue of milled grain and the problems that Zambia faces were also mentioned by the hon. Member for Salisbury. The debate has not been helped by some people in the United Kingdom who are opposed to GM research under any circumstances. If drought-resistant crops can be developed and the process of speeding them up can be delivered by science, scientists should be able to do what they can to help with the problem.

We also have the problem of understanding the situation from the point of view of those suffering in Africa. It is impossible for many of us in this country to appreciate what it means not to have a regular supply of nutritious food instantly accessible and available every day of the week.

In an attempt to raise the profile of the food crisis in southern Africa, I agreed to live on a Red Cross food parcel for one week at the start of the year. I agree that that does not equate to living on food parcels alone in the long term, but I can report that it made me think about food all the time—what I was eating, what I could drink, and how to make bread. I never want to see another white bean in my life. Not drinking tea, coffee, fruit juice and alcohol and surviving on the two basics had another effect: it made me realise how significant the lack of nutritional food is. When we talk about keeping people alive by supplying maize or other basics, that is a long way short of a healthy diet, but it is often the basis for living a relatively normal life. Without a decent diet, infections can easily take over, and people are often too weak to do a day's physical work.

3.36 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.51 pm

On resuming—

John Barrett: We often hear about how much difference a treadle pump can make, contributing to the production of an extra crop a year in some areas. In countries such as Malawi, the ability to run small irrigation schemes can make an impact. However, I have tried to work a treadle pump and found that to do so one has to be fairly fit to start with. For those who have not seen a treadle pump, it is similar to the type of treadle machine often seen at a gymnasium, which drains the life from one's legs and the stamina from one's lungs in minutes.

The difference between surviving and developing a sustainable existence in many southern African countries is the difference between continuing to supply them with food aid and helping in the reconstruction of individual countries, as happened in Europe after the second world war. It was recognised at that time that rebuilding Europe would provide a market for US goods, and that a successful European economy would also help the USA grow.

Africa has many of the problems associated with war-torn countries, and many regions of Africa have been ravaged by war for decades. If Africa is to grow out of its current crisis, it cannot do so on its own. The rest of the world must play its part. One way of starting that process is to examine the way in which we trade with African countries, how fair trade develops, what barriers we have put in place, and how we are reducing the opportunities for those countries.

We should examine how we in Europe and the USA support farmers, how we dispose of surpluses, the effects of dumping, and how surpluses and subsidies could be better used. Non-tariff barriers and technical standards may also place restrictions on developing countries. If market access was improved, that could be a major step forward.

Some of my hard-pressed constituents might ask why we should continue to help those abroad, when we have enough problems of our own on our doorstep. I argue

[John Barrett]

that we have enough resources to do both, and that it is in all our interests to do so, and not only for humanitarian purposes, although that on its own should be enough—if someone is starving and we have enough food, we should share it.

Even in my constituency, one does not have to look far to see an abundance of wealth. Yesterday, an analysis was published of where millionaires live in the United Kingdom, and second on the list of their neighbourhoods was Blackhall in my constituency. Five minutes away from there are some of the most deprived areas of Edinburgh—Pilton and Muirhouse.

Inequality is worldwide, and it is sad to say that it is sometimes seen at its worst in Africa, with individuals amassing vast sums while others go hungry. We must keep the spotlight on southern Africa and hope that the determination shown to deal with problems in other regions does not, once again, leave Africa out in the cold.

3.[illegible]pm

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): I am glad to be able to contribute to this important debate on the famine conditions in southern Africa. I have taken part in debates in my constituency, and was invited by NGOs in Scotland to participate in a televised debate on the issues that have been raised in the debate today. I have also had the chance to catch the Speaker's eye and ask the Secretary of State for International Development several questions in the House on the matter.

I have a great interest in this issue and I am glad to have had a chance to read through the evidence that the International Development Committee took over the Christmas period and before, in November and December, which highlighted many of the issues that were raised in the excellent speeches of the Minister, the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Tony Worthington) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett). They all made relevant points. Just to see the depth of analysis has been worth while. We must now move on from all that investigatory work to find a solution, not only to the short-term famine that people are facing in southern Africa, but to the long-term risk of famine throughout that continent.

Many hon. Members could emulate to good effect my friend the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West, who undertook to restrict his diet to the food in a Red Cross parcel for a period of time. Maybe he and I could get together and table an early-day motion along those lines to encourage other hon. Members to follow suit. I do not hold out great hopes of that, but it would be another way of drawing attention to the fact that people throughout the world have to live on significantly lower levels of calories than we do in this rich country.

I was brought up in a Church that put great faith in missionary work. I was enthralled as a child to hear the stories of the lives of the great Scottish missionaries of that Church, such as David Livingstone, who virtually single-handedly opened up vast tracts of the interior of Africa. Mary Slessor, Aberdeen born but Dundee bred, was known as the great white mother of what is now modern-day Nigeria. They and others like them were spurred on by the belief that it was their role to bring the benefits of western civilisation and the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Gospels to the natives who came under their care. Africa as a continent has therefore always had a special interest for me. I welcome the recent setting up of an all-party group on Africa to allow for a focus on the many issues and troubles that beset that continent.

The Africa of the 19th century is to me a vast and exciting place, as described in such stories—a continent of lush, green vegetation and unlimited and bountiful savannah teeming with millions of wild animals. Although it was often described as "dark", it had a romance and exotic appeal that captured my imagination, and excited the thoughts and senses of many like me. Only recently, a well attended play staged at Dundee repertory theatre called "Mill Lavies" featured a poem by a local songwriter, Mike Marra. The play was about the escapism and thoughts of the jute workers in Dundee. The poem was called "If Dundee was Africa", and read:

"If Dundee was Africa . . .
I'd wheel my wheelbarrow up Kilimanjaro.
What a bra sight there would be.
Aw they icebergs in Taiport
when it's bilin in Dundee."

"Bilin" is the word for boiling hot. The hope of escaping from the cold confines of a jute mill to the warm, teeming lands of Africa was certainly at the forefront of some of my fellow citizens' minds, probably during winter times.

Modern Africa has a different image from that of the glamorous 19th-century Africa. Its image is a montage of conflict, poverty, mass suffering from AIDS and dictators, brutal tribal conflicts and genocide, natural disasters, and a myriad of human tragedies, often without hope and frequently with minimal western interest and assistance. As has been said, only when the television cameras capture the problems do such things receive any interest in this country.

By contemplating the swathe of problems encountered there, it should be obvious to all that we in the UK are lucky—indeed, privileged—to have been born in an advanced, affluent, industrial, western-style society, where the basic needs and wants of even the least fortunate are provided through a modern and comprehensive welfare state, without recourse to the Red Cross parcels mentioned earlier. The famines and the disastrous impacts are for us just a distant flicker on our collective consciousness—a phenomenon that has been dispatched, luckily enough, to the pages of our nation's history books.

However, for many of our fellow inhabitants of this beautiful and bountiful planet, famine is an ever-present threat and an everyday backdrop to their lives and their families' well-being. Nowhere is the curse of famine such an ever-present reality than the continent of Africa. Its teeming masses still contend with the basic, daily mechanistic function of grubbing around, begging and struggling for the food necessary to keep body and soul together and to continue to cling to life, however simple and basic that may be.

I recommend to anyone who wants to taste the atmosphere of such an existence Ben Okri's Booker prize-wining novel "The Famished Road". It is a

moving human testimony to life in Africa today. My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie referred to the nature of politics in Africa, and that book gives a real taste of the corruption, the wheeling and dealing and the issues that affect politics locally in rural and urban situations in African countries. It is well worth reading to find out at first hand, through the genius of the author, the problems and the blights that have scarred modern-day Africa in the post-colonial era of African history.

No blight has been so fearful and so collectively borne than famine, which has flared and flickered throughout the continent. It is brought about by a mixture of climatic features; the poor feudal, indeed, prehistoric husbandry and agricultural systems; agricultural mismanagement; and gross governmental inefficiency and corruption. Famine is a movable infamy that has migrated progressively southwards over the past three decades. However, the hon. Member for Salisbury made the point well that we should not be distracted from the fact that, although we are currently focusing on the famine in southern Africa, it could flare up anywhere on the continent. We must keep our minds focused throughout the continent, rather than on specific regions.

Britain, as the pre-eminent imperial power, played such a significant role in the opening of the continent. Our jingoist forebears boasted that they could travel from Cairo in the north to Cape Town in the south without ever leaving the protective shadow cast by the folds of the Union flag. It is therefore right, in the post-colonial era, to discuss an issue that affects many ex-British colonies. I hope that out of the debate will come an agenda whereby we do all that we can to remove from Africa the continuing prospect of famine and to ensure that the aid flowing from this country and our G8 and United Nations partners continues to provide sustenance—the means needed for survival by millions who struggle daily with famine.

It is also right to ask questions. As was asked earlier, why have countries such as Zimbabwe and Malawi, in an area that was once described as a bread-basket and which was self-sufficient in the food required to support its indigenous populations, descended into such perilous conditions? I am talking about a situation in which the spectre of Thomas Malthus and his 18th century theories of population control still hold good and stalk the African landscape.

The journalist Jeremy Laurance, in his article in *The Independent* on 8 July 2002, reviewed the famine in Malawi, one of the countries in the area that is suffering the most. It is worth posing again the question that he asked: Malawi should be a land of plenty, so why do 3 million people of the 20 million estimated—at that time—to be at risk continue to face the threat of starvation? The truth, as with much of the rest of the area, is that it is a puzzle—a complex mixture of drought, pestilence, war, corruption and mismanagement.

The only relief in the debate, as I found in reading up for it, is the fact that last year's estimates have been revised. At one stage, we were talking about more than 20 million people under threat. The article that I mentioned referred to the 20 million people identified by the non-governmental organisations as under threat. It is therefore good that we are now talking about 14 million people. That is still an enormous figure, but at least it shows that some of the efforts that have been made since the alarm went off have made a difference—they have moved some of those who were under threat out from under it.

The reasons why Zimbabwe and Malawi are in such a situation have been well recited. However, it is an inescapable fact—I must congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie on raising the HIV/AIDS crisis—that were it not for the AIDS crisis, the food crisis would not be as great. Many of the NGOs with which I have been working and whose reports I have read readily identify HIV/AIDS as the root cause of the food crisis affecting southern Africa. That point was made in the reports of the International Development Committee. Indeed, in a press release in December 2002, Oxfam said:

"only a concerted, long-term response will break the vicious cycle of disease and hunger . . . HIV/AIDS is killing the very generation that should be working in the fields to produce food—and the health workers and civil servants who should be responding to the crisis."

There was reference to the need for better and bigger health education programmes, yet the people who should be delivering those programmes are as much under threat as those who are trying to produce food. It will take a greater effort by western countries. I was delighted to hear from my hon. Friend that the American contribution was $15 billion. I was however saddened to hear that the Secretary of State answered a question on Thursday 23 January by saying that the United Nations co-ordinator of funds to counter AIDS did not believe that that sum was enough to tackle the crisis. Unless that crisis is dealt with, unless we can prevent the vast number of deaths that have left so many grandparents and orphans struggling to cope on their own, there will be no progress.

Oxfam estimated in its press release that in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia—the countries suffering most—3 million AIDS orphans have been left to fend for themselves, to be cared for by extended families or to be fed by charitable organisations. It is also significant that of the 13 million or 14 million people facing starvation, 6 million of them, according to Oxfam's figures, are in Zimbabwe. Food shortages have been caused by price controls, a hugely chaotic fast-track land reform that has reduced the number of farms able to contribute to food production by two thirds, and the ruinous economic mismanagement imposed on Zimbabwe by Mugabe and his regime. A country that should be producing food surpluses has been brought low by the hare-brained destructive policies of a President whose grasp on reality is rapidly receding.

It is a real shame that the last vestiges of what was seen as a model of democratic government is being given a last-gasp shot of credibility by the staging of the world cricket competition. It is time for the England cricket team and its managers to take a positive decision not to participate in such an event, no matter what the cost. It is for us politicians to reconsider what more we can do to ensure a radical change of policy by Mr. Mugabe and his regime or to discuss with our allies to see how best we can encourage a peaceful and democratic change in the Government of Zimbabwe. We must work with the French to ensure that they know how ludicrous their policies towards Mugabe's regime are—policies that can only lead to more deaths.

[Mr. Iain Luke]

We must also ensure that our polices on aid and on democratic change are geared towards banishing famine from southern Africa—indeed, from the whole of Africa—for ever. That is why the positive involvement in and endorsement of the NEPAD initiative by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for International Development is welcome. We have heard about Governments not being able to pull strategies together. For the first time we are seeing the formulation of a positive agenda for Africa. At the heart of that agenda we should rightly seek the resolution of conflict and the encouragement whenever and wherever possible of good or at least better governance.

The key to ensuring the success of such an agenda is to allow the responsible African countries a greater and more influential say in how the destinies of the continent are shaped. One of the most important and innovative aspects of the NEPAD initiative is the creation of mechanisms that allow for peer review, the measuring and monitoring of progress and the encouragement of better standards of political and economic governance. Hopefully, those frameworks of partnership and mutual accountability will remove the regional policy constraints between different countries that have inhibited Africa's growth and development.

As part of the efforts to reconstruct and create partnerships, the UK's policy on debt should not go unheralded. It is a positive contribution to the whole situation. There was criticism earlier from Opposition Members, but it is generally seen as positive. The Government's decision to increase bilateral aid to £1 billion by 2006 is to be applauded. Hopefully, that long-term commitment and the commitment to work through NEPAD will in turn remove the requirement regularly to rush emergency aid and assistance to areas of crisis. It is worth noting that DFID has played a major role, and that the UK's contribution to aid relief in that area of £137 million is, after that of the United States, the largest amount of assistance on offer.

I want to stress the objectives that lie at the heart of this activity and assistance, which are eloquently set out in "Food Security and the WTO" by Sophia Murphy, which was published by the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund in September 2001. It states that the overriding objective—whether in Africa in general or throughout the rest of the developing world—should be to ensure that countries at risk are able to produce enough food to nourish their own populations. Paul Chitnis, the chief executive of SCIAF, says in his introduction to the report:

> "Few things unite human beings as our common need for food. At the same time, nothing so divides our world. 826 million people in the developing world are under-nourished and the UN estimates that the equivalent of 30,000 children under the age of five die every day from preventable causes, one of which is poor nutrition."

That is a grotesque death toll in a world that can feed itself.

In last year's report "Forgotten Farmers" by Kevan Bundell, Christian Aid points out that the populations of the world's poorest countries have grown so rapidly that the demand for food has far outstripped the ability of farmers in those countries to provide the food required. The leading countries and organisations have not created mechanisms that can allow for the easy transfer of agricultural resources from the developed to the undeveloped world at a cost that can be afforded by the undeveloped world. In the face of global protectionism and western self-interest, Christian Aid has been at the forefront of encouraging farmers in the developing world to adopt an approach that is more appropriate to their needs and circumstances. That policy offers a positive way forward to achieving secure, locally accessed, indigenous food supplies that help to sustain life and livelihoods in the developing world.

It should be stressed that DFID has done a great deal in countries such as Malawi to achieve the self-sufficiency goals set by the campaign. It has ensured the widespread distribution of starter packs of seeds and fertiliser to every farmer. I was glad that the Committee had a chance to see what was going on in Malawi last year. I hope that I will get the same chance at some stage.

Despite the initial success of the programmes implemented by DFID and the growth of a sizeable reserve, economic incompetence and endemic political corruption have allowed those reserves to be sold. In turn, that has contributed to the famine in Malawi, where 25 per cent. of under fives in rural areas are severely malnourished. That example of mismanagement—or worse, corruption—emphasises the need for good governance, which forms the major part of our commitment to NEPAD and the new planning structures for Africa.

The Government have done a great deal in the region to cope with the famine conditions flagged up by NGOs that have a presence there. As a result, there has been a reduction in the number of people whom NGOs feared might be affected by famine. The figure has dropped from 20 million to about 14 million—a drop of 6 million, which is a significant number. However, the number of people still under threat is enormous, and the figures clearly indicate the amount of work still to be undertaken. It is right that we should be trying to bring short-term relief by rushing relief programmes to those suffering from the current blight, but the Government, the UN, the G8 and, most importantly, the Governments of responsible African states should be seeking to find a long-term solution to the recurrent scourge and to ensure that the African continent can, just as we have, dispatch the pestilence of famine to the dustbin of history.

I am heartened by the Government's commitments over the past year to give more aid and do more for Africa. In drawing to a close, however, it is right to pay tribute to the work of the many UK charities and Church organisations, such as SCIAF, its English equivalent CAFOD, Christian Aid and Oxfam, to name just a few, which do so much good work in the region to tackle famine conditions and promote the vital health and education policies needed to counter the twin killers of AIDS and starvation.

I started my speech by referring to the work of the eminent 19th century Scottish missionaries, Livingstone and Slessor, and it is fitting that I should end by praising the work done by their counterparts in the 21st century: those organisations that I have just mentioned, which have the same zeal, Christian beliefs and vision to pursue our common aims. Hopefully, the end result will be the banishment of famine from the whole of Africa, not only from its southern regions.

4.17 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury): My mother is a Scot whose family originally came from Aberdeenshire, so I am conscious of the contribution that Scottish Presbyterianism made to the founding of the empire and of the commitment of many of its members to propagating the Gospel. One of the sadder sights that one sees in Malawi is a mission hospital, funded largely by NGOs such as Christian Aid, which is about an hour's drive from Lilongwe. It is a very effective hospital, but behind it is a graveyard full of the graves of early Scots, their babies and young children, who went to that part of the world and were cut down in a year because they did not appreciate the problem of malaria. It is good to see that many NGOs working in Malawi and throughout the world are still supported by churches in Scotland.

I have already apologised to the Minister and I apologise to other hon. Members for the fact that I will not be staying for the winding-up speeches. The burden that used to fall on the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Tony Worthington) has today fallen on me, because a long time ago, I undertook to give a talk to the foreign services programme at Oxford university which trains young diplomats from overseas in the role of the Opposition. I must give a talk, which I hope the hon. Gentleman or his colleagues will be invited to give sooner rather than later, so I hope that hon. Members will excuse me if I cannot stay for the winding-up speeches.

It is good to speak in a debate in which at least three colleagues from the International Development Committee are taking part. I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) that one should give credit where it is due. It is fair to say that wherever we have been in Africa this year, Governments, non-governmental organisations and others have given credit for the work of the Department for International Development. DFID officials have often been able to respond speedily to immediate concerns. A good example is the way in which the Department galvanised the World Food Programme and other agencies by rehabilitating the rail link in Malawi and so improving logistics.

The debate is also welcome because, all too often, media and political attention moves from subject to subject. A couple of months ago, it was southern Africa, then it was Afghanistan and now Iraq is obscuring everything else. However, the issue that we are debating this afternoon is enormously important. The Select Committee, of which I am fortunate to be Chairman, will shortly publish a report on our findings drawn from our work on the food crisis in southern Africa. The papers and the evidence that we took are tagged to today's debate. I hope that hon. Members will have a chance to read some of those documents.

I sometimes think that the figures are so enormous that they are difficult for us to grasp. I shall share with hon. Members three quick glimpses of experiences that I had in Africa this year which, in their different ways, sum up something of the tragedy and the difficulties that we confront. On an afternoon in September, I went for a walk in the Simian mountains in Ethiopia and found myself on a hill looking down on a farmer who was trying to make a living. He had two oxen and a yoke, and he was ploughing a field under a blazing sun on a hill with a 45-degree incline which was strewn with the hardest of boulders. That was the only way in which he could earn a living, as other land in the village had become so depleted that, without access to fertilisers and nutrients, the villagers were constantly being forced out to the edge of the village.

There is an underlying issue that we will all have to address: in Ethiopia and, I suspect, in other countries, the number of food-insecure people increases even in years when there is no drought, because when there is a drought, people sell off their assets—cattle and any other possessions—so that they are almost unable to recover in years with no drought. We are faced with the dilemma of not wanting to over-dramatise what is happening but not wanting to be complacent about it either.

I was struck by the informal evidence that James Morris of the World Food Programme gave to the Select Committee. He shared with us his concern that the numbers of food-insecure people in the horn and in southern Africa were reaching such a level that he was no longer confident that he could raise the money to buy the necessary food for them, and even if he could raise that money, he was no longer confident that the food pipeline could manage to distribute it. I noted with interest the Secretary of State's candid remarks in her evidence on this topic to the Select Committee last week. She told us:

> "I am really worried that we are getting to a point where the capacity of the international system to deal with the crises that we have got in the world is being stretched to the level where I do not know whether it will carry on functioning."

We must all share that concern.

My second experience was at a feeding station in Malawi, run by a non-governmental organisation supported by Christian Aid. It was about four times the size of the Chamber. Mothers with young babes in arms were patiently waiting to receive food supplements. A young child, who could only have been 14, came to the head of the queue with her two younger siblings, aged six and five, and they wanted something to eat. She was the head of her household. Her parents had died and she was one of the many orphans in Malawi, a country with a population of 11 million, of whom more than 1 million are orphans.

Later that day, I went to a village. There are now ad hoc orphanages growing up all over the country. The person running the one that I visited invited me to speak to the orphans, who ranged in age from about 18 down to three. I did not know what to say, and I found myself telling them the story of the three little pigs—Malawi has many brick houses. I could think of no other way in which to engage them. I was struck by a 16-year-old girl who asked, "Who will now provide for my education? Without any money for education I shall get into a cycle in which the only way for me to have protection is to marry, to have children and not to advance."

I wondered who on earth would look after those huge numbers of orphans. There did not seem to be any policy of registration. In many villages, grandmothers are looking after the children, but many of them will die before the children become teenagers. We have to face that issue. I agree with the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie that the scope of governance in Malawi is pitifully small. Outside Lilongwe, there was no sense of the Government's having any reach, and within Lilongwe the only thing that people were concerned about was whether the Government had a third term.

[Tony Baldry]

The likelihood of people looking after large numbers of orphans seemed small. We have heard a lot about the link between HIV/AIDS and food shortages, which interplay with each other, and we have to address both catastrophes simultaneously. It is important to recognise the scale of the underlying problem. Without wishing to dramatise the issue, there is now a general recognition that, as the Secretary of State candidly acknowledged to the Select Committee, we are going to the limits of what organisations such as the World Food Programme can do.

We must think about how we enable countries such as Malawi and Ethiopia better to feed themselves. Part of the problem is poor governance, but it varies from country to country. Prime Minister Meles, who will give evidence to the Select Committee shortly, has done an enormous amount in Ethiopia, which has made great progress in governance. Other countries, such as Zimbabwe, have suffered. As has been said, President Mugabe has done a lot that has been extremely damaging. I was interested in the comments that President Mbeki made immediately after his press conference with the Prime Minister.

Last week, I was fortunate to be in Sierra Leone and I met President Kabbah, who happens to have trained here in law. He is a barrister who, at one stage, was a member of my chambers. I was interested to hear that he said candidly that the problem is seen in Africa as a legacy of colonialism. We see it as land being confiscated from farmers who have worked it up over a number of years. It was striking that somebody as reasonable and as moderate as President Kabbah should signal that for many African leaders it is seen as a key issue of land. There is still—it may seem unreasonable from our perspective—lingering support for what they see as a concern about sorting out a post-colonial issue. We must be sensitive to that. Shouting at South Africa for not doing enough will not necessarily solve the problem, although South Africans sometimes get confused between support for Zimbabwe and support for Mugabe, which are not necessarily the same thing.

Of course we must address the issues of governance and of HIV/AIDS, but we must accept that there are no simple answers. One of the problems of media attention suddenly focusing on an issue such as this is the belief that if only we did more of X or Y, everything would resolve itself.

I commend to hon. Members the evidence given to the Select Committee by academics from Wye college and agricultural experts from Oxfam. The witnesses made three points, the first of which was the complexity of risk in Africa. Farmers there take a much greater risk than those elsewhere. The second was the role of the state and liberalisation, which is a much more complicated matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and I are natural one-nation Conservatives and we would always take the view that the state should do only what it absolutely has to. However, it seems from the objective evidence that we heard that such issues are much more complex in countries where the liberalisation of organisations such as state marketing departments has been of a kind, and at a pace, that has left many poor farmers bereft of support. The debate about seeds and fertilisers in Malawi, and about who encourages farmers, is extremely complex. It is not simply that DFID should have done more to provide seed packs, fertilisers and so on; we must look at the role of the state and of the organisations supporting individuals.

The witnesses' third point concerned the question why this issue is so difficult in Africa when parts of Asia have seen the best of the green revolution, and China and other countries are becoming much more self-sufficient in foodstuffs. Dr. Dorward of Wye college said that issues other than governance are involved; for example, climate, access to irrigation, population density, health problems and access to markets and to the sea. There are many interlocking issues.

It is crucial to continue to press the Government on these matters. There are no easy answers, and the UN agencies, the UK Government and the NGOs are doing their best to deal with a serious humanitarian crisis, which, in Zimbabwe and in the wider region, has not been helped by the Government of Zimbabwe. We still have to get to grips with the nature and scale of the crucial underlying problems. For example, how do we enable more farmers in Africa to grow and buy food for themselves so that they can be self-sufficient and not dependent on food aid? What can we do to tackle not just the immediate impact of HIV/AIDS but its longer-term consequences, when the families of people who are suffering from the disease are unable to look after them?

We must be sensitive about addressing some of the complex issues relating to agriculture in Africa. No one would suggest that there are simple answers, and that if we tick the right boxes or follow the right theorem all will be well; these issues will take a long time to resolve. However, I hope that the House will continue to take the closest possible interest in these matters, notwithstanding what is happening elsewhere in the world, because from a humanitarian point of view, if we are not advocates for the needs of people and their children in Africa, who will be?

4.34 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): It is a privilege to follow so many of my colleagues who have spoken with such authority. I do not intend to repeat what they said, but I agree with the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) about the need to deal with the GM foods debate, with my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Tony Worthington) about the need to develop good governance, and with the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) that the New Partnership for Africa's Development is the way in which that could be achieved. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) that agricultural mismanagement is the source of many of Africa's problems. Other areas were, of course, mentioned by hon. Members, but I wish to associate myself with those issues in particular.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), the Chairman of the International Development Committee, on which I am proud to serve, has passed on to us the view of President Kabbah about land reform being an issue that is left over from the colonial era. I am proud of the work that I did in Kenya

from 1964 to 1966, and it is amazing that the issue of land reform has been left to fester for so long since then. That does not excuse what is currently being done in Zimbabwe, but the world should have addressed the issue long ago.

I was unable to take part in the International Development Committee's visit to Malawi because of constituency duties, but in August, on my way to the world summit for sustainable development, to which I was a delegate from the Committee and the House, I was able to visit Zambia. My hosts were Dr. Guy Scott and his wife. I pay tribute to them for enabling me to meet a number of NGOs and representatives of the World Food Programme. I also pay tribute to the work done by the British high commissioner and the representatives of the Department for International Development to ensure that I understood fully the range of problems affecting that country. I had long discussions with the Minister of Agriculture there, who was concerned that we should not give up on Zambia. I assured him that we would not do so.

I made a second visit to Zambia in October with World Vision—the visit is noted in the Register of Members' Interests—to examine the issue of HIV/AIDS. I spent a memorable three days with the deputy Health Minister at the Chirundu stop—the lorry stop between Zambia and Zimbabwe. It is a hell-hole of about 1,000 vehicles waiting to cross the border. The stop is served by increasingly younger sex workers who are seeking cash to provide a living for their families.

I pay tribute to the work that World Vision is doing there and elsewhere in Africa to deal with the way in which truck drivers contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS across southern Africa. The trucks and their drivers are needed, but it is crucial that the health aspects and the impact that they can have on the food crisis in southern Africa are addressed.

4.38 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.53 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Colman: Travelling to Zambia on the excellent Kenya Airways, I flew in and out of Malawi and over the vast sheet of water that, as other hon. Members have said, covers some 20 per cent. of Malawi and could provide fresh water for irrigation. Flying in and out of Zimbabwe on the way to Zambia, I saw the dammed areas that are full of water and the potential that exists for irrigation. Issues of agricultural mismanagement come to mind in both those countries, but I have four points to make. They come from the Zambian visit, as I was unable to visit Malawi.

First, I believe that southern Africa, and Africa in general, could become the bread basket of the world and feed itself in the coming years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East said, it is a puzzle, but there are ways forward. We need to return to the situation that I left in the 1960s, when I worked for the United Africa Company. There was a massive investment in agricultural extension workers and many of the subsistence farmers, and there was increased working with the various agricultural and veterinary colleges. Farming was seen as a premier industry that should be backed and have first call on the budgets of many of the countries of southern Africa. That starting point from the 1960s needs to be carried through to the 2000s. Some may say that those were colonial days, but Africanisation and empowerment ensured in Kenya that there was a transfer from ownership by European farmers to, in that case, Kikuyu farmers. An impressive productivity gain of about a hundredfold was recorded, and it is important to see how change can come. It is not impossible for Africa to become the bread basket of the world.

To kick-start that process, there needs to be strong support for commercial farming and farming for a surplus. The key role of DFID is in sustainable livelihoods and dealing with the poorest people in the poorest countries, and I do not want to change that, but benefiting commercial farmers will also benefit the poorest. Other hon. Members have talked about the need to build roads, and when the International Development Committee visited Ghana, we saw the tremendous advantages that were emerging for surplus farmers—those supplying local markets—through the 58 bridges that DFID had financed. I notice that, in opening the debate, the Minister focused on the need for functioning local markets, which is a starting point in developing food security. Local farmers must feel that it is worth planting a bit more because they can sell it along the road in the nearest market or large town, rather than feeling that they need produce only for their immediate family.

Another aspect of commercial farming is the external focus, and I was pleased that when I asked whether the UK supermarket chains should continue to purchase food from southern African countries that are in food crisis, all the NGOs that gave evidence to us said yes. I added the caveat in my question that it should be done within the ethical trading initiative, to ensure that benefit is felt by all parts of the supply chain from the village to our local supermarket shelf. Countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe should feel the benefits of having the skills of agricultural input and training that are needed to supply Tesco or Sainsbury's—to choose two UK supermarkets at random.

I checked carefully to see that none of the green beans coming from Zimbabwe came from farms that had been seized illegally by the Mugabe regime. None did, and although the supply came from one such farm for one week, the contract was terminated. It is important that people know that a close watch is kept down the supply chain and the fact that the NGOs on the spot are pleased with how the ethical trading initiative, backed by the major supermarkets in this country, is working in the supply of vegetables and horticulture to the UK, the rest of Europe and the world. It is providing the tremendous fillip that is needed to put agriculture on a sound basis.

I pay tribute to the work that has been done by the Southern African Development Community and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the trade organisation that works for Africa from Egypt down to, but not including, South Africa. COMESA has done a great deal to ensure that vegetables, flowers and many other products get to Europe and north America, and it has been negotiating with the

[Mr. Colman]

Agriculture Secretary in Washington DC over the past two months to get access to north America for agricultural produce from southern Africa.

Thirdly, it is important that if there is a food crisis, the relief food that is purchased by, say, the WFP is bought locally in-country or in-region, if at all possible, and the Minister mentioned that. Certainly, James Morris, whom we interviewed, and Judith Lewis of the WFP—I pay tribute to both of them—would prefer to buy locally, but they do not have the cash, because not enough of their means is in money. The residuum is in food, and largely comes from north America.

5.1 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.9 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Colman: As I was saying, the key thing is that, if there is a food crisis, relief food should be bought locally. It was interesting to listen to members of the delegation from the Inter-Parliamentary Union branch here, which visited Ethiopia recently. Before hitting the drought areas, they drove through places with good crops and significant harvests. It would be much more advantageous for Ethiopia if the WFP purchased from areas of Ethiopia that have crops. Apparently, there was an excellent yield in Ethiopia the year before last, but hardly anyone harvested it—James Morris himself confirmed that. The problem arose because Ethiopia received the same amount of food aid that it would have received during a food crisis. It is important to work out a way forward. I visited Burkina Faso two years ago with directors of the World Food Programme for Burkina Faso. I said that there was no food crisis there, and they agreed, but they had contracts to deliver food aid there.

One of the good outcomes of the price in Zambia of genetically modified food was the search for food locally, in Tanzania—the hon. Member for Salisbury referred to that—and from elsewhere in southern Africa to supply Zambia. I understand that that was how Zimbabwe survived until recent weeks, when it had to call on significant WFP supplies. We must ensure that when there is a food crisis, food comes from other parts of the affected countries or from near countries.

My last point is perhaps the most important: there is a need for accurate data. We have all seen the recent correspondence in *The Times*. The original article by Michael Dynes appeared on 22 January and there was a response by Judith Lewis. A letter was published on Monday from Guy Scott, Zambia's Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries between 1991 and 1993, and the host of my first visit there. I e-mailed him after reading his letter, and I have received, in the past 24 hours, a full report on food insecurity, HIV/AIDS and children, which he submitted with Charlotte Harland, his wife, to Family Health International on 21 January 2003. With his permission, I shall pass the report to the Secretary of State, the Minister, the WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organisation, because it is important that we learn the lessons of the situation in Zambia.

The e-mail says:

"We are complaining of hype, of exaggeration, of sensationalism by the UN agencies. Specifically we are complaining of the way a moderate food shortage"—

that refers to Zambia, and nowhere else—

"has been hyped into a famine of (one might easily be led to believe) biblical proportions ... While we have a profoundly serious HIV/Aids problem in this country, and while we have been in the forefront of demands for practical action against it, we object to the way the virus is being hyped by some UN people as the basic cause of the alleged 'famine'. There are many problems with Zambian agriculture but a shortage of available labour resulting from Aids is not one of them (not yet anyway)."

The e-mail continues to address the link between the famine and AIDS by saying:

"Yes, there is a new theory about Southern Africa which goes by the name of 'New Variant Famine'. It holds that Aids is putting so much pressure, directly and indirectly, on the rural labour supply that famines arise more easily and recovery from them is difficult. We do not know what the situation is elsewhere in the region, but we doubt that Aids is a factor in our intermittent food shortages. The rate of HIV infection in Zambia's truly rural areas is not sufficiently high for 'New Variant' to occur. Yes, there are orphans coming in from the urban areas and there are adults coming home from town to die ... and this places demands on rural households, in terms of cash and labour. But the idea that there is virtually no labour available—"

in Zambia, that is—

"for crop production is patently untrue. The surest evidence of this is the fact that the area planted to cotton, a very labour consuming crop, has been climbing by between 10 and 15 per cent. every year since 1992 and is continuing to climb."

Guy Scott goes on to criticise the World Bank, which apparently is not listening locally and has published an advertisement inviting tenders for the distribution of food security packs containing seed and fertiliser. The date of the advertisement was 4 January and the closing date for tender was 15 January. He says:

"Perhaps they are assuming that this season's weather will be imperfect, and that people will need early delivery of food security packs for planting next November! And don't forget, dear readers, that this money is a loan to Zambia. This crazy stuff increases our national debt."

His last point is that he believes that there is a tendency to overplay humanitarian crises and that is misguided:

"We appreciate that it is not always easy to excite the concern, and activate the pocketbooks, of Western governments or of old ladies in Cheltenham, but hype carries severe dangers. The greatest, obviously, is that people will come to recognise it as hype and will never believe you again, even about a true calamity. You should not cry wolf, as we say in Zambia."

He is a forthright man, and one needs to hear his words in those terms.

That is a voice from the south saying that we should make our enumeration and our checking better next time round. Guy Scott was one of those who sat under the tree with me for hour after hour when we met last August, worried about the millions he thought would die in Zambia. His view is important. The whole text is much longer, and I have passed it to the Minister.

On 4 February, I was reading the *Morning Star* and I saw:

"Zambia will offer thousands of hectares of free farmland in a bid to end persistent food shortages and encourage agricultural exports ... Only 2.7 million hectares of Zambia's 18.2 million hectares of arable land is utilised. With five rivers and a high water table, Zambia is a prime target for irrigation farming."

I do not say that anything that has been said by anybody else is wrong, but it is interesting that a voice from the south wants us to think again. The fact that he wanted me to make those points in the debate makes it important to listen to them.

Where do we go from here? I was honoured to attend the world food summit last June, and it is interesting that ours is the one embassy that reports to its country's international development Ministry. All the others report to agriculture. The Food and Agriculture Organisation's ambassador reports to DFID for pay and rations, but all the others do not—they go to agricultural ministries. Ours was the one country pushing the concept not just of food security, but of developing agriculture. We must remember that we have two White Papers on the go at the same time. They are different but interlinked, so if we go for food security, we should not forget about developing agriculture.

We have a global compact with the United Nations, which seems to deal with manufactured goods. Can we please have a global compact with the UN for food importers? It would be easy to run, and I can see the Secretary of State hosting it within the next month or so. We really could create a situation that allowed the matter to go right to the top of the agenda.

Finally, my father was a member of the National Union of Agricultural Workers. It is an honourable role for people in developing countries as well as developed ones to be agricultural workers in a commercial establishment, so long as they receive a good cash wage—my father did not, but we now have the minimum wage under a Labour Government. It is important to recognise that commercial farming can take families out of poverty in developing countries, rather than leaving them scratching a living on land that might be unusable for sustainable agriculture.

5.19 pm

Mr. Key: With the leave of the House, may I say that I have featured only twice in the *Morning Star* and I cannot claim to be a regular reader of it? On the first occasion, I was shown in a photograph at the head of an anti-racism march in Camden, in about 1978, when I was fighting the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) for his seat, which he held. On the second occasion, I had penetrated the old headquarters of the African National Congress in Lusaka at the invitation of its representatives. I went through the steel doors at the end of a somewhat intimidating concrete-walled lane, the gates were flung open and a photographer popped out from behind a pillar and said that he was from the *Morning Star*. However, I digress—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Edward O'Hara): Order. I was beginning to wonder when we would be getting to the point.

Mr. Key: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This has been an excellent debate, which has illustrated that Members of Parliament in Britain are engaged with the issues; it is important that people know that. The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Tony Worthington) made an impassioned plea for better government and talked about the contribution made to the problem by human inadequacy.

Only a few weeks ago, I thought of the somewhat absurd situation in my constituency. If we measured the amount of assistance for development that is available in our constituencies against what is available in southern Africa, we would blush. My constituency is fortunate because it has the second lowest unemployment rate in the country, 0.3 per cent. One person unemployed is too many, but approximately 400 people are unemployed in my constituency out of a total of 103,000. In spite of that, and our hugely diverse and prosperous economy, it turns out that, in my county alone, there are about 249 economic specialists and advisers in seven organisations, ranging from the county council to Business Link, which advises businesses on how to become even more prosperous.

By contrast, I understand that, in Angola, one official is seconded from, I think, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to negotiate 17 international treaties on behalf of that nation. That puts things into perspective, and I agree with what the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie said not only about that but about reproductive health issues. I would only add that I wonder how long it will be before the European Union aid programme is subverted by MEPs who oppose the inclusion of reproductive health care components in the EU budget.

Certain groups are very active on that issue; they are largely from the United States, which is opposed to those components of public spending. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, a delegation from our all-party group went to China. One of the members of the delegation was my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). He was deeply sceptical before he went, but when he got back, he said that there was absolutely no evidence of the United Nations Family Planning Association engaging in any coercive action in China with regard to abortion or anything else. We must acknowledge that there are some unhelpful forces at work out there.

I very much enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett). He was right to concentrate on issues such as the dumping of surpluses, market access and questions of trade. To inject a note of optimism, I point out that one thing that we could offer, but which we have not developed as fully as we might, is distance learning and use of the internet. I shall not mention my website, which the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) always teases me about. Not only are there educational benefits to be gained from the worldwide application of the internet; there are secondary benefits, because the internet promotes political stability and is a weapon against corrupt government. It improves transparency and is a weapon against despotism and tyranny because it enables people to know the truth. They do not have to huddle around a crystal set or a portable wireless; they can have the world at their fingertips if they are allowed access to the internet.

I was also very impressed by the speech of the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke), whose sense of history, mission and commitment shone through. That is very important. In the rough and tumble of this place we forget that there is massive commitment by communities in our constituencies the length and breadth of the country. It is often based on a Christian tradition but other faiths also have the tradition of duty to the rest of the world. I salute the hon. Gentleman.

[Mr. Key]

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) also talked about the importance of education. Two Fridays ago I was in Shrewton, a little village on the edge of Salisbury plain. I visited, as I regularly do, the Church of England primary school where on Friday mornings they have an enrichment class for the senior children. The enlightened teacher who looks after them, Hilary Storer, had been a global teacher and done an exchange with a primary school in South Africa.

The school is building on that; it hopes to receive exchange teachers, and the children are engaged with those in the South African school. We had a very sophisticated discussion for an hour and 20 minutes about issues such as water, poverty, food, and government and democracy, all of which they are covering in their key stages now. That is a huge hope for the future. When I say that our country is engaged on the issue, I mean that it is engaged in the long term as well.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney on his stamina in sustaining the quality of his argument through our many Divisions. He rounded things up very nicely by ending with a reference to a real person, with a real point of view from southern Africa, who wants us to listen. This debate has been not just about lecturing, but about listening. I hope that the Minister will respond in the positive spirit in which we have contributed to the debate.

5.29 pm

Ms Keeble: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to this informed and thoughtful debate. As I said in my opening remarks, I welcome the chance to set out the current position. I also said that I wanted to consider some strategic issues. I particularly welcome the fact that Members did not simply focus on the short term, but looked at the longer-term issues and made thoughtful, well argued points. I shall pick on three points that were highlighted and respond to them—before there is a vote in the House, I hope.

First, obviously the conditions for the poor people in southern Africa have been quite desperate over the past 12 months. A number of hon. Members talked movingly about that. The hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) described what he saw and the people he spoke to in Ethiopia. There have obviously been widespread food shortages, increased disease and a great deal of uncertainty for many people about their very survival.

I take the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) made about HIV/AIDS. Clearly, poor nutrition has contributed to the rise in mortality rates for AIDS and other diseases. There is a complex syndrome there. Many people have had to take desperate measures to survive. Indeed, as many hon. Members have highlighted, the position has been made worse for many because of the poor governance and the politically motivated distortion of food distribution.

Secondly, the international community, with the UK playing a leading part, has responded effectively to the complex crisis, and we have learned profound lessons in the process. The UN has established a regional team, bringing all the relevant agencies together to provide the leadership that we look for in such crises.

The UK has made an important funding contribution to that and has also supported the co-ordination machinery. The British public can take real pride in the work that has been done on their behalf, although we must be careful not to become complacent as there are still serious, long-term challenges that those involved in development must face. One of them is Zimbabwe, where the situation is very bad and likely to get worse. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has frequently outlined her genuine concerns about what is happening there. The numbers in need of assistance are increasing, and its problems are caused not by climate, but by politics and by appalling economic mismanagement.

Thirdly, Members highlighted the fact that the crisis has not occurred in isolation. There have been droughts in the past and there will, sadly, be droughts in the future, but there is something different about this crisis, because southern Africa should be able to cope with variations in rainfall. That has not happened this time, and there are signs that food insecurity is a growing problem. HIV/AIDS is an important factor, as it is a cause of much of the hardship and the reason that the suffering is so severe.

Falling income adds to the problems of the region. Many Members mentioned the lack of alternatives to subsistence agriculture and the real difficulties in agriculture. Another worrying factor, which was raised by the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) in particular, is that although food aid is necessary in the short term, it has long-term repercussions as it damages local markets and removes the incentives for local farmers.

The hon. Gentleman raised several other issues, among them water. The Department has played a substantial role in providing developing countries with a safe, clean water supply. He highlighted investment, and it is true that the sector-specific spending on water does not appear massive—£82 million to £91 million to £87 million now—but that does not include the budget support for water, which will be substantial. It is, however, difficult to disaggregate it from the support that we give to the budgets of such countries.

Much of our spending goes precisely into what the hon. Gentleman supports—education and water management, not infrastructure development, which is often done by other agencies. I have seen some work that our grant to WaterAid has enabled it to do in Bangladesh. An important part of that work was to establish an education programme to help people to manage their new water supply and to discuss water-related and health-related issues.

However, I take issue with the hon. Gentleman on one matter: deaths from water-borne diseases are not necessarily associated with water shortages. What happens to the water supply determines what happens to children's health. He also pointed out that many of the illnesses are preventable and that there is a real need to tackle that.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of genetically modified food, which was a complicating factor in Zambia. We have been through the issues quite a few times. The international community was absolutely right to say that the decision had to be for the national Government, but the repercussions have been

huge and it is extremely regrettable that some countries were not prepared to accept the milled food, as that would have dealt with the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney.

One of the issues that has not been discussed before is that there was a problem in the Zambian scientists' report, which did not distinguish properly between the wider concerns posed by GM technology and the immediate question whether it would damage people if it were introduced to meet the food shortages. It seems that there was never a proper analysis and discussion of the different kinds of risk, and that they talked about environmental rather than health risks. I understand that it has been possible to source some food from non-GM products, but that has been a major problem.

The hon. Member for Salisbury also talked about what happens to the prices of food as a result of food aid. As I mentioned previously, we would certainly agree that that is a problem. It appears that there is now more awareness and concern in the international community about that unintended consequence of food aid and about the need to resolve it.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the International Monetary Fund and the price of wheat—there is no truth in the suggestion that has been made, and he and his hon. Friends have heard a rebuttal from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on several occasions. It is extremely damaging that that rumour has got about, because it has misled people about the nature of the wider debate, what is happening in Malawi and the role of the IMF. He then talked about debt relief and Zambia—

Mr. Key: Privatisation.

Ms Keeble: I thought that the hon. Gentleman talked about debt. It is not true that the IMF is denying debt relief. The heavily indebted poor countries agreement for Zambia includes conditions on economic reform that the Zambian Government have yet to meet, but we hope that they will do so soon. As he knows, terms are attached to the conditions of aid or relief in relation to a number of measures, and the current situation relates to those.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Zimbabwe and asked what pressure is being put on Robert Mugabe. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have not had direct discussions about food aid, but when the executive director of the World Food Programme met Mugabe in Harare recently during a regional tour, he stressed the seriousness of the humanitarian crisis and the need for the Government to ensure that the food distribution is not biased. The WFP has put the case clearly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Tony Worthington) set out clearly some big issues concerning development and, in particular, problems facing Africa, including governance, the need for transparency in payments, the massive problems relating to the lack of domestic investment and the fact that so much African capital is invested outside the continent. He highlighted the twin problems of the financial and political economies, which need massive restructuring. Sometimes, I think that the financial economy will be restructured long before the political. It seems that there are fewer levers for dealing with the political systems.

When considering all the difficulties of Africa, it is possible to miss areas of hope—for example, South Africa's management of the macro-economy and the role that it has played in terms of political leadership in southern Africa. South Africa has also played its part in respect of Mozambique, which has made considerable progress since liberation, and in respect of the glimmerings of a settlement and hope in Angola after nearly 30 years of the most desperate civil war. We need to consider the positives in Africa, as well as recognising its serious problems.

The hon. Member for Salisbury rightly highlighted the problems of reproductive health and the importance of ensuring that we have a sound international policy framework to deal with that issue. He also mentioned the pressures that could be imposed if we restrict options due to views on sex education, abortion services or family planning. I share his views on that, because if the countries concerned are to be able to overcome the profound difficulties involved with people dying of HIV/AIDS and the associated problems of infant and maternal mortality, they must have a full range of services at their disposal. They cannot be subject to limits set by people on the other side of the world and in very different circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue in respect of European Union spending. The EU picked up the tabs left by the United States when it cut off funding to the United Nations Family Planning Association. The amounts were substantial and the EU, where movement can be glacial, acted quickly. The views of the development Commissioner and the development directorate-general are extremely clear—they were most supportive to the UNFPA in taking forward its programme and they, too, believe that it is important for people to have a range of options.

Mr. Key: I am not casting aspersions on the Commission, as the Parliament is the problem. If it starts flexing its muscles in this area, there could be difficulties.

Ms Keeble: I also recognise the problems that the hon. Gentleman describes, because although many MEPs have a big commitment to development issues and share our views, some do not agree with us and they met delegates from the United States recently to talk about the issue.

I have a feeling that the hon. Gentleman has more access to those MEPs than I do, so perhaps he could use his influence to persuade them on the subject. I am grateful to him for raising the matter, as it is important that people understand that lobbying and discussion go on in private. All that should be out in the open so that people can take part in the debate. I am sure that the vast majority of people in this country and in Europe agree with us on the matter.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) spoke a great deal about political will in relation to funding, and he is right. That is why the Government have increased the amount of money going into the developing world and why the Chancellor has made proposals for the international financing facility to provide upfront the volume of money needed to implement the millennium development goals.

[Ms Keeble]

However, many key issues that Members mentioned involve not just money, but will—in this country, the international community and the developing countries. Conflict has cost Africa 2 per cent. in growth, and issues such as trade, agricultural reform and HIV/AIDS, which is linked to behaviour change, are tackled by having the will to provide the right policies and a regulatory framework to make it possible to overcome the legacy of Africa's problems. That is why cross-party engagement and the engagement of this country and the international community are so important.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned, at considerable length, the problems of Zimbabwe and the shock of that country being unable to feed itself. I have lived in southern Africa, and I find that almost impossible to believe. He pointed to the lack of a distribution system for drugs and other things, which is why the Department for International Development takes such a strong systems-based approach. There is no point in providing Africa with goods, be they medicine, food and so on, if there is no distribution system.

The hon. Gentleman and other Members mentioned the importance of market access. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) made a thoughtful and informed contribution, as he spent a great deal of time reading the evidence presented to the Select Committee to prepare for the debate. He welcomed the establishment of the all-party Africa group, as do I. It will provide a forum for discussing and advancing many issues that we have discussed.

My hon. Friend also highlighted the need to find long-term solutions, especially in Malawi and Zambia, to the problems faced by the agriculture sector. He spoke at length about the damage in Zimbabwe. One thing struck me as he was speaking about what is happening there: the sobering realisation of the impact of bad governance on a country.

For example, Uganda, the pearl of Africa, is only just starting to return to how it was before Idi Amin's regime. It missed out on an era of development, as did Angola, because of conflict. I have no doubt that the recovery from what is happening in Zimbabwe will also take a long time and cost the people of Zimbabwe dear. My hon. Friend's contribution emphasised the damage that one person or one regime can do to an economy and an entire people.

The hon. Member for Banbury obviously spoke from his enormous experience and knowledge, especially about things he saw in Ethiopia. He picked out particular themes. One was the problem caused by the change of family structures brought about by HIV/AIDS and the stripping out of the middle age band. Another was the problem of governance. He rightly said that we should be advocates for Africa and that the international community has a role to play.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney also spoke with a great deal of knowledge, especially about his visit to see World Vision work at the truck stop between Zambia and Zimbabwe. The work being done there is an example of what is possible when care is put into finding out how HIV/AIDS is spread and what interventions are needed to prevent that. It shows how it is possible to get behaviour change from people, even when one might not expect it.

My hon. Friend spoke about the role of southern Africa as the bread basket of the world, which was emphasised by many Members, and stressed the importance of social responsibility in investment and development, the development of local markets and local sourcing of relief food supplies, which was also mentioned by several Members when we discussed the disastrous impact that food aid can have. Although it meets a short-term need, it destroys long-term gains.

My hon. Friend also stressed the need for accurate data. If he provides the document he mentioned, we will give it careful thought and give him a considered response. He is right about the need for accuracy. Clearly, there is a problem if famines are hyped, but the complexity of the difficulties that southern Africa faces means that, without a lot of international effort in examining other issues as well as providing food, the situation could have been even worse. I will ensure that he gets a considered response to his point.

Mr. Colman: Will the Minister also respond to my point about the supermarket chains continuing to buy from countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe and helping those economies to develop their farming base, which is good for them in the long term?

Ms Keeble: Yes, indeed. One of the interesting pieces of work undertaken by my Department is an examination of supermarket sourcing of food in Ethiopia as part of providing sustainable agriculture in that country. The Government will continue to work with the countries in the region, the UN, other donors and the agencies operating on the ground in the short term to ensure that food and other supplies continue to be delivered to those in need.

We very much welcome the efforts that have been made to prevent large-scale death in the region. Although we expect that operations can be scaled down in April in most places, Zimbabwe will continue to need massive amounts of aid. We need to consider the longer term, in which we will work with others to reverse the downward trend in food security in the region. That means improving agricultural techniques, as several Members said, as well as tackling HIV/AIDS, reforming Government policies and reviewing our systems for providing food aid.

Those issues are important in themselves, but they are also absolutely key to the international community's aims of achieving the millennium development goals by 2015 and reducing poverty, as most issues that we have talked about are poverty related. We must deal with them if we are to end the poverty from which so many people in Africa suffer, as they are some of the really big problems for the development community. Solving them is vital for the region and the rest of Africa.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes to Six o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 February 2003

[SIR NICHOLAS WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

Congestion Charging

[Relevant document: First Report from the Transport Committee on Urban Charging Schemes, HC 390–I]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Derek Twigg.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Nicholas Winterton): I call Mr. Mark Field, who has arrived in the Chamber in the nick of time.

9.30 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): I have hot-footed it from the Upper Committee Corridor, you will be glad to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It may not surprise the Minister that, in securing this debate on congestion charging, I have elected as a central London Member to focus on the practical application rather than simply on the general principles. However, I am aware that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport is present, and no doubt she will wish to address the issues that go beyond central London.

There is no doubt that the clock is ticking. There are now six days to go until Ken's car tax turns London's already congested roads into utter chaos. Opposition Members have warned and warned again that this ideologically motivated assault on the freedom that comes with the ownership of a private car is being rushed through with woefully inadequate technology. I hold responsible not only Ken Livingstone and his absurd crew of sidekicks at Transport for London, but the Labour Government.

It is not good enough for the Prime Minister simply to wash his hands of the matter, as he did at Prime Minister's Question Time only last week. The new tax is a gross betrayal of the people of London by those who now think that they are capable of hosting the Olympic games. As the Member of Parliament most directly affected, I have had a huge mailbag in the past 18 months since the programme came on stream.

As the Prime Minister pointed out at Prime Minister's Question Time last week, congestion charging may well be part of devolved power, but, unlike this Government, whose Ministers will continue to use their chauffeur-driven cars and be exempt from the tax, I do not consider that our approach should be, "I'm all right, Jack." Residents in my constituency are appalled at the misleading claims of a 90 per cent. discount for those who live in the zone; angered by the discourteous and unprofessional service of Transport for London; and bemused by the amateurishness of the registration process. I understand that only last week Transport for London had to add 300 staff to the 500 in its call centre. They have been drafted in very much at the last minute.

The devolved government argument adopted by the Government seems to be flawed on two main grounds. First and foremost is the Treasury's refusal properly to fund London. I have said in a number of debates in the House on the underground and a range of devolved issues that I have some sympathy with Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, on that limited point. He is desperate to have ring-fenced funds. That is one reason why he is pushing ahead with the congestion charge.

When Ken Livingstone was elected almost three years ago, his manifesto made it clear that congestion charging would be brought in only after there had been measurable improvements in public transport. Now, even by the Mayor's admission—all 7 million people living in London would vouch for this—the London underground will require at least a decade of sustained investment before standards reach even a satisfactory level. That was clear before the Central line shut down. It has become apparent this morning that the Central line will not open until well after the 17 February start date for the congestion charge.

The argument is made about buses. Anyone who has used buses over the past couple of years will admit that there have been improvements. There is no doubt about that, and those improvements are to the Mayor's credit. However, the notion that a small increase in the number of buses will relieve our roads of the enormous congestion is clearly nonsense. That is only a small part of the answer.

Deliberate sabotage by Transport for London seems to have led to an 18 per cent. reduction in the number of private motor cars on London's roads over the past two years, yet congestion has got worse. Indeed, the raison d'être for the congestion charge is a further 15 to 20 per cent. reduction. Where will all the commuters, tourists and residents go? If the Minister had recently used the tube, he would realise that there is no capacity, not only in rush hour but through much of the day. I first suggested as long ago as autumn 2001 that the narrowing of bus lanes and altered sequencing of traffic lights was a deliberate attempt to justify the need for the car tax that is now upon us. That was vehemently denied at the time by the Mayor and Transport for London. They now admit that I was right all along. I still reckon that those measures will be reversed after 17 February and used to spin the notion that the new tax is a success.

The experiment is a test case for the principle of road charging in this country, yet, amazingly, no system is in place to measure its effectiveness in cutting congestion. The Mayor of London and Transport for London assure us that they have their own criteria on which to judge its success. Clearly that is important, because if we are to consider congestion charging beyond central London, we must know whether this big experiment is a success. Unbelievably for such a keen advocate of open government as Mr. Livingstone has been throughout his career, the guidelines for the success of the congestion charge are being kept secret.

I recognise the excellent work of my local authority, Westminster city council, and in particular the leader and deputy leader, Simon Milton and Kit Malthouse, who have highlighted five main tests for approval of the congestion charge. I am not sure where I have heard the idea of five tests before, but they will be readily

[Mr. Mark Field]

quantifiable. We will not have to wait till June. I suspect that it will be only a matter of weeks before we can determine whether the tests are satisfied.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): The hon. Gentleman has made it clear that he is opposed to the principle of the congestion tax. What is his alternative to tackling London's congestion problems?

Mr. Field: I am opposed to this congestion charge being rushed in now. Having been in business, I approve of market solutions, so I do not rule out a congestion charge as the right solution. However, this charge, which is being rushed through before there has been any improvement in the public transport system—indeed the tube will get worse over the next 10 years—is the wrong way forward. As the hon. Gentleman says, congestion is a problem. Although the changes that Transport for London has implemented over the past two years have resulted in a reduction in the number of cars on the road, congestion has become ever worse. There are no easy solutions, but this charge is not the right way forward, not least because of the way in which it penalises some of the worst off.

There is no doubt that I have a considerable number of relatively wealthy constituents who will grin and bear it and pay their £5 a day, but the people for whom I have most regard are the relatively poor. Only yesterday I was at Knightsbridge barracks, where I met a young mother who was quite desperate. She has two young children; one is at school in the zone and one is at school outside it. There is no way that she cannot use a private car. A charge of £25 a week will blow an enormous hole in her disposable budget. No one seems to be taking any notice of concerns of that kind. Although we must ensure that there is less congestion on our roads, the charge is simply an ideological attack: it is being rushed through at the wrong time and in the wrong way.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I want to encourage the hon. Gentleman to speculate. If now is not the right time to introduce the charge, when does he think would be?

Mr. Field: I am with Professor Galbraith on that. Speculation is always a bad idea: one never knows what will happen. I am looking at the here and now. We must consider the problem that will beset Londoners in six days. That is what concerns me above all. There is no doubt that the tax is precisely the wrong way forward.

I was addressing some of the issues raised by Westminster city council's five tests. The council considers that cutting congestion is one of the most important tests. By that I mean—I am sure that it means this, too—congestion not just in the central zone but in the area around, much of which is also in my constituency. If the result of the tax is simply to displace traffic, it will have failed. The Mayor reckons that the deterioration in the life of those living around the boundary of the central zone will be a price worth paying, but they will suffer the double whammy of no discount and increased traffic. Again, the tax will have failed if there is increased rat-running and destruction of quiet in residential streets around the main central zone.

The third test is cost of living. A number of small businesses inside the zone will not only lose passing trade if the charge is successful in reducing day-to-day traffic by 20 per cent.; they will, indirectly, have to fund the cost of deliveries. According to a number of head teachers to whom I have spoken during the past six to nine months, teachers may have to use their motor cars to get into central London. There is therefore great worry about recruitment and retention of teachers in central London at an already difficult time.

The fourth test concerns the overcrowded tube, to which I have already referred. Will the tube be able to cope? Next week, when the Central line will still be down, we shall see ongoing problems. Even with a fully working Central line there is a question mark over whether the current underground and train system can cope with the increased traffic for which it is supposed to cater when people leave their motor cars and take public transport. If the tube and railways become a lot worse, there is little doubt that the tax will have failed.

Finally, I hope to see tangible evidence that the car tax will generate sufficient income to pay for the new transport schemes promised. Many of us appreciate that part of the raison d'être for the tax—this is one of the points on which I symapthise with the Mayor—is to use the £130 million or so raised annually to secure Crossrail and other transport projects. That is admirable in many ways, but we must keep an eye on precisely what is happening. Our great worry is that not only will the £130 million be a fantasy—net income may end up being considerably less—but that much of the sum raised will be squirreled away for other projects and the large infrastructure projects that we all want will not occur.

We shall no doubt hear more about the Olympic bid in the next 48 hours, but it is interesting that there has already been an attempt by the International Olympic Committee to decouple its bid from Crossrail. The great worry is that Crossrail will somehow fall through the middle because, on one hand, there will be insufficient funds from the Mayor and the congestion tax, and on the other, Crossrail will not be part and parcel of an Olympic bid.

I am also concerned about the prospect of civil disobedience in central London. I want to make it absolutely clear that, as a Member of Parliament, I do not support civil disobedience and people who break the law. However, one must contrast the actions of Mayor Livingstone today, who is a hardline, no-nonsense tax collector, with those 12 or 13 years ago when the community charge or poll tax came in and he was fined £600 for non-payment. How will he have the authority to uphold a law with which so many of his constituents disagree so vehemently? My own view is that an untried, untested and unready technology is likely to bring the scheme down. I suspect that many people will not be forced to pay, and there is a risk that the experiment will collapse in ridicule, which will make a great difference to any future schemes in other parts of the Untied Kingdom.

I appreciate that other hon. Members want to speak, so in conclusion I look to the Minister to answer a few questions today. I want to hear what he has to say to elderly folk who live within the zone in my constituency, many of whom will be unable to have so many visits from relatives and carers because the use of a private motor car will simply not be affordable and, for reasons

of infirmity, they might not be able easily to use public transport. What will he say to small business people in my constituency whose heads are barely above water owing to the difficulties in London and the south-east during the past year or two? What will he say to representatives of some of London's key bigger tourist industries—those industries are already depressed as a result of BSE during 2000 and 2001 and 11 September 2001—many of whom feel that the tax will have a devastating effect?

The Minister, on behalf of the Government, cannot simply say that congestion charging is a matter for local government to decide and that it is devolved government. In central London, we are not talking about a small parish council; we are dealing with the most important commercial centre in our entire nation. We all know that if London catches a cold, it applies to the whole country within a matter of months and certainly years. I end this speech with great sadness because a nightmare is about to befall the city that I represent and love. The Government must take a share of the blame.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker I remind the Chamber that the Select Committee on Transport's first report of this Session on urban charging schemes, which was published on Sunday 9 February, is relevant to the debate. With the permission of the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), it has been tagged on to this Adjournment debate, as is clear from the Order Paper. A number of Members want to speak; with self-discipline, I am sure that all of them will be able to do so.

9.46 am

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the Select Committee's report on congestion charging and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster for raising the subject. As he made clear, the matter is of considerable importance to us all. In a capital city, the movement of goods and people is fundamental to the way in which the economy operates. Any attempt to deal with the enormous problems of traffic movement must be of concern not only to the Government, but to the people who are involved.

The other Committee members and I decided that we would not debate in principle the right to apply congestion charging to an urban situation, because the principle had already been conceded by Parliament in the Transport Act 2000, in which it was agreed that, since we were obviously going to have to plan the movement of traffic, congestion charging was one way forward. However, we thought that we should consider in detail the scheme that was being proposed, because we were aware that certain difficulties had arisen. The report highlights not just the advantages, but some of the disadvantages. That is important.

The advantages to a congestion charging scheme are obvious. If traffic continues to grow at the present rate, we will not have to debate whether congestion charging is the alternative because, frankly, the entire city will simply grind to a halt. That already happens on occasions—one can see what happens to the movement of traffic above ground if there is a problem on the London underground. If the city ground to a halt, it would have a direct effect not only on businesses, but on the quality of Londoners' lives.

We know that we will have to face up to the problem of more and more people trying to work and live in a congested space, but there were things about the London scheme that worried the Committee. The fundamental worry was whether the Mayor had properly organised the scheme. Were the lines in the right place? Was the equipment efficient? Would it work? Would it be capable of doing the task for which it was employed? Above all, would we be able to explain to the public why such schemes are essential?

There were other things that worried us. For example, we were not at all clear whether the indicators currently used to measure congestion, which may be all right for national policy modelling, were any good at all in demonstrating the problem of congestion in urban areas. Anybody who listens to drive-time radio can say where the congestion points are, yet there do not seem to be a set of indicators that we can all use as a basis for transport planning.

Committee members were very clear that the scheme could contribute enormous amounts of money to improving transport systems, and the Mayor should have access to that revenue stream. However, we were also convinced more than 10 years would be needed. We could not understand why the Government are not taking the lead by saying that if the trial scheme works, those responsible for the 20 others that we have calculated will be necessary during the 10-year transport plan can learn from what happens and improve the operation of their schemes.

The Mayor's suggestion that one can run the scheme for two months and then decide whether it is a failure seemed to us not only unrealistic, but rather petulant. That is not the way to proceed. The assessment will take much longer than that. We were pleased that the Mayor said that he would allow an independent scrutiny body to review the scheme—that is absolutely essential. We must judge whether the scheme does what it is supposed to do and whether it offers lessons for the future.

Many of the likely difficulties will, no doubt, arise at the commencement of the scheme. Contractors are responsible not only for putting the number plate recognition system into operation, but for the way in which people will pay the charges and access information. If those arrangements work efficiently, it will very soon become clear whether the scheme is producing a result.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): My hon. Friend mentions contractors. Is she aware of how everyone in Lambeth feels about contractors? Capita absolutely ruined the housing benefit system in Lambeth and its contract was eventually terminated. Many people in my borough cannot understand why that failed operator, which seems to fail at everything it does, has been given the job of congestion charging.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I would not disagree with that point of view. Frankly, if the company fails in this scheme, I do not how much longer it will be able to continue in

[Mrs. Dunwoody]

business. There is a limit to the tolerance that even the British are prepared to extend to people who are not capable of doing the jobs for which they are paid vast amounts of money.

The contractor that operates the automatic number plate recognition system must be able to build up a robust database that matches the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency database so that information is accurate. Nothing would destroy the scheme more quickly than large numbers of people being charged for journeys that they have not taken, or people successfully avoiding the system and messing it up in different ways. An accurate database is an essential precondition for efficient working.

The Government should give a very clear lead on their attitude towards congestion charging, but they are standing back. It appears that they are prepared to let whatever happens remain the responsibility of London's elected representatives. I have spent some 30 years having good fights with the Mayor, and I remind every taxi driver to whom I speak to that I did not vote for him—he is aware of the fact that I did not vote for him. However, in fairness, it is not only what happens to him that should be of importance, but whether the scheme works and whether the various alternative schemes that have been suggested would, in fact, work better.

It is vital that additional capital and revenue funding are made available to local authorities through local transport plan settlements. That is the only way in which they will be able to address the problems with the alternative services that must be put in place. Furthermore, electronic charging standards must be developed. What happens in London will determine what happens in many parts of the United Kingdom. If we get the standards right, the benefit will be felt by all.

I do not wish to take too much time in this debate, so I shall make just a few further points. Before the 1997 election, when it had a Conservative Chairman, the Select Committee considered congestion charging in other nations, many of which not only operate successful schemes, but do not experience the trauma and difficulties that we envisage. I shall not pretend that the population will enjoy being charged for the use of road space, but they will see positive benefits when the money is put into transport schemes. Many businesses benefit from such planning, because people are more able to visit those businesses when they are able to move more freely. They understand that that is possible only because of a form of controlled traffic movement.

However, the Committee made it plain that it was worried about the scheme. We highlighted the fact that there may be immediate problems for low-paid workers because of the way in which the lines had been drawn within the inner ring road. It is not a secret that many of the services provided to areas the north of the river come from people who live to the south, many of whom use cars because of the unsocial hours that they work or the difficulties that they have getting to and from their employment. Their cars may be very old or inadequate, but they need to use some form of transport.

We were concerned that it would be disastrous if the scheme acted as a deterrent to public service workers or teachers working in inner-city schools. The cost to the community as a whole would be extremely high. We look to the Mayor to produce an immediate and flexible response to those difficulties as soon as they become plain, and to respond in the best way possible either by having differential schemes of charging, or by considering some other way of compensating those who are desperately needed to run our cities. We took evidence from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who not only highlighted those problems, but made it plain that she thought that they would exist from day one.

I return to the matter that worried the Committee most, which was that the Government, having put the machinery in place, seemed to be standing back and saying to London, "Get on with it." I think that leadership in transport matters is tremendously important. It amuses me to see how transport schemes become ideological or non-ideological depending on what people happen to believe at the time. If they agree with a scheme, it is non-ideological; if they disagree with it, it is a barmy idea that no one should have had in the first place.

The London scheme may be a very brave attempt to face up to a real problem. We are not able to move around in our capital city in a way that makes our lives more pleasant and productive. The Committee has produced a report that should be taken seriously, not only by the Mayor but—I say this with the greatest respect—by Her Majesty's Government. That is not always the case with Transport Committee reports. Nevertheless, I commend the report because I think that Londoners deserve high-quality, day-to-day management of their lives. They suffer the disadvantages of being in a crowded, urban environment, and they should have the right to ask of those who plan their transport systems that their real needs be taken into account.

9.58 am

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): I should like to confine my remarks to what I perceive to be the purpose of the scheme. I submit that it has nothing whatever to do with traffic congestion. There can be no doubt that traffic in London is congested, but let us consider it in the grand scheme of things. If one were to go to Cairo or Tehran—or, a bit nearer home, to Rome or Paris—one would see real traffic congestion.

The scheme is simply a tax on drivers and driving. People do not drive in London just to annoy Ken Livingstone; they do it because it is necessary, and because they have no choice. They work unsocial hours, do shift work, or have to carry equipment with them. There are all sorts of reasons why people have to undertake all the component parts of their lives in the time available to them. The use of a car is necessary for them.

People also use cars because they want to. Some prefer to use a private car rather than public transport, and I defend their freedom to do so. The attractions of private transport are obvious. For a start, people can travel from door to door—from their own home to their destination. Private transport is clean, or as clean as an individual cares to make it, and safe. The safety of the vehicle is the responsibility of the owner. Driving in privacy means that one is safe from possible dangers from other passengers on public transport. I have met such dangers several times.

People driving are safe from the weather, can carry goods and can travel at unsocial hours, as do so many these days. Many such people are on modest incomes, such as postmen, who have to get up at an unearthly hour of the morning—I understand that 4.30 am is not unusual. Other people whose jobs require them to get up very early in the morning include cleaners, hospital workers, firefighters and police. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), the Chairman of the Transport Committee, spoke about the possibility of differential payments, and I defer to her great depth of knowledge on transport matters. There could be so many exemptions that a system that takes them into consideration would have to be administratively very complex, and I wonder how on earth it could work.

The first great purchase of any young person once they have an income is their car. It gives great freedom. I defend the freedom to be able to travel.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Lady not agree that the poorest people—I presume that she wants to represent them as well—do not tend to own cars, so are most likely to benefit from the scheme that Ken is introducing?

Angela Watkinson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman raised that point, because I was just coming to it. I disagree totally that poor people do not own cars. Poor people often rely on their cars to a great extent. They are often old cars because those people do not have the capital investment to buy reliable ones. A comment made by Ken Livingstone some time ago is very telling. He said: "I hate cars". I understand that he has never owned or driven one. That demonstrates his deep lack of understanding of car ownership and use, and of how many people that involves.

How many of us cannot name non-drivers—those crusading, oh-so morally superior greens—who see no contradiction or offence to their principles in accepting lifts from people who own and run cars? They wear that like a badge of honour. I suggest that, if we all ceased to offer them lifts, there would be a few more cars on the road by next week.

I should like to examine the effects of the scheme, which are twofold. The first is cost. A charge of £5 per day can perhaps be shrugged off by someone on a comfortable income, but £100 from the net monthly income of someone on a modest wage is very serious. We have already heard reference to the groups likely to be affected. Mothers taking young children to school or to carers in the mornings will be caught in the net. I look forward to the day when I see the Mayor of London and his partner with their baby, pushchair, all the paraphernalia one needs for a child and 10 bags of shopping from Tesco, getting on to a bus.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Will my hon. Friend comment on another important group? I refer to essential workers who will be coming into or leaving the metropolis when the congestion charge is active. Many are on very low incomes, and many who might not be caught coming in at antisocial hours, when public transport is not available, will be caught going home. How will such people be able to fund the extra £1,000 a year, or whatever sum they will have to pay, when as public sector workers their pay rise is some 2.9 per cent?

Angela Watkinson: My hon. Friend is right. There is already a crisis in attracting essential workers into London because of the high cost of housing. The additional cost of travel will exacerbate that problem, making it even more difficult to get teachers, hospital staff and a range of workers on modest incomes to come into London. Such people will look elsewhere for employment. It is also possible that the day will come when people on low incomes, who have to use their cars to get to work, are unable to pay their £5. They will have to take a chance, because they have to get to work, and they will incur fines that they are even less able to pay than the original charge.

There is also the inconvenience. The Mayor of London has kindly set out a range of ways in which people may pay the charge, all of which are highly inconvenient. If someone is going to work in the morning, the last thing that they will want to do is to stop and pay, get on the internet, or try any of the wonderful ways that have been devised to allow people to pay. If it is inconvenient, it is anti-motorist. I deplore the entire scheme.

I wonder what will happen to people whose cars have been stolen. My constituents whose cars have been stolen often contact me, because months afterwards they are still receiving fines for illegal parking. I foresee the same thing happening in the case of congestion charging. Car theft is not unusual in London—many cars are stolen every day. How will the system cope with people whose cars have been stolen? Those people may incur enormous rafts of fines if their cars are driven backwards and forwards through the boundary of the congestion zone? I hope that the Minister will enlighten us on that point.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): May I add to my hon. Friend's most telling point? There is a further argument that very poor people who notice every penny will have more incentive to go in for motor crime and stealing vehicles. That is already a serious problem, especially among young people in the capital. This is an utterly pernicious proposition.

Angela Watkinson: I should like to explore the purported desired effect of the scheme to reduce congestion in London. It is intended that many of the people who currently use their cars will be deterred by the charge and seek other modes of transport. As a regular user of the tube, I shudder to think what the Circle line, for example, would be like if large numbers of people decided to abandon their cars and joined me. It is not unusual, even at peak times, to wait more than 10 minutes for a Circle line train and for the carriages to be filled to bursting point when it arrives. There is no spare capacity at the moment, and certainly not on the underground, to absorb large numbers of disgruntled drivers. The tube is also unreliable and uncomfortable. Even the public-private partnership would support only sufficient growth to maintain passenger numbers and not—as is needed—embrace very many more.

It has also been suggested that there will be environmental benefits in terms of air quality. I understand, however, that experts have claimed that,

[Angela Watkinson]

although there might be a minor improvement in the middle of the congestion zone, the area is too small for there to be any appreciable benefits. The outer edge of the zone would be adversely affected and prevailing winds would blow the fumes back into the centre, so the net effect would be nil. Even Ken Livingstone has conceded that:

"We expect there to be no significant improvement in air quality directly as a result of congestion charging".

There will also be a knock-on effect in areas just outside the congestion zone from overspill parking and people wishing to avoid the charge by going around the outside. I represent an outer London constituency that suffers greatly from commuter parking. People drive into Upminster, leave their cars there all day and get on the train to come into London. The congestion charge will exacerbate that because some of those who currently drive into central London will be put off and will break their journeys at stations such as Upminster, resulting in even more commuter parking.

It will be easy to show measurable improvements in congestion by stopping all the diversions and road closures for which at the moment there appears no reason, and by re-phasing traffic lights so that the green phase is longer than the red one. Miraculously, congestion will appear to have improved overnight. If the scheme is declared to be a success, how many other towns will latch on to it—not to reduce congestion but as a tax?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I do not want to interrupt the hon. Lady's flow, but will she inform us whether she is opposed in principle to congestion charging?

Angela Watkinson: I am happy to assure the Minister that I am. I defend the individual's freedom to drive in congested traffic if they wish to do so. I am one of those who does not drive in London. That is my choice because I do not enjoy driving in congested traffic, but I defend the right of anyone who wishes to do so.

I wonder about the accuracy of records that will be kept, and how any measurable improvement will be demonstrated. The entire scheme is an expensive confidence trick, for which the taxpayer, as ever, will have to pay. The charge is a tax masquerading as an environmental measure. It is a hoax, a controlling Big Brother scheme, and the sooner that it is concluded the better I shall like it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I exhort hon. Members to be as brief as possible so that all those who want to speak can do so. The winding-up speeches should begin at 10:30.

10.12 am

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): As a Member of Parliament whose area is affected by London congestion charging, I find it frustrating that this is one of the few opportunities for a debate on the matter. It has been impossible to secure a debate because Ministers have said that it is nothing to do with them.

I welcome this opportunity, brief though it is, and thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) for bringing the matter up. I do not want to debate whether congestion charging is good or not. Personally, I am against it. There are many other ways to stop congestion in London. There are fewer cars in London now than there were three years ago and there is more congestion. That is because traffic planning is based on the assumption that driving cars is wrong. If we are to base transport planning in London on the idea that people who get into cars are somehow bad and we want to drive them from their vehicles, we are going down a blind alley. The congestion charge will influence very few people in deciding whether to buy a car because a car gives one freedom and all sorts of other benefits, to which it is right for people to aspire.

I repeat my view that the consultation was a sham. People were not consulted—certainly not in my area—in the way that they should have been. There was a clear view that, whatever was said, the scheme would go ahead. Nobody listened to anything said in north Lambeth, which will be particularly affected by the boundary. I therefore very much welcome the report of the Transport Committee, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). For the first time, the voice of people in the areas where the boundary has been drawn—arbitrarily dividing communities in half—has been listened to.

People who pay quite expensive residents' parking charges have found that two thirds of the area where they are allowed to park is inside the zone but that they live outside it. So, having paid to park, they will also have to pay the congestion charge simply to move their car nearer to their home.

I am against the charge. There are huge anomalies in the scheme. It is necessary for some of them to be taken into account and for there to be more exemptions. I understand why the Mayor does not want exemptions. Everyone can put forward a good reason for needing his or her car, and that shows what a nonsense the scheme is.

My hon. Friend referred to public sector workers inside the zone, particularly those in schools. I, too, am worried about them. There are eight schools in my constituency within the zone: five primary, two secondary and one nursery school. Teachers in each school have said that they intend to leave. One school has decided that it will pay the congestion charge on behalf of its teachers. That means that money in its budget will be diverted from somethirfg else, and that is wrong.

Let us consider those teachers who have always driven to school and find that that is the best way for them to travel because of the hours they work and the equipment that they have to carry. They will be the people who suffer. For example, I know of a nursery nurse who has worked in Ethelred nursery school for 25 years. She is at the top of her pay scale, and earns some £5,000 less annually than the increase that the Lord Chancellor was about to give himself. She cannot afford to pay the congestion charge and she is already looking for work outside the area. Several teachers are taking such action. Parents are moving their children from schools, too.

Inner-city schools that find it most difficult to recruit and retain good teachers will be the hardest hit. One head teacher said:

"I feel that having access to a car is integral to my role as a headteacher".

Many other head teachers feel like that. Congestion charging will also affect teachers who will have to travel through the zone from north London. Some will have a much longer journey if they want to stay outside the zone. I have grave reservations about that.

People living on the boundary of the zone will be hit by huge amounts of extra traffic, with motorists feeling their way round and trying to avoid the payment area. That will hit the Kennington area particularly hard, which is why people there are so against the decision on where the boundary has been drawn. Among other people who will be affected are Metropolitan police officers working inside the zone. The Metropolitan police force has said that it will pay the charge on their behalf for a short period and review the matter later.

I remind everyone—particularly people who do not drive and say that congestion charging will not affect them—that everyone in London will pay extra because of the charge. That includes all small businesses and public services that decide to pick up the tab. We will all pay for the scheme.

Ken Livingstone, the Mayor, has been incredibly clever about introducing the charge. The psychology of it has been to make the past six months in London absolutely appalling by having four road schemes running at the same time. He has screwed up the whole of central London. Now the roads are coming back on stream, so people are beginning to see that it is not so bad coming into London. I drive in and out of central London and around my constituency sometimes two or three times a day. The traffic hold-ups are now not as bad because the road works are finished and traffic is flowing much better. The charge is starting in half-term week, so traffic flows will appear to work better.

There are no fewer cars coming into London now than there were, and there will be no fewer cars after the congestion charge starts. All that we shall see is the spending of a huge amount of money in the scheme's first two years to pay for Capita, the administrators, the computers, the cameras and other paraphernalia. The scheme represents no more than the ideological hatred of cars of someone who does not drive a car.

The majority of people who voted in the mayoral elections did not vote for congestion charging. Of those who voted for Ken Livingstone, some may have thought that they were voting for congestion charging, but most thought that they were voting for a measure that would be thoroughly discussed and would not be introduced until public transport was much better. The other candidates—and particularly the Labour candidate—made it quite clear that they did not want congestion charging to be introduced in the first mayoral term. It is not true to say that there is a public mandate for congestion charging; Londoners do not need or want the charge, and its effects will be quite bad. The Mayor might claim that the scheme is a great success, and that it will enable him to continue to bring in the money. However, it is ironic that if it is a great success, he will not get the money to put into public transport, because there will be less money coming in from the scheme.

I am very much against congestion charging, and I am disappointed that the Government have not been a little more sceptical about it. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich that the Government have stepped back from the scheme, and have tried to play it both ways, so that if it is really successful—by whoever's terms we judge success—they will be able to claim credit, and if it is a complete disaster, they can wash their hands of it and say that it is nothing to do with them. I welcome the Select Committee's brave attempt at considering the scheme, and recognising that there are views on both sides. It also recognised that the scheme will hit the poorest hardest. It is a poll tax; it affects everyone in the same way.

I am disappointed that, as a Member of Parliament whose constituency is affected by the scheme, I have had no say in it and no vote on it. There has been no referendum to see what people think about congestion charging. Unfortunately, because, as a penalty, people will not be sent to prison but have their cars taken away, I will probably have to comply with it.

10.21 am

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): We are indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), and to the hon. Ladies who have contributed to the debate. I noted the passion and conviction of my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson) and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). I also note the great experience, independence of mind, intellectual rigour, sense of conscience and personal conviction that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) brings to the debate. Those qualities are all too rare in debates in the House of Commons these days. Londoners deserve independent-minded, courageous Members of Parliament to champion their interests, because the Government have singularly let them down over congestion charges.

Congestion charges are the Government's baby. They cannot escape responsibility for what they have brought into the world. They instituted the legislation that made charges possible: the Greater London Authority Act 1999. If the congestion charge is allowed to work, the chances are that workplace parking charges will follow, because there was also provision for that in the legislation. The Government have studiously avoided giving a commitment that they will not impose workplace parking charging on employers. They have largely penalised employees—the work force of London—and, if the scheme is allowed to continue, there may be workplace parking charges in future, too.

We must remember that motorists in London already face exorbitant charges. They pay extra insurance premiums for the pleasure of driving in the capital. In many instances, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall pointed out, they must pay car parking charges in the areas where they live. Also, with all the stopping and starting involved in driving in London, they pay extra fuel tax, as their fuel consumption is higher. Now they face this regressive impost that will penalise hard-working people.

We are not penalising those who stay at home and live on benefits; we are penalising those who get up early in the morning or late at night or whenever to go to work.

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

I attended an interesting meeting in the Palace theatre in the centre of London not so long ago, and that regressive aspect of the tax really annoyed people. It will do so more and more when taxes become greater in the spring as higher national insurance charges are introduced. Also, the Chancellor will undoubtedly have to introduce other measures.

We were promised an integrated transport strategy for the capital, and what have we got? We have a red bus lane for ministerial cars and the occasional bus from Heathrow to the centre, and all the cameras and apparatus of congestion charging. My hon. Friend the Member for Upminster is right that we are talking about a matter of personal freedom. Conservatives believe in individual choice and in people making up their mind as to what is best for them in their circumstances. I am against congestion charging in principle.

The Government should have honoured their commitment to improve public transport in London first, but they have not. They promised a public-private partnership to modernise the tube in their 1997 manifesto, but it has not been implemented. All that we have is chaos, which has been exacerbated by the closure of the Central line. If the Mayor had any conscience, he would at least postpone the introduction of the charge until the Central line is operating again.

My constituents face serious difficulties because of the knock-on effect of the charge. Parking zones might be established in outer boroughs such as mine, which would be the consequence of the park-and-ride mentality that will increasingly come into being as motorists try to avoid the charges. There will be more parking and parking schemes in middle and outer boroughs, which will put yet another burden of taxation on Londoners and will degrade the quality of life in our capital. Furthermore, the rush hour in the morning will be brought forward because people will try to avoid the congestion charge by driving earlier, and it will be delayed in the evening. There will be bottlenecks around the entry points and rat-running will occur. We well know that that will cause immense inconvenience.

What the capital needs above all is something that has often been promised but never delivered: the Crossrail project. That project would do more to alleviate congestion in London than any other public transport measure. That is where the funding and resources should go and it is what the Government should support. They should not support further imposts on hard-working motorists in our capital.

The measure is thoroughly ill begotten and it was the Government who begat it. They cannot escape responsibility for their progeny. Just because the Mayor is a renegade socialist, the buck still ultimately stops with the Government. We know that the Mayor is a bird of passage and that he will not hold office in the capital by May 2004. Let us not blame him. The organ grinder is sitting on the Treasury Bench and we look forward to hearing the tune that he sings later.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I will call the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) but I hope that he will be brief because I want to give the spokesmen for the Government, official Opposition and Liberal Democrats adequate time to contribute to the debate.

10.27 am

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): I will be brief not only for the reasons that you gave, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but because I must leave shortly to attend a meeting. I apologise to the three Front Benchers for that.

I shall make two brief points. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider, even at this late stage, meeting Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, to advocate a three-month delay before fines are levied. There is concern about whether the public information campaign in London has worked and about the fact that Transport for London faces considerable problems registering people who live in the zone for a discount. I understand that there is a precedent for such a delay in congestion charge schemes throughout the world. There was a two-month delay in one city when the transport authority sent notes to offenders who had not paid pointing out that they should have paid the charges and outlining arrangements for future payments.

We need a time lag because of concern that there will be considerable confusion for a while as Londoners who drive into the city experience difficulties with the new congestion charge. I hope that the Minister will take up that point with the Mayor of London and that he will advocate a three-month delay before levying fines on those who do not pay the charge.

I urge Transport for London to consider the way in which it has diverted funds from outer London boroughs to pay the cost of implementing the congestion charge. I recognise why it took such action, but it has undoubtedly delayed boroughs such as Harrow in tackling real transport problems, albeit on a smaller scale. I refer, for example, to the need to close the junction of Rowlands avenue and Oxhey lane in Hatch End in the north of my constituency. The fact that many cars travel far too fast towards that junction, causing crashes and near crashes, greatly worries my constituents. Had Transport for London been able to give Harrow the funding that it needs, some parking difficulties in north Harrow in the middle of my constituency might have been resolved. Such problems have had a considerable effect on local businesses.

Transport for London could have indicated earlier that it may fund a feasibility study on the use of trams or guided busways along the 140 bus route to Heathrow, the key local airport. I urge the Minister in his discussions with the Mayor of London—and I urge the Mayor himself—not to advocate a possible extension of congestion charging to the area around Heathrow, as has been mooted in the past, at least until an independent evaluation of the impact of congestion charging in central London has taken place.

10.31 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) on securing the debate. Given that he does not support the introduction of the congestion charging scheme, but is in favour of market mechanisms, presumably he supports the idea of someone paying more for a resource that is in short supply, such as road space. I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman did not speculate on when he considers it appropriate for such a scheme to be introduced.

Perhaps he will tell me off the record after the debate, and I will promise not to tell his constituents or his party about his views.

The hon. Gentleman said that he did not support the idea of breaking the law. Perhaps he agrees with the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), who, according to today's article in *The Times*, advocates breaking the scheme's back by paying by cheque. If that campaign is a success, it will be incumbent on the hon. Gentleman to explain to London's taxpayers what has happened to the £100 million that was spent on the scheme and how he will raise the £130 million a year that it would have raised in revenue. He will also have to talk to those in business who are paying the congestion charge as well as the poorer section of the population.

I have listened in vain during the debate for references to people who use buses, but have heard none; hon. Members have concentrated on the car. We have had an ideological, pro-car, anti-devolution debate. No hon. Member has put forward solutions; no one has had anything to say about the people who would benefit from the scheme. It will be incumbent on the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster to explain to people what system he would propose.

Kate Hoey: Who will benefit?

Tom Brake: If the hon. Lady were to use buses occasionally, she would know that many people with pushchairs and shopping will benefit from the increased number of buses that the scheme will provide as well as reduced congestion. She laughs, but she needs to travel more frequently by that mode of transport. We have heard from the hon. Lady a blinkered view about the inalienable right to drive cars irrespective of the traffic conditions, irrespective of the harm and pollution that they cause and irrespective of the cost to business. That is not a sustainable position. People do not have an inalienable right to drive wherever and whenever they want at the expense of the local community or the environment.

I listened for solutions. None has been forthcoming from hon. Members, with the exception of the Chairman of the Transport Committee. I am disappointed that the debate has been so ideological.

If I can calm down for a second, I will set out the Liberal Democrats' position. We have been very open about our support for the principle of the Mayor's congestion charging scheme. That is not a secret; it has been said before. However, we have some reservations, and Liberal Democrat Members of the Greater London Assembly would like to raise with the Mayor points about boundaries and buffer zones, and how he would respond to any IT failures in the system.

The Government's position set out in the 10-year transport plan is clear:

"Tackling congestion on our roads is a primary objective of the 10 Year Plan . . . Surveys show that traffic congestion remains the most important local transport issue for most people."

The Government expect that the scheme will result in

"reduced congestion on London's roads."

So, although they are not saying publicly that they support what Ken Livingstone is doing, they expect congestion in London to be reduced.

The Government have suggested various solutions to the congestion problem; for example, dealing with the important problem of parking management. I agree with that approach. They also think that the management of street works and the way in which the utilities deal with the roads is important. I agree, which is why the Transport Committee is examining that matter. In their strategy, the Government refer to other steps that they would take, but hon. Members need to read between the lines to discover whether they support congestion charging. The Government support

"measures including . . . initiatives to encourage use and promote awareness of"

public transport and other alternatives. They also mention

"improvements to the existing road system".

However, the one thing that they do not mention is the c-word.

What does the Transport Committee have to say about congestion charging? The Committee highlighted the fact that the Government's expectation of the revenue that will be raised has halved from £2.7 billion to £1.3 billion, and that, inevitably, congestion is increasing at a greater rate than they had expected. The chair of the Commission for Integrated Transport—which the Government set up—believes that the 10-year transport plan will come unstuck as a result of the Government's failure to support or promote other urban congestion charging schemes.

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman mentions the chair of the Commission for Integrated Transport, Mr. David Begg. Does he realise that David Begg also thinks that pensioners in London should no longer get free bus passes?

Tom Brake: I am aware that Mr. Begg has advocated that position. I have spoken forcefully against any such proposal.

The Secretary of State has taken positive steps by hypothecating, which is welcome. However, I am concerned about the limited period, 10 years, for which hypothecation would apply. The Minister will be aware of the views of London First, which has voiced its concerns about that. It believes that investment in key transport projects may require revenue streams to be guaranteed for 20 or 30 years. Would the Minister support such a change?

What other assistance can the Government give in relation to congestion charges, both by making their position clear and by facilitating the implementation of such schemes by local authorities and others that want to introduce them? There is a clear need for the Government to provide additional funding to ensure that transport improvements are made in advance of any urban charging schemes. As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said, it is important that the Government provide a technological framework in which such schemes can be introduced so that they share a common technological basis.

What is most needed from the Government now is leadership. In the words of the Select Committee:

"The question is whether the Government has the political nerve to support bold experiments in reducing congestion."

[Tom Brake]

I hope that the Minister will provide an answer to that today.

10.39 am

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The debate has been excellent, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) on introducing it so well.

My party believes that the congestion tax is nothing short of highway robbery. It will rob the poor and benefit the rich. It is grossly unjust, unaffordable and unnecessary. That is why the Conservative party is unequivocally pledged to abolish it at the earliest opportunity. The first opportunity to do so will arise at the mayoral elections in May 2003, and I anticipate that a Conservative will win that election. Today's opinion poll shows that the Conservatives are only 1 per cent. behind Labour, so people are taking much more interest in our policies. I am confident that a Conservative will be elected Mayor next year, and that will result in the demise of this charge.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) has reconfirmed that the Liberal Democrats fully support the scheme. That position was stated in the debate of 6 November. There has been a certain amount of vacillation by the Government, but the clearest statement from them was made by Lord McIntosh of Haringey on 15 October 2002. He said:

"My Lords, yes, the Government have always been supportive of congestion charges and we have been supportive of the plans for congestion charges put forward by the Mayor of London. That matter was discussed with the Secretary of State on 26th September."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 October 2002; Vol. 639, c. 701.]

That is an unequivocal statement of support for the charge.

What will the Government do to try to mitigate the worst effects of the charge, until it is scrapped when the Conservatives are elected? They have now accepted that they have a power under schedule 23(11) of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to extend exemptions from the road user charge. I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, who is replying today, about exemptions on 27 January. He said:

"Exemptions from the central London congestion charge are primarily a matter for the Mayor. We are committed to providing a uniform minimum standard of exemptions or concessions from local road user charges in England. In considering the scope of these we will take into account experience gained in London and Durham."—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 523W.]

At oral questions on 28 January, I asked the Minister of State when the concessions would be introduced, whether they would be backdated to 17 February, and whether they would include help for parents, key workers, shift workers, small businesses and people living just outside the zone. I also suggested that the entire ludicrous scheme be scrapped immediately. However, the right hon. Gentleman gave the impression that he did not know what his junior Minister had said the previous day. He stated:

"I do not have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, in the main, those matters are best addressed locally."—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 700.]

The Government have accepted that they have the power to give concessions and they now intend to introduce a national scheme of concessions. On 31 January, I tabled a written question, which the Under-Secretary answered on 6 February, stating:

"We will consult on the scope of a uniform minimum standard of exemptions and concessions in due course".

It is an insult to the people of London who are going to suffer this grave injustice next week for the Minister to say that the Government will consult

"in due course once we have had an opportunity to take into account the experiences gained from road user charging schemes in London and Durham." —[*Official Report*, 6 February 2003; Vol. 399, c. 362-63W.]

However, Departments have already anticipated the problems that will arise: that is why they have given exemptions to some Government employees. Most recently, the Ministry of Defence has announced that soldiers in the Wellington barracks will not have to pay the residents' 90 per cent. concessionary charge, because that would be unfair. [*Interruption.*] Meanwhile, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) says, the ordinary people have to pay.

The Government have already accepted that there is injustice, but they are not prepared to introduce a scheme of concessions and exemptions. They should do so immediately. Even if they cannot announce the details of the scheme today, they should announce publicly that when it is introduced, it will be backdated to 17 February, so that those who are adversely affected will be able to get some recompense.

The charge is, as my hon. Friends have said, nothing other than a tax—a tax, not a charge. A charge relates to the service provided or the use made of the facility, whereas the £5 a day tax is the same whether one spends all day driving an articulated lorry around the streets of inner London, or one moves a car 100 yd from inside the zone to outside it at 7.15 am because the previous evening one was unable to obtain a place in a resident's parking bay. It is grossly unjust. To add insult to injury, motorists who have paid the £5 tax will be refused a refund if their plans change and they do not enter the zone. That is why I have made the point that people should pay by postdated cheque. If they change their plans, they can cancel their cheque; if they do not, the cheque will go through.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) thinks that there is something wrong with making life difficult for the people who have introduced the charge. However, page 23 of the Select Committee report states:

"When pressed, the Mayor identified two possible occurrences that might lead him to conclude after such a short period of time that the scheme has failed: a level of resistance to the payment of charge which means that the scheme is not sustainable".

The people of London should demonstrate to the Mayor that there is so much resistance to the charge that it is not sustainable. We already know that it will not break even until the year after next.

It is reported that the costs incurred are in the order of £300 million. As the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) said, that means that there has been a reduction in expenditure by the Mayor elsewhere in London. In answer to the hon. Gentleman's point, I have already written to Transport for London

suggesting that enforcement procedures should not be imposed from day one. I have had an unequivocal response from a lady who describes herself as the stakeholder manager for congestion charging, which states:

"I confirm that enforcement procedures will be effective and imposed from day one of congestion charging, 17 February 2003."

I asked about compliance targets, to which she responded

"there are no specific targets for the congestion charging scheme. The aim is not to achieve any set levels of compliance but rather to achieve an overall reduction in congestion."

She went on to say, disarmingly:

"Congestion charging is aimed at deterring non-essential journeys into the congestion charging zone during charging hours".

It will deter those journeys because those people will go around the zone adding to congestion and air pollution outside it. People making essential journeys will be penalised by the charge, and it seems as though the Mayor is delighted about it.

One of today's newspapers refers to a website called "Sod-u-Ken". The problem with that website, and the Select Committee report, is that it suggests that this is all the fault of Ken Livingstone. The website should be called "Sod-u-Blair" because the scheme is Government inspired. They should accept responsibility. They brought forward the legislation and they should be answerable for the consequences for the people of London. The congestion charge is an appalling scheme, and I hope that people will resist it as much as they possibly can.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I hope that all the words that we have heard in the last few minutes are correct parliamentary language.

Today's debate was an example of déjà vu all over again—we had the same debate last year—but I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) on securing it. Before I make my contribution, I ought to declare that as one of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), I live in the congestion zone. My private car is not exempt, as Opposition Members suggested. I have to pay the congestion charge, like everyone else who lives in the zone.

Mr. Wilkinson: But is not the Minister lucky to have a ministerial car to take him to work charge free, unlike his friends and neighbours, who will have to pay?

Mr. Jamieson: The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) said "Conservative" and "elected" in the same sentence, which is something of an oxymoron, but if they are ever elected to office again, perhaps Conservative Members will be in the same position. It has always been the case under any Government that the Department pays for the ministerial car, where appropriate.

I also travel by bus—I take the 159 down Kennington road. Like the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), I hope that buses will travel more freely once the congestion charge is introduced. It once took me nearly an hour to get to Oxford street, and along with many of the constituents represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall, I travelled through great congestion on the roads. Most of the people on the bus did not look as if they possessed a car, despite what the hon. Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson) said. In my constituency, which is a long way from London, 40 per cent. of people do not have access to a car. That is probably true of my hon. Friends' constituencies, as well. There are many people who do not have access to a car.

Let me make some general comments and perhaps expand the discussion. We have talked mostly about London, which is right and proper, but traffic growth and congestion are issues faced by all successful economies. The greater wealth of recent years brings more opportunities for car ownership and increased travel, but the consequences of unchecked congestion are all too obvious. Congestion makes journey times longer and less reliable, and it hinders the efficiency of public transport services and makes them less attractive options. Of course, congestion also generates pollution and noise, and degrades people's quality of life and the environment in which they live and work. Congestion is a frustrating experience for all road users, be they motorists, bus passengers, cyclists or pedestrians.

The Government intend to weaken the link between prosperity and traffic growth by improving public transport alternatives, encouraging people to walk and cycle more, and using better planning policies aimed at reducing dependency on the car. We also need to improve the road network by making better use of the available capacity, managing traffic better, and providing more capacity where needed. To dwell on the wider issues for a moment, on 10 December last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport announced a £5.5 billion package of major national and local transport measures, which will tackle congestion and improve safety, reliability and quality of life.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr. Jamieson: No, I will not. The improvements tackle some of the country's most serious transport problems. They include many significant improvements to the motorway system and many improvements in the Manchester area and Birmingham. There are nearly 1,600 traffic management schemes, more than 400 new or improved road junctions, and up to 55 new or extended park-and-ride schemes. The work will be of considerable benefit to motorists using the inter-urban network. Although the Government can expand capacity and put in place systems to manage the network better, businesses and individuals can do a great deal by thinking about their journeys and whether they could be made more sensibly or in a more sustainable way.

There is no single magic answer to congestion. We can travel more freely on our roads only if we apply a range of measures and attitudes. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall made that point. In that context, I should make it clear that the Government currently have no plans to introduce road charging for cars to combat congestion on the inter-urban road network. However, we must not forget that the majority of us encounter

[Mr. Jamieson]

traffic congestion most frequently not on the national road network, but on our journeys to and from work and leisure activities in towns and cities.

It is for local authorities to tackle those problems. They can work with bus companies to ensure that services meet current, not historic, needs; they can develop travel-planning networks, which spread knowledge about more sustainable travel-to-work options; and they can make the streets more friendly for pedestrians and cyclists. However, local authorities also told us that they thought the charging option might be helpful in addressing congestion management. That is why in the Greater London Authority Act 1999 and the Transport Act 2000 we gave them new powers enabling them to introduce, if they wished, road user charging or workplace parking levy schemes.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Is my hon. Friend not forgetting that road charging schemes were part of the Government's calculation to sustain the 10-year plan?

Mr. Jamieson: Indeed, and it will be up to local authorities to introduce them in their own area where they think they are appropriate.

When he gave evidence to the Transport Committee, the Secretary of State mentioned certain criteria. Such schemes provide incentives for motorists to consider using alternative means of transport, while securing additional funds through a hypothecated revenue scheme for spending on improving local transport provision.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Jamieson: Yes, I shall give way, and then I shall come to some of the hon. Gentleman's earlier points.

Mr. Chope: I hope that in the time that remains the Minister tells us when the Government will introduce the system of concessions and exemptions to which he has referred.

Mr. Jamieson: I shall certainly come to that, if there is time.

In relation to authorities that decide to introduce congestion charging, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in his evidence last October to the Transport Committee during its inquiry into urban congestion charging schemes, said that he believed that authorities should bear three things in mind. First, charging must be part of an overall strategy with clear objectives; secondly, it must be effective and workable, with the consequences well thought through; and, thirdly, it must command broad public support.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster said that the charge was an assault on the private car and a gross betrayal of the people of London. Yet in last night's *Evening Standard*, an excellent newspaper, I read that his local authority, Westminster, intends, naturally, to put up parking fees on the edge of the zone by 60 per cent. An AA spokesman said:

"Frankly, it is now almost out-and-out war against the motorist."

He was talking about Westminster city council. That might be the council's sixth test after the five that the hon. Gentleman mentioned—but perhaps he is about to tell us about it.

Mr. Field: To coin a phrase, it is devolved government. Am I answerable for everything that Westminster city council does? What we want to know is what the Minister has to say about what is going on in his congestion charge.

Mr. Jamieson: Devolved government indeed. There seems to be a difference of view. There is clearly a split between the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster and his hon. Friend the Member for Upminster.

I took the trouble to look at the document called "Transport, The Way Forward, The Government's Response to the Transport Debate", which was published in 1996, slightly before the Labour Government were elected. That document, which the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster might not have had an opportunity to read, says:

"Some respondents to the transport debate suggested that local authorities should have wider powers, for example, to implement restraint measures including congestion charging on an experimental basis."

It goes on:

"This is something the Government is prepared to consider".

The hon. Member for Christchurch said that he would abolish the charge at the first opportunity. It looks to me as if in 1996 his Government intended to introduce it at the first opportunity, because the document goes on to say that "The Government"—that is, the last Conservative Government, in which I believe the hon. Gentleman was a Transport Minister—"think"

"that the most appropriate package of measures for a particular area is something best determined at local level, by locally accountable politicians."

Those are the words not of the current Government, but of the Government in which the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) was Secretary of State for Transport. We seem to hear a different tune now.

Mr. Chope: What a cop-out!

Mr. Jamieson: The hon. Gentleman must hope that there has been a great national act of amnesia. I am reminding him of the policies of the Government of which he was a member and whom he supported. They were in favour of congestion charging and inter-urban charging. On 30 November 1993, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), then Chancellor of the Exchequer, said in his Budget statement:

"I can announce today that, when the technology is ready, we intend to introduce a system of electronic motorway charging in this country."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 932.]

That was Conservatives' policy.

Unfortunately, as always, there is little time to cover all the points in the debate—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Indeed, the Minister has run out of time. We must now move on to the next debate.

Christian Stephen-Martin

11 am

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful to the Minister for taking time out this morning to participate in the debate.

It is not my normal custom to bring a constituency case to an Adjournment debate. Obviously, there are channels that one can use to approach Ministers. However, listening to and thinking through the issues related to the case of Mr. Stephen-Martin caused me such anxiety that I did not want it buried in the ministerial correspondence unit. I felt that the Minister should be aware of and take on board the issues involved. I wish to set out, in as responsible and pragmatic a way as possible, the background to Mr. Stephen-Martin's case, my involvement in it, and some of the circumstances that have prompted the debate. From our past exchanges, I very much hope that the Minister will recognise me as someone who attempts to take a sensible approach to such matters. I feel strongly that the case involves issues that he should consider.

Mr. Stephen-Martin is a constituent of mine. He first came to see me just over a year ago, in December 2001, about impending disciplinary proceedings against him in his role with the Metropolitan police. I made representations on his behalf to the commissioner at that time. He came back to me last summer after his suspension had become a reality, and again shortly before Christmas, when not much was happening with his case. In addition to this Adjournment debate, this week we have benefited from at least one development, in that Mr. Stephen-Martin's Metropolitan police board now has a date. That is a welcome step forward.

By all measures, Mr. Stephen-Martin appears to have been a very highly regarded member of the Metropolitan police team. His role was in the organisation that vets external recruits to the force to ensure that they are suitable to become police officers, and internal appointments to specific specialist roles. For example, he dealt with appointments to the organisation within the Metropolitan police that has a remit to investigate potential malpractice by other officers. He handled sensitive appointments.

What do we know about Mr. Stephen-Martin, a constituent who turned up out of the blue with a story to tell? In April 2001 he received a commendation from the deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan police service

"for tenacity, investigative ability and determination in a complex national security vetting enquiry"—

a good pat on the back from the force for one of its people. That was less than two years ago.

Mr. Stephen-Martin's line manager, a man to whom I shall return later in the debate, wrote a reference for him last October. He stated that he had worked closely with Mr. Stephen-Martin for the past 14 months, and continued:

"Mr Stephen-Martin is a remarkably talented investigator and vetting officer. He is tenacious and methodical, leaving no stone unturned in his search for the truth. His determination and drive have earned him accolade in many quarters and he is renown in the organisation as probably our most talented vetter. He has demonstrated the ability to interview across a wide range of subjects, including the most personal sexual matters, yet he manages to put interviewees at rest and obtain their full co-operation.

On a personal level, Mr. Stephen-Martin is always a pleasure to have around. He has brought a smile to my face on many a bleak moment by his devilish sense of humour. He is an excellent speaker and good leader."

Those are two high accolades from both his line manager and the force. Against that background, I take seriously what Mr. Stephen-Martin has said. I do not believe that any employee goes from excellent to bad in a very short space of time.

What is the nub of the issue that Mr. Stephen-Martin has brought to me? I should like to emphasise to the Minister that the Official Secrets Act covers many areas of Mr. Stephen-Martin's work. He has not sought to share the details of his work, which are covered by the Act, with me because it would not be proper for him to do so. Were I aware of any such matters, I would not discuss them in this morning's debate. The matters that I am discussing, which are not wrapped up in secrecy laws, concern the workings and disciplinary processes of the force.

According to Mr. Stephen-Martin, the current situation has arisen as a result of his work in two specific areas. As I have mentioned, part of his job involved vetting new recruits. When he took over his role, he began challenging a culture, which had existed for many years, of the force not doing a good job of vetting recruits. He says that in many ways lip service had been paid to vetting. He brought an extra discipline to that work, and in doing so raised a number of issues about new recruits and challenged the wisdom of a number of appointments.

The force was under considerable political pressure—as it is today—to increase its numbers and get more officers into the Met. That aspiration is desirable and I share it—providing that the officers are not all poached from Surrey! We want to see the force in our capital city properly manned given the different threats that we face today. At the same time, it is obviously important that the quality and the background of those recruited are suitable for the force. Mr. Stephen-Martin says that he ran into a number of issues at very senior levels over what he saw as the robust vetting of new recruits. He recommended that the Met should not recruit some people because they were not suitable for the job. That brought him into direct conflict with some of his most senior line managers, who had to meet targets for recruiting people to the force.

In addition, Mr. Stephen-Martin says that some of his work on vetting specialist officer appointments was ignored. In his discussions with me, he referred to one particular case in which an officer was nominated for an appointment to the Complaints Investigation Bureau, which appoints officers to investigative positions to review potential malpractices within the force—the police force for the police. In one specific case, he recommended that an officer was not only unsuitable to join the CIB but should be subject to further investigation in relation to a number of alleged malpractices. That did not happen, his recommendations were not listened to and the officer was appointed to the CIB.

Mr. Stephen-Martin says that during those internal difficulties in persuading his senior officers to take on board his recommendations for tough vetting decisions,

[Chris Grayling]

he ran into a direct personal conflict with one of his most senior line managers, who is a high-profile officer whom I do not propose to name under parliamentary privilege in the Chamber because it would not be appropriate. At the end of the debate, however, I will give the Minister Mr. Stephen-Martin's written evidence to the inquiry, and I hope that he will skim through it because it contains one or two disturbing items.

This is a classic case of a whistleblower putting forward anxieties internally and the muck descending from the heavens. Mr. Stephen-Martin said that he faced an internal investigation after a short time about relatively small—in the context of the overall issues, I emphasise the word "relatively"—management issues in his team, which he disputes. He says that a couple of minor complaints were turned into a high-level investigation of his activities, which was led by a more senior person than usual and was pursued with greater than usual stringency.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is important that the investigation of an officer for any misdemeanour should be fair, impartial and appropriate. The reason why I become involved a year ago was that the same senior line manager to whom I have referred was involved in the internal investigation of Mr. Stephen-Martin's complaints, and has had line management responsibility for the investigation against him. I wrote to the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to say that was not right and to ask him to ensure that the case was investigated by a person who was unconnected with the operation of which Mr. Stephen-Martin was part. That has not happened and, worryingly, the same internal organisation of which he was part will be represented on the board of inquiry that will examine his case at the start of March. That cannot be right.

Mr. Stephen-Martin believes that he has been the subject of an internal witch hunt because of the work that he did, and that has been substantiated. Mr. Stephen-Martin's evidence offers several challenges to the Metropolitan police about the way in which it has managed the investigation, especially the conduct of that investigation.

The Minister will be able to look at that for himself, but I shall read one or two snippets from a written statement made by Mr. Stephen-Martin's former line manager—who also wrote his reference. He has now moved to a different role, but nothing would lead us to assume anything other than the fact that he is a respected man doing a good job. There is no question about the authority of the person who wrote the reference and the evidence. He said that the investigating officer, whom I shall not name,

"was trying to put words in my mouth, I had to keep correcting him. I had the distinct impression this was an exercise to solely and absolutely destroy the career of Christian Stephen-Martin."

That was based on a verbal interview between the investigating officer and Mr. Stephen-Martin's line manager.

The line manager continued:

"He did not give any names but I do remember leaving with the impression that he had made up his mind Christian had committed very serious disciplinary offences. He also issued some veiled threats to me, smiling sarcastically and saying 'if you were still an employee I would be interviewing you on tape' and 'its in everyone's interests that this does not go to an employment tribunal'."

The interview then ended, and he was sent a draft of the statement based on it, which would be put forward as evidence for the investigation. He said:

"Some time later I received"

the investigating officer's

"first draft. I could not believe what I was reading. The statement . . . provided needed radical alteration. Some of the material was blatantly inaccurate . . . I would describe the behaviour of"

the investigating officer

"as highly unprofessional and very concerning. I am an ex senior member of staff with no obligation at all to assist him in his enquiries . . . My generosity in assisting, in my own time, was met with juvenile behaviour by the investigating team"—

which is referred to in the evidence document—

"threats and my evidence being misreported. I am very concerned that what I was asked to assist with was not an investigation, rather a witch-hunt."

I have significant cause for concern given that that comes from a person who I have no reason to believe is anything other than a respected former member of the service, and given that the case is being made against a person who was commended for his work less than two years ago and received an excellent reference from his line manager. That underlies my decision to bring the matter before the Minister today in person so that he can pay close attention to the situation.

I hope that during my 18 months as an hon. Member, the Minister has built up the impression that I try to take issues seriously. Something is not right here; there is something odd about this case. I am not in a position to judge the rights and the wrongs of the matter, and I have heard only one side of the argument. However, the problem can be properly resolved only if someone totally independent of the Metropolitan police—or at least, independent of the organisation of which Mr. Stephen-Martin and the officers to whom he referred in his inquiries were a part—takes a look over the shoulder of those involved and asks whether everything is in order.

I have two questions for the Minister. First, will he ensure that one of his officials, or someone disconnected from the Metropolitan police, meets Mr. Stephen-Martin and discusses his original complaints and criticisms about the vetting process and decisions of the Metropolitan police? Those issues would then be put, privately, on record outside the confines of the Met. Secondly, will the Minister ensure that there is a proper independent assessment of the case, so that we can make sure that it is being properly handled, and there is no question of a witch hunt?

11.15 am

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) on obtaining the debate, and on enabling me to set out, to the best of my knowledge, how the Metropolitan police service has conducted the investigation, and how it will continue. I start by offering the hon. Gentleman an unreserved apology. He tabled a parliamentary

question about the matter last July, but I regret to say that although I myself signed the reply, for some reason it was never printed in the *Official Report*.

The hon. Gentleman has asked several questions, some of which he also put in a letter to me dated 23 January. I shall reply to the letter after today's debate. However, the case of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, Christian Stephen-Martin, is an internal personnel matter for the Metropolitan police service, and I do not have powers to intervene in the case. Disciplinary proceedings are also in progress, and I have to take care not to say anything that would prejudice those proceedings. I shall have to confine myself to the facts of the matter as reported to me by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. I understand from the commissioner that Mr. Stephen-Martin has been kept well informed throughout the affair—although I understand that Mr. Stephen-Martin is not totally convinced of that. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that I shall say anything today of which he is unaware.

Mr. Stephen-Martin was employed as a civilian support staff member of the Metropolitan police service, and worked as a security vetting officer in the service security unit. A formal complaint was made against him by a junior member of staff, about the way that he and another manager treated her during an internal disciplinary investigation into her behaviour. I am told that the disciplinary action in respect of that manager and one other against whom allegations emerged during a subsequent investigation have now been concluded. While the complaint was being investigated, other staff in the unit expressed concerns about working in the unit. A senior police officer was assigned to conduct a management review of the complaints raised by the staff. I understand that the complaints, and the concerns of other staff, led to a complex, wide-ranging and lengthy management review that opened up many lines of inquiry. The management review was conducted according to the MPS civil staff personnel manual, which itself accords with the ACAS code of practice for disciplinary practices and procedures in employment.

Mr. Stephen-Martin was formally suspended on 3 July 2002. He was later notified in writing of the disciplinary allegation made against him, and of the disciplinary procedures to be followed. He was also given an explanation as to why the commissioner thought it appropriate to suspend him. During his suspension, Mr. Stephen-Martin became concerned about the disciplinary procedures as applied in his case. He believed them to be flawed because he thought that the Metropolitan police service had not properly applied its own procedures. I understand that initially, he expected his concerns to be treated as formal complaints against the police under section 65 of the Police Act 1996. I hope that he was able to accept the Metropolitan police service explanation that it was more appropriate to deal with his concerns under existing internal mechanisms.

I am told that as a result of issues being raised, the Metropolitan police service suspended its investigation in order to carry out a review of the conduct of the case, but not a review of the evidence. Because of the extent to which Mr. Stephen-Martin believed that the procedures had been breached and in order to be fair to him, the review needed to be thorough and was necessarily lengthy. In his letter to me, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell pointed out that the case seemed to have dragged on for an excessive period. I am told that the two main reasons are as follows: the lengthy review of the procedures applied had caused great concern to Mr. Stephen-Martin, and there had been a complex and lengthy management review of the original complaint and the concerns of other staff.

The procedural review was concluded on 25 November 2002, and the commissioner has told me that he is entirely satisfied that the disciplinary procedure was correctly deployed and that all Mr. Stephen-Martin's concerns had been addressed. I am told that Mr. Stephen-Martin was informed of the outcome of the procedural review, and I understand that he continues to have doubts about it. On the conclusion of the procedural review, the Metropolitan police service recommenced the initial management review and the examination of the evidence, which led to a number of allegations against Mr. Stephen-Martin.

I understand that Mr. Stephen-Martin refuted all the allegations made against him, and that those will be considered at a disciplinary hearing scheduled to commence on 3 March. I also understand that the procedural issues will not be considered at that hearing, because they have already been dealt with. The Metropolitan police service wrote to Mr. Stephen-Martin on 5 February, informing him of the disciplinary hearing and about other matters. I presume that he understands how the proceedings will be conducted and what further steps he can take if he is not satisfied with the outcome.

If the boards find that the allegations are substantiated and a penalty is imposed, Mr. Stephen-Martin will have the right of appeal to a senior member of the Metropolitan police service. If the penalty is dismissal, and if the appeal goes against him, he will have the right of a further appeal to an employment tribunal. I hope that the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate will take some comfort from the fact that ultimately—certainly if the penalty were sufficiently serious—all the matters that he has raised today could be heard in front of an independent employment tribunal.

Most of Mr. Stephen-Martin's concerns were procedural and have already been dealt with under the disciplinary procedure review. Other concerns of his are to do with allegations that police officers have lied in their statements to the investigating officer. The commissioner has advised me that if the discipline board does not accept the evidence of those officers, he will consider whether it is necessary to take action against them, and that if that is the case, they will be dealt with through internal management processes that may or may not result in internal disciplinary action. As for the alleged failure to investigate Mr. Stephen-Martin's complaints, which he raised in a letter to the hon. Gentleman, those complaints have not been ignored; they have simply been set aside until the disciplinary proceedings have been concluded.

Over the years, I have spoken in a number of Adjournment debates and other debates in which personnel and disciplinary matters have been raised by hon. Members. I have to say that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell has raised the issues carefully and responsibly. I have come to accept that and I respect him for doing so. It is always difficult to make a judgment in

[Mr. John Denham]

complex cases on the basis of a part of the evidence. Leaving aside the fact that I have no powers to intervene in a case of this kind, the best thing to do is to follow the procedures laid down to ensure that cases are properly investigated. It would not be right at this stage in the proceedings for me to instigate an independent assessment of the case, as the hon. Gentleman has asked. There are still a number of stages through which the disciplinary matter must proceed. Should the penalty be dismissal, the case could be heard at an employment tribunal where all the facts of the matter could be rehearsed. I therefore resist the hon. Gentleman's request.

Chris Grayling: I appreciate the limitations on the Minister's powers and his reluctance to use his powers in interfering in an internal disciplinary matter. None the less, he has a working relationship with the commissioner. He has the ability to say to him that it would be a good idea if someone—even someone from within the Metropolitan police, but entirely disconnected from those matters—were to cast a weather eye over them. I have raised some genuine concerns. The Minister will know which powers are available to him to look into those matters. I want to seek his assurance that he will not set the matter aside and leave it entirely to the internal processes, without his Department at the very least asking whether there is something that it should be worried about here.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman has raised a number of points that I want to consider. I shall speak honestly and say that across my desk, through correspondence—much more often, it has to be said, than in Adjournment debates—questions are raised with me by hon. Members, by members of the public and by the families and friends of police service employees who regularly suggest that disciplinary procedures are not properly carried out. It is almost impossible to make a judgment on the basis of the representations that are made. I have no legal powers to intervene. It is only in the most exceptional circumstances that I would raise queries at such an early stage in the procedure. The initial investigatory board has not yet met, let alone the possibility of appeals having been explored.

It is my inclination to look at those matters only at a later stage—for example, after an employment tribunal has criticised the police conduct of a case. Only then would I get involved with a police force in any part of the country to ask it how it is reviewing such cases. In the recent past there have been cases in which the police service, including the Metropolitan police service, has been criticised by an employment tribunal over the performance of police officers. I have taken an active interest in looking into what went wrong in those cases.

It would cause some difficulty if I were routinely to intervene, even at the level of the working relationship—as the hon. Gentleman put it—with the commissioner or his senior officers, at such an early stage in the formal proceedings. The hon. Gentleman has asked me to take an interest in the case, and I will certainly follow it as it wends its way through the system and ask my officials to keep me updated. However, at present it would be premature to move ahead and ask for the case to be reviewed. We need to let the official procedures go some way further before I should consider doing that.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended until Two o'clock.

Regional Television

2 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): I do not know whether any hon. Member watched the boxing on television on Saturday night, but I feel a little like Audley Harrison. He is used to fighting just three or four rounds, but was asked to fight eight rounds on Saturday, and if he ever challenges for the world title he will have to fight 12. The analogy is that my average speaking time in the House is seven and a half minutes, but I have a little longer today.

I have three qualifications for talking about regional television. First, I am fortunate enough to chair the all-party BBC group. Secondly, I was fortunate enough to be on Lord Puttnam's Joint Committee on the draft Communications Bill. That was by far my most interesting activity in Parliament and we got to the meat of the Bill. It was a reasonably successful process and should be extended to other Bills. I was not a member of the Communications Bill Standing Committee, but the Whips gave me other interesting things to do, and I spent a particularly fascinating morning considering a Northern Ireland Audit Office report. I did not have much expertise on that, but I was pleased to be kept gainfully employed on pre-legislative scrutiny of the Communications Bill.

My third qualification, which applies to every Member of Parliament, was expressed by the recent Independent Television Commission report on a charter for the nations and regions, which stated:

> "Local news and current affairs has a pivotal place in the democratic process, where MPs and other elected officials can connect with their voters in a way not possible in national news. The people who work in regional television are also close to their audience in a way that metropolitan broadcasters can never be."

It would be uncharitable to say that Back Benchers such as myself are interested in regional television because it is the main, if not the only, form of television that we are likely to be on, but that is largely true. I have just done an interview on "BBC Look North" on coal and, for reasons that I shall not go into, it has typecast me for floods, coal and beer. If there is any news about those subjects, I am on the regional news.

My success nationally is rather more limited. I nearly got on "Newsnight" a little while ago, but we invaded Afghanistan and my piece was cancelled. I nearly got on breakfast television nationally, but the Queen Mother died and my piece was again cancelled. I did make one memorable appearance last year when I was dashing into the House for an important meeting and saw Jon Snow of "Channel 4 News" out of the corner of my eye. I vaguely remember him shouting "Pensions" at me, but I was in too much of a hurry. "Channel 4 News" led that night with an item on MPs' pensions and how they run away from talking about them, and there was a picture of me running into the House.

To show that it is not all bad, I was stopped on College green during the summer and asked for my views on "The West Wing", which appears regionally and nationally, and then found that I was part of an advert. I have never had so much publicity in Selby as when I was advocating "The West Wing". I was there with the Mayor of London talking about the programme and the strapline was that top leaders recommended it. That was my moment of fame on national television.

I want to celebrate regional television this afternoon; we should not approach the subject with doom and gloom because there is much to celebrate. I shall go through the public service broadcasters in turn, examine the good things that they are doing, and how we can make them better. We must not forget that in this country we spend more per head on indigenous programme production than any other major western country, including the United States. A lot of that money is spent regionally.

There is a lot of source material for the debate. Some potential sources include the Joint Committee's report; the Independent Television Commission's report, "Television in the Nations and Regions", which was carried out a couple of years ago; the ITC programme review, which was instituted by the Minister following the Joint Committee report; and a very important conference at the Granada studios in Manchester towards the end of last year, which considered the issue of regional television. That conference also considered television of the nations, such as Wales and Scotland.

There is also a substantial background to the debate, such as the consolidation of ITV—traditionally the strongest regional broadcaster. The decline in viewing share has been quite marked during the past five years. All the regional ITV companies combined gained a 33 per cent. viewing share in 1997. That has declined to about 26 per cent. today, although they have made a strong start this year. Obviously, there is a prospect of further consolidation in ITV in the reasonably near future. That raises questions about the future regional output and structure of ITV.

A debate about regionalism has grown over recent years. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) famously remarked recently that we did not need regional government in Yorkshire because we had a cricket team and an attitude. We have those things, to which I would add Yorkshire Television. YTV is not just of economic benefit to the region—I shall talk more about that later—but of cultural benefit, too. That is true of many of the ITV franchises and BBC regions. They give an identity to the region. Whether there is regional government or not, in a more globalised world, they are something to which people cling.

When talking about regional television, the first factor to consider is definition. There are three possible definitions of regional broadcasting, and it is important to make them distinct. Those definitions are taken from the ITC. First, there is the sheer volume of production of regional and network programmes in locations outside London. Secondly, broadcasting of regional opt-out programmes in specific nations and regions reflects the diversity of life in the UK outside London. For example, Yorkshire has regional news, regional sport such as "Rugby League Raw", and coverage of the House of Commons in "Around the House". The Ulster Television area broadcasts programmes such as "Lesser Spotted Ulster", which is very popular. There is a whole range of regional opt-out programmes.

Thirdly, when people talk about regional broadcasting, they talk about the broadcasting on the national networks of television programmes that reflect the diversity of life in the UK outside London. An obvious example of that is "Coronation Street", as is "Emmerdale". Such shows reflect at a national level regional characteristics and values.

[Mr. John Grogan]

Those are three definitions of regional broadcasting. How important is it? I turn to the ITC for some numbers relating to that important question. The total value of regional programme expenditure—network programmes made outside London and opt-out programmes made for regional audiences—was over £907 million in 2001. That represents about a third of the total value of programmes produced and acquired for UK television broadcasters.

All UK terrestrial broadcasters have promised to earmark a proportion of their expenditure on UK first-run originated programmes from outside London. Many of those promises will become statutory obligations when the Communications Bill becomes law. It is worth reminding the House of the current commitments: BBC, 33 per cent.; ITV 50 per cent.; Channel 4, 30 per cent.; Channel Five, 10 per cent. We should note, however, that in 2000, two thirds of all the network's new programming, across all the public service channels, originated in London. That was followed by Manchester, with 11 per cent. of spend and Glasgow with 4 per cent.

A similar regional pattern applies to the share of network hours given to programmes produced in the regions that then go out on the national network. Some 69 per cent. of network hours are accounted for by London, 9 per cent. by Manchester and 4 per cent. by Glasgow. To illustrate that further, 20 hours per year of production from the Tyne Tees area in the north-east of England goes on to the national network. In some areas, then, the amounts can be very small.

I shall go through what the different public service channels are doing on regional television production, and make one or two suggestions on how they can renew and extend their commitments. If we start with the BBC, we must really start with Greg Dyke, who has imposed his personality on the BBC in many ways and competed aggressively in the market, not least at regional level. He commented not long ago:

> "The ITV system was traditionally the regional network and the BBC a national channel. That will gradually be reversed as the ITV system comes under greater financial pressure. The BBC's Nations and Regions, marooned for too long on the outer edges of the organisation, have come in from the cold and are spearheading a closer relationship between the whole of the BBC and the distinctive and diverse communities which make up our audience across the UK."

There is a story that Dyke has placed importance on the regions because, during his first months in office, he went round the BBC's regions and visited areas that had not been visited by a director general for some years. That might have had something to do with the fact that his predecessor, John Birt, was occupying his office and showed no signs of hurrying out, but that regional tour was none the less instructive and has led to considerable action.

The BBC network's programming commission from the regions has, during the past two years, increased from £55 million to £95 million. Some of the physical evidence can be seen in my region. BBC buildings in Yorkshire are springing up all over the place. BBC centres are currently being built at Quarry hill in Leeds and Queens gardens in Hull, following the opening of the new centre in Shoreham street, Sheffield. There will be new offices in Grimsby and in Bradford, as part of the national museum of photography, film and television. Altogether, the BBC complement of staff in the region is 330 strong.

There are not only more BBC buildings, but more regional opt-out programmes. Again drawing on my experience in Yorkshire, although I think that it is a nationwide trend, I can say that regional current affairs shows are appearing at prime time on BBC 1 for the first time in many a long year. Only the weekend before last, we saw "The Politics Show". Quite a lot of the BBC's reputation on politics coverage is riding on that. It is a revival, in many ways, of the old "Nationwide" concept, which was the current affairs programme in the '70s, when national news was very much integrated with regional news.

The new show has a younger presenter, and a tighter format, but the content is crucial, and I hope that gimmicks are avoided. I understand that the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), on the show in its first week, was asked to appear without a tie and jacket, à la Jeremy Vine. He took his jacket off but left his tie on, and I commend him for that. I doubt whether the young people of Yorkshire will turn on in their droves simply because the hon. Gentleman or I, as middle age takes hold, appear in our shirtsleeves or without ties. Whatever Jeremy Vine does, it is important to concentrate on the politics. The show should not pretend that it is doing something fundamentally different. It is not; the difference is in style. If it ensures that it gets the good, solid, region-based stories, "The Politics Show" could be a great success.

The BBC is trying to expand its entire range of programming, not just news, in the north and elsewhere. For example, BBC Scotland has a new, gritty soap called "River City". A soap does a great deal for a region by providing work and a long-term commitment to those with talent. I have no doubt that we shall hear about "Emmerdale" and "Coronation Street". The BBC needs to develop regional soaps. It is no accident that Granada's main soap, "Coronation Street", is set in the Manchester area. The BBC, which has, perhaps, been London-based too long, has as its main soap "EastEnders".

That brings me to the experiment in Hull. BBC regional television now has an opt-out for its local news programming and is experimenting with interactive broadband. BBCi Hull is a £25 million initiative that is designed to test new ways for the BBC to provide local services, and regional television is very much linked with it.

Let us not forget the training element of BBC activity in the regions. It is as important at the local level as at the national level that the BBC has strong in-house production and searches for talent for the future. Several programmes deal with that role: the producer-development programme; the BBC northern exposure programme, which works with more than 3,000 budding writers in conjunction with regional theatres throughout the country; and "BBC Talent", which has gone to more than 20 cities to find the presenters of the future.

I suggest two areas in which the BBC could further its regional commitment. I was lucky enough to be invited to the launch last week of BBC 3, which is one of the BBC's new digital channels. The head of BBC 3 is a chap called Stuart Murphy, who is aged about 31, which puts him in the target range for the channel. He comes from Yorkshire and, when he heard my name, he asked whether my father was the John Grogan who was his primary school head teacher. He remembered an occasion when he was about seven on which my dad gave him the slipper for being somewhat naughty—that was a different age. I had to confess that it was the same man. I tell that story because there is no way that Stuart Murphy would be the controller of a national channel had he stayed in Ilkley, just outside Leeds, where he grew up.

The BBC has many channels: BBC 1, BBC 2, BBC 3, which is the youth channel, BBC 4, which is a more highbrow, intellectual arts channel, two children's channels and BBC News 24. As we approach charter renewal in 2006, is it impossible to imagine that one or more of those channels might locate in Cardiff, Manchester or Glasgow? That would be a big commitment by the BBC, which has dramatically changed its regional opt-out hours during the past 40 years. It now produces six times as many regional programmes as it did in the 1960s, but such a move would be a further dramatic step.

It is not impossible to imagine a BBC national channel based outside London. It would give the BBC greater insight into life in the regions, and it would strengthen production in the area to which it moved. That is my first suggestion, which I make to the governors of the BBC and to Ministers in the run-up to charter renewal.

Secondly, the BBC has begun to address its relations with independent producers following the work of the Puttnam Joint Committee and the independent television supply review that followed it. In many regions, the independents are the source of ideas and creativity. I believe that most people in the BBC recognise that they did not get right their relationships with independents and that they did not make the most of the talent that can be found in many such companies not only in London but, for the purpose of the debate, scattered around the country. The new rules will give independent producers a much better deal.

The BBC has appointed an executive who will be the point of contact for independent producers and ensure that independent production, wherever it is, is nurtured and brought forward. I make those two suggestions to the BBC. It should get its relations with independent producers right. That is important politically, not least from the point of view of the BBC's self-interest in the run-up to charter renewal. It should also put a channel in the regions.

ITV has what is perhaps the greatest regional structure. ITV was created in 1955 as a federal system; it grew from only a few companies in the early years to a federation of 15 separate regional companies, firmly located in the nations and regions, with their own studios and offices broadcasting network and regional material to local audiences. It is worth remembering that the duty to provide regional programmes was built into ITV's structure from the outset. The Television Act 1954, under which ITV was established, stipulated that each regional station should include a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal specifically to the taste and outlook of persons served by the station. It is interesting that that same phraseology—

"the taste and outlook of persons served by the station"—

appears in the most current legislation; it has stood the test of time.

Moving on to today, Carlton and Granada own 11 of the 15 regional licences. Together, the ITV companies produce more than 6,000 hours of original regional programming each year. There is more than 5,000 hours of regional news, which the ITV network specialises in, and 150 cameras on the road up and down the country. A total of 27 separate local services cover the 15 licence areas.

I said that I would make brief mention of the economic impact of the ITV companies on the regions. In my region, Yorkshire, there are 1,100 employees. Approximately the same number of people rely on ITV and Yorkshire Television and provide related support and production services. Together they contribute £140 million to the local economy. Of course, it is ultimately about programmes. ITV had 10 of the 2002 top 20 programmes. They included "Coronation Street", "Emmerdale", "Heartbeat" and "Blood Strangers", all of which reflect life in the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. Over many years and in many ways, we have had a success story.

So what are the threats to that and what can we do about them? First, we have to acknowledge that regional opt-out hours have decreased dramatically on ITV over the past couple of years. The number of regional opt-out slots—that is to say, regional productions for the regions—has gone down from 8,775 to 6,682 hours. That is a loss of about 2,000 hours. By contrast, the BBC has slightly increased its opt-out hours to more than 5,000, but that is over two channels, not one.

Stuart Cosgrove from Channel 4 said:

"The ITV regional presence is an essential part of the ecologies of broadcasting and of regional economies."

He went on:

"Production companies based outside London have in the past been able to secure their businesses, if not build them, on ITV commissions."

He sees the decline of regional opt-out hours and the domination of network programming by the big four in ITV—London Weekend Television, Carlton, Granada and Yorkshire Television—as threatening regional production in relation not just to ITV, but to the many companies that depend on it.

The ITV network has responded with many assurances. It has a very impressive charter for the network and regions, which talks about the importance of regional management. It is concentrating on regional investment, rather than the number of programme hours. But what could be done to address the challenges and threats to ITV in the years ahead?

There is a big debate about exactly how tough Ofcom should be in regulating ITV. Should it insist that a suitable proportion of programmes made by ITV are made in the regions—or, as some suggest, should it be a substantial or a considerable proportion? I hope that the House will consider that in other contexts in the weeks

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ahead. I will give definitions of those words. The suggestion is that "suitable" be used. Suitable means right or appropriate for a particular person, purpose or situation, which is not very strong. Substantial, on the other hand, means of considerable importance, size or worth. Considerable means great in size, amount or importance. I shall not detain the Chamber, because I am sure that these debates will go on in this House and the House of Lords in the coming weeks, but I believe that there is scope for strengthening Ofcom's role. Indeed, 100 hon. Members have signed early-day motion 260 along those lines.

The ITV network is pressing quite hard for a redefinition of an independent TV company. At present, at least 25 per cent. of ITV and BBC production must be taken from independent companies. Regional ITV companies do not qualify, even for the BBC's quotas. Naturally, they do not qualify for ITV. I read from an ITV memorandum:

"As a result of the quota, 25 per cent. of ITV commissions have shifted from regional ITV producers, such as Anglia and Tyne Tees, to independent producers predominately based in London and the South East. Those same regional ITV producers are unable to compete fairly for commissions from other channels, because they are not classed as 'independents'. The independent quota is thus reinforcing the southern bias of the UK production industry and undermining efforts to ensure that ITV's regional production hubs are sustained."

ITV goes on to claim:

"A more equitable redefinition of independent production would ensure UK regional producers are not penalised as they seek to compete against foreign-owned and London-based producers. A more straightforward and consistent redefinition might run along the following lines:

An 'independent' production includes any programme commissioned by a broadcaster from whom the producer is independent (in ownership terms)."

At present, Endemol will be able to compete for the BBC's 25 per cent. although it is owned by a foreign broadcaster, whereas Tyne Tees, which is much smaller, will not be able to do so.

I agree that it is not a simple matter. The ITC's programme review suggested that Ofcom conduct a market analysis of the difference that the change would make. That is probably the proper way forward, but it is worth examining. It is something that Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television and the independent producers are beginning to address, because a great deal of faith has been placed in the independent producers. However, the top 10 independent producers—there are rumours that there will be more consolidation—are based in London. I am told that 60 per cent. of the total public service channel quotas are produced by those top 10. Some outstanding examples, such as Red Productions in Manchester and Maverick in Birmingham, are just below the top 10. Given the changes to be made as a result of the Communications Bill and so on, the hope is that those independent producers will be in a much stronger position in the regions: they will be able to keep more of their rights and grow.

The future of regional broadcasting depends both on the emerging independent companies such as Red Productions and on traditional ITV companies such as Granada. As a Member of Parliament from the north, I hope that in the final ITV merger Granada rather than Carlton emerges as top dog. That would be good for programme production. Granada has a history of concentrating on classic programme production over many generations, which Carlton does not. It would do much to reassure northern Members about ITV's commitment to the regions if Granada won out in the end.

I shall conclude on Channel 4 and Channel Five in a moment, but I want to reiterate my challenge to the independent companies. There is now a great deal of potential for the growth of independent companies in the regions, but it must not be through independent, northern companies that are based in London hiring an office in Leeds—to be realistic, probably not in Selby—putting a brass plate on the door and pretending to be regional. If in two or three years' time most independent production is concentrated in London, as it is now, many MPs will ask questions the next time broadcasting is discussed in Parliament.

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): For once, we have the luxury of time, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have been following the issue closely. My hon. Friend asks whether we—or Ofcom, when it becomes active—can change the rules. Not all the excellent independent production companies are based in London. Is he asking us to bend the rules to ensure that companies such as Granada, which have been around for donkey's years and for generations have had a licence to print their own money, should be favoured simply because they are based in the regions, rather than the independents in London?

Mr. Grogan: Far be it from me to suggest that we should bend the rules. Some would suggest that bringing in Endemol—an independent company that broadcasts in Britain but which is owned by a foreign broadcaster—bent the rules.

Dr. Howells: As the Minister who bent—I would rather say set—the rules, on the basis of the evidence that was put before us, I think that that was a very wise decision, but I would say that, wouldn't I?

Mr. Grogan: I would describe that, as the Minister does, as setting the rules. I am calling for a proper market analysis to look at the impact of changing the rules, such as the one that the ITC carried out. There is a strong case to be made. Why should not a small company such as Tyne Tees TV—the only company in the north-east, not counting a few independents that feed off it—which is dwarfed by some of the London independents, be able to make a bid for the BBC's 25 per cent. if it has the creative ideas? That question must be examined further.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point, but he is worrying at the wrong end of the bone. If we look at regional production from the point of view of ownership, we shall probably get it wrong. As the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, I want it to be looked at from the point of view of investment in the regions and nations and of protecting the continuity of that investment, whether in HTV or independent Welsh

production companies in the Welsh context. He is right to raise the issue. It will be a feature of the forthcoming Communications Act. Rather than looking at ownership, we should be looking at the framework of Ofcom to ensure a continuity of regional investment and regional production in the regions and nations.

Mr. Grogan: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. HTV is an interesting example. It does much work for the BBC in Wales. Under the current format there is nothing to stop that, but it does not seem to happen in many other regions at the moment. It is worth raising the question whether it should.

In many ways, Channel 4, as Lord Puttnam put it in his Manchester speech, is the trailblazer of regional production. Stuart Cosgrove, whom Lord Puttnam praised, is in charge of Channel 4's regional production, and his office is in Glasgow. Over many years Channel 4 has sustained many independent regional production companies and has invested in companies such as Red Productions based in Manchester and Maverick in Birmingham. It has a good record in that regard.

Channel Five has starting putting a toe in the water to invest in the regions. It is now saying that it will invest 10 per cent. of its total programme budget in the regions. It is worth speculating over what may happen in the coming months. If legislation goes through unchanged, there is a possibility that for the first time a major newspaper proprietor may buy Channel Five. Taking an example at random, Mr. Murdoch will not be able to buy Channel 3, but under a clause that was possibly written in No. 10 Downing street rather than in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport—the special adviser certainly played a part in it—he will be able to buy Channel Five. Why should that matter?

One reason is that nearly 40 per cent. of our Sunday newspaper market, more than 20 per cent. of our daily newspaper market, our only major satellite producer and a major terrestrial broadcaster would then be in the hands of one man and one company. Hon. Members might ask what that has to do with regional production; it would mean that there would be all the opportunity in the world to cross-promote. We would not read much about "Big Brother", a Channel 4 production, in *The Sun*, for example.

At the moment, Channel Five has few public service obligations, so Mr. Murdoch could grow it very rapidly on a diet of premier league football matches loaned from BSkyB, big movies and so on. That would, in time, undermine Channel 4, and eat into its audience and that of Channel 3. Mr. Murdoch says that he is not interested in Channel Five, but he would say that, wouldn't he?

What have the Government done to give assurances to those on Lord Puttnam's Committee and others who were worried about the issue? They have done some quite good things, actually. For example, they suggested that Channel Five should for the first time have regional and UK-based obligations, and that when there is a change of ownership of either Channel 3 or Channel Five, there should be a review of regional production, news and so on. Incidentally, I think that those clauses were written in DCMS rather than No. 10; I give DCMS officials full credit for them. However, such a review would take place at a specific moment, and there is nothing that would allow Ofcom to take account of the expansion of Channel Five over a period. I would like there to be a ratchet, so that as a channel increases in size, Ofcom can increase its regional and original production targets.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Nicholas Winterton): Order. I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's interesting contribution, but he is touching rather too much on the Communications Bill, and that is inappropriate for this debate. However, I am perfectly happy for him to refer to it from time to time.

Mr. Grogan: I could see that remark coming. I shall touch on the Bill tangentially from now on.

In principle, regulators need a clear agenda, and that is as true for regional television as anything else. In the words of an article written in 1998 for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Mr. Murdoch

"wields his media as instruments of influence with politicians who can aid him and savages his competitors in his news columns".

The likes of Mr. Murdoch are adept at such behaviour, and it is absolutely crucial that, in all regulatory structures on which regional television depends, a clear message is sent to those who own our television stations about what they can expect as their stations grow or decline.

One of the Back Bencher's weapons, aside from Adjourment debates, is the early-day motion. Some describe early-day motions as constitutional graffiti, but they are important to Back Benchers, and real effort goes into obtaining signatures to them. I draw the Minister's attention to early-day motion 260, which touches on regional programme production. It is quite boring getting the signatures, so I pretend that I am trying to get a century batting for Yorkshire, and always aim for 100. We have that many signatures for the regional production early-day motion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) will speak on the subject later, but I tabled an early-day motion only yesterday on must-carry. I shall not go into great detail on the issue, but it is an absolutely crucial subject for regional television. There is a real danger that many resources will go from regional ITV companies into BSkyB coffers, undermining regional television—unless we get things right. I hope that the Minister, and, indeed, the special adviser in No. 10, will look kindly on both early-day motions and strengthen the position of regional television.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my longest speech in the House of Commons.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the second speaker, I point out to hon. Members that it would be my wish to start the wind-ups at 3 o'clock. There are at least two other speakers to get in before that time.

2.40 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) and I congratulate him on securing the debate. He has obviously been able to get rid of some of his frustration at not being present during the 26 sittings of the Communications Bill. I can tell him that it was not all

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that enjoyable, although the debates that we had on regional programming were some of the high points. I am sure that his presence in the Committee was missed. He brought to this debate a lot of useful thought and understanding about regional production, which, in the Committee, may have swayed the Minister to move slightly further than he did.

I shall concentrate on the situation in Wales, from which we could bring lessons to bear throughout the UK. The first thing to say about regional production in Wales is that it comes, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, from a national perspective. What is framed in legislation as regional television is national in Wales, and it has been increasingly regarded as such during the past 20 years. That has been especially apparent since the coming of S4C, which has given the Welsh language a regional dimension, although, of course, we cannot talk about the Welsh language as a regional thing; it is a national language. The whole situation has changed during that period, especially since the coming of the National Assembly for Wales.

The obligation on broadcasters to provide current affairs and news programmes has enabled them to take on a more vigorous and confident national role without feeling that they are trying to fulfil two roles in the system. All broadcasters in Wales have succeeded in doing that within their public service remit, and they are to be congratulated, on the whole, on the way in which they have innovated. I would like to talk about those innovations because they could be useful for other parts of the UK.

I shall start with the BBC, which has taken a national role since it broadcast the first radio programmes in Wales which were intended just for Wales. The interesting thing about the BBC is that in addition to its usual regional aspect, which one would see in any other part of the UK, it has a digital opt-out on BBC 2. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the possibility of locating a national BBC channel—a UK channel—somewhere such as Cardiff. I would welcome that. Let us bring BBC 3 to Cardiff; I can tell the hon. Gentleman that it would get more viewers if it were located there.

The digital format of BBC 2 in Wales has an opt-out of an hour and a half to two hours every evening. I am not sure whether that happens in other parts of the UK. I do not think that there is, for example, a BBC 2 Yorkshire opt-out, although there may be such a thing. The opt-out in Wales is new—it has been in place for about a year—and I am sure that hon. Members in other parts of the UK would want to look at that and think about how it could work in their area.

We know, having seen the viewing figures for BBC 3—which are something like 1.2 per cent. of the total for digital television—that digital viewers still watch the main ITV and BBC channels, and they also watch BBC 2 and Channel 4, or S4C in Wales. Anything that could help to strengthen the regional or national aspects of the main channels on digital should be welcomed and supported.

Although the hon. Gentleman was right to ask about the new national channels and whether one could be located outside London, it is also important to point out to the BBC that perhaps it should be doing more to strengthen its mainstream digital broadcasting. We are in danger of seeing the BBC putting all its digital eggs in the extra-digital channels basket, rather than thinking about how it could enrich its two main channels, which most people still want to watch and are watching.

HTV, which is owned by the Carlton Group, is the independent television broadcaster in Wales. It has gone through some difficult times during the past five years, but it seems to have come out in fairly good shape and it is continuing to make a contribution to broadcasting in Wales. To qualify what the hon. Gentleman said about HTV, it is important to say that it makes programmes for S4C, rather than for the BBC in Wales. That gives it a different dimension: in effect, HTV is part of the independent sector, making programmes for another channel in Wales. That certainly enriches HTV, because it can make a Welsh-language programme for S4C, for example, and if it makes an investigative programme, that can be used as the news on HTV in English. All Wales benefits from working in such a way.

My worry about the ITV franchise in Wales is the hours, as the hon. Gentleman said. There has been an overall diminution of about 2,000 hours throughout the United Kingdom. The response of the ITV companies is, "Yes, but many of those programmes were repeats. We are concentrating on quality, and one should not think about such matters in terms of the number of hours." We should not micro-manage broadcasters, but the number of hours on the third channel in Wales or elsewhere in the United Kingdom spent on recognisably regional or national programmes strengthens the regional role.

If people expect to have only regional news and little else, over time they will accept that. Repeats can strengthen regional aspects. I certainly appreciate repeats being shown on Saturdays and Sundays, because I never see certain programmes during the week. I have never seen "Nuts and Bolts", "Barry Welsh is Coming" or other good HTV programmes. If repeats can strengthen and embed regional or national broadcasting, they are not all bad.

Regional broadcasting is given a different appearance in a Welsh context by S4C. It is the Welsh-language channel, and it also carries the majority of Channel 4 programmes. It is celebrating 20 years of success this year, and I am sure that we all congratulate it on that. S4C has made the independent sector in Wales, including HTV, grow, although I do not think that that was the intention. Part of the agreement was that S4C takes 20 hours for free from the BBC. The rest of its hours it purchases from independent broadcasters and HTV. Since S4C has established a digital channel, it has increased its role in the independent sector; 80 per cent. of S4C's output now comes from the independent sector in Wales, including HTV, with the other 20 per cent. being BBC programmes.

Such an arrangement has given rise to about 4,000 jobs in the creative media sector in Wales, which the declining post-industrial economy can do with. The majority of those jobs are in objective 1 areas and are well paid. It is important to mention that not only because Wales concentrates matters in Cardiff as England concentrates matters in London, but because Welsh-language programme making needs to be located in Welsh-speaking areas, which means that we have a

strong independent sector in the most unlikely of places. It is important that the Selbys of Wales have independent television production.

Teledwyr Annibynnol Cymm—TAC—is the Welsh equivalent of the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television. It can locate its work in the regional sector, which will have economic benefits. One aspect of the Welsh experience is that it is possible to have sub-regional economic benefits from independent broadcasting which are then linked to regional broadcasting. I hope that other areas will be able to build on that.

I want to raise with the Minister an important aspect that we debated when the Communications Bill was in Committee. I also raised it when I intervened on the hon. Member for Selby. How do we protect regional investment within the framework of Ofcom? At present, the Bill is a little too weak. In Committee, my amendments and those tabled by the hon. Members for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda) and for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson) were not accepted. However, there will be another opportunity to table such amendments when the Bill comes back to the House.

Since our debate in Committee, an article that appeared in *Broadcast* magazine on 10 January 2003 has come to my attention. It says:

"Seldom is a journey on the tube ever rewarding but, for producer Talkback, travelling to the end of the Metropolitan Line has given it regional status and opened up a potential wealth of commissions from broadcasters anxious to meet their regional quota commitments.

Talkback's office in Amersham, which opened recently, is outside the M25 putting it technically in 'the regions' by edict of the Independent Television Commission (ITC). But the fact that the company is claiming regionality in an area still covered by a travelcard poses questions about the simple definitions of regional status."

I could not have put it better myself. That is one of the key things that we will need to address in supporting regional broadcasting in future.

The Bill deals with the need to support investment and production centres outside the M25. If large independent producers put their production centres just outside the M25 where it is still very easy to employ a work force from London, we will not be able to protect such investment in regions throughout the United Kingdom. We should try to ensure that the Bill achieves that.

I want the Minister to look again at some aspects of the Bill, and I hope that he will address the need for regional representation on the Ofcom board. I welcome this opportunity to note the importance of regional broadcasting in a national context in Wales.

2.50 pm

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on securing this important debate on regional television—even if I do not entirely share his hopes about the outcome of the rivalry between Granada and Carlton.

I want to raise a current anomaly in the system. The Communications Bill could rectify it, but I fear that it will not do so. I think that it could have a profound impact on the long-term viability of regional television, and I would like to hear the Minister's comments about it.

There is an expectation that public service broadcasters will make their services available to all platforms. The Bill contains reserve powers for must-offer powers relating to public service broadcasters and must-carry powers for cable because the Government think that this is important. I believe that they have also allocated a part of the digital spectrum for public service broadcasters.

With regard to satellite, the BBC, ITV and others have to negotiate the conditional access charges—a wholly commercial arrangement—with Sky, which is, in effect, a monopoly provider. Oftel is responsible for overseeing those arrangements, which it does under the FRND system, which seeks to ensure that charges are fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory. However, Oftel fails to distinguish between the needs of public service broadcasters such as ITV, which requires conditional access solely to ensure that the right regional service is made available to each viewer—that, I understand, is a licence obligation—and the needs of other channels, such as pay-per-view channels, which use access to raise revenue.

Currently, ITV pays Sky £17 million per annum for access, but the cost of that is probably tens of thousands rather than millions of pounds. The BBC also pays millions of pounds and that money comes straight from the licence fee payer. The effect of that is that the satellite company—in other words Sky—secures money from the public service broadcasters to subsidise its own commercial operations. I am not saying that Sky is not entitled reasonably to recover some of its own development costs; of course it is. But that money could, and some might say should, be used to improve regional output. In effect, analogue viewers who do not have access to satellite, often because they cannot afford it, pay for their own service and for the cost of Sky services that they do not use, such as pay television, business channels and so-called free set-top boxes.

What is the point of the Government placing such emphasis on the content of public service channels, such as the diversity, quality and volume of regional output in news and current affairs, if viewers are not being treated equally? The result is that terrestrial viewers pay for the service that they receive and part of the cost of satellite services that they do not receive.

A new world of broadcasting is opening up. We have an opportunity to regulate it in a way that is fair and meets other obligations for regional access. However, will the Minister consider guidance on the FRND system, rather than new legislation or changes to the Communications Bill? Guidance would enable Ofcom to distinguish between public service broadcasters and pay-per-view channels. Similar guidance already covers content regulation and regional and independent production.

If we do not see some movement on the subject, I fear that the commitment to regional viewers will be lost. They will be the losers because they will end up paying, and they will be making the sacrifice to subsidise a monopoly operator. When we are extolling the virtues of regional television output, and when the Government themselves desire a regional service to be available on

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the satellite platform, it is grossly unfair to expect those viewers to pay the costs of a monopoly operator. I would appreciate hearing the Minister's thoughts on that matter.

2.57 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I congratulate the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on his 39 minutes—far more than his average seven minutes and all of them good value—on this interesting topic. He made a strong case for regional production and broadcasting. His argument for one of the BBC's national channels to be based outside London is a good one. Not to be outdone, I put in a bid for it to be based somewhere in the south-west of England.

There is concern about the drop in regional opt-out hours on ITV and its threat to regional production, which is very real. The hon. Gentleman called for the strengthening of Ofcom and a new definition of independent production. He is worried about changes to the law that could allow a multi-media operator to purchase Channel Five. Those concerns are shared by Liberal Democrats.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) believes that we can learn lessons from Wales, which seem to be based on the fact that Wales has a separate language channel. They may not apply in the rest of England, but my Cornish colleagues are keen to see more Cornish language broadcasts. To the credit of the independent television franchisees in the far south-west, they have tried to introduce some Cornish language broadcasting in that region. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the BBC 2 opt-out. There are opt-outs in England of about half an hour a week, and those could be increased to encourage more production in the BBC regions.

The most important point that the hon. Gentleman made was his warning about the definition of regional production, echoing comments made by the hon. Member for Selby. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) also raised an important point when he claimed that terrestrial viewers are subsidising satellite viewers for programmes that he or she cannot see. I would be interested to hear the Minister's response to that.

We on the Liberal Democrat Benches believe in regional television; we are naturally regionalist. We believe that regional identity is part of cultural diversity, and that regional television increases both accountability and people's view of where they are in the world. In many respects, people identify more strongly with their regional television than they do with the artificial boundaries imposed on them by the Government offices for the regions.

My television region is comparatively small, covering just 19 constituencies. We therefore have more contact with our regional television than Members in London who are competing with upwards of 100 or more MPs for regional coverage of their activities. That suggests to me that smaller regions are preferable to the danger of the amalgamation of regions through company buy-outs.

Regional programming plays a unique and invaluable role in British television. Whenever they are polled, viewers say that it is essential that ITV produces regional programmes. The licensees network the commissioning of locally produced programmes and that provides them with extra income, from which the local economy benefits. Research by the south-west economy centre concluded that for every £1 earned by the TV sector, £1.42 is generated in the south-west, and that each job generates a further 2.6 jobs.

None the less, the future of regional television is threatened today partly because regional programming is expensive. It does not attract the same audiences as nationwide programming, and therefore has less commercial potential. In addition, the new digital platform threatens to bring an end to broadcasters' public service obligations, which have historically been predicted on spectrum scarcity. The future for regional television therefore does not look good, although the hon. Member for Selby wanted to be optimistic. I will try to be so too, although that requires the political will to protect what is good and to enhance and improve on it.

It is clear that ITV continues to be the best placed broadcaster to provide regional programming: it enjoys the regional infrastructure that the BBC sadly lacks; it has experience and expertise in commissioning regionally and broadcasting across the network; and its licence holders have a record and reputation of being quality regional providers. Despite the mergers that one feared would reduce that, so far that has not proved to be the case. We must, however, be very careful about what happens in future. To keep ITV interested in producing regional television—especially past the point at which it may be commercially viable for licence holders to go elsewhere—we as politicians must ensure that an element of regional provision does not jeopardise a company's commercial viability.

When the digital switch-over occurs, competition between broadcasters will inevitably become even more fierce. The audience and advertisers will increasingly take over from Government as the arbiters of power. In the longer term, that may mean that central Government will have to subsidise regional services to ensure their continued existence. However, in the medium term, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Trade and Industry must do some serious thinking about their new creature—the super-regulator, Ofcom.

As other hon. Members have suggested, Ofcom's powers must be strengthened, but it will need a lightness of touch as well as a sharpness of bite to succeed in the world of media regulation. It will need to understand the economic aspects of business, as Oftel now does, without threatening or undermining the public service broadcasting obligations of many companies. In the short term, there is still a need for a statutory requirement for ITV companies to produce and broadcast regional output, but we will have to use alternative carrots and sticks in the longer term.

Ofcom will need to have the power and flexibility to address the future of regional broadcasting. It will need to consider the concentration of ownership among ITV companies and gauge whether it has any effect on regional production. Flexibility will be required if audiences for regional broadcasts drop off—there is no point in merely filling quotas if broadcasters are meeting measurable demand—and in negotiations for time slots for regional programming.

The view of the Liberal Democrat party is clear. We believe in regional broadcasting and regional production, and we want a framework that will enable them to continue long into the future.

3.6 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I remind the Chamber of a former interest. Until three years ago, when I was appointed to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport shadow Front-Bench team, I was for almost 10 years a consultant to ITV, Yorkshire Television, Tyne Tees Television and, eventually, ITV Network.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on securing the debate. The Minister and I, having spent the past seven weeks in Committee, were wondering what to do with our Tuesdays and Thursdays, and 90 minutes in Westminster Hall on some of the issues that we debated in Committee is something that we look on with great relish.

I was particularly interested in the contribution of the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), because I was not entirely sure that he was singing from the same hymn sheet as the two Liberal Democrat Members who served on the Committee had at their disposal, but I shall not pursue that. However, he made one comment that struck me as different—it is something with which I strongly agree—when he said that it is important to keep in mind where the money will come from to pay for the commitments that we place on broadcasters. I shall return to that comment.

ITV has always been regarded as the regional television channel and is a feature of our broadcasting landscape. It has survived significant change in the structure of its ownership in a way that very few people in the Standing Committee discussions on the Broadcasting Bills in 1990 and 1996 thought likely or feared would be the case.

As an example, I wish to mention how important a company such as Yorkshire Television is to the Yorkshire region. YTV makes a direct contribution of £55 million to the regional economy. It is the largest media employer in the region, employing more than 1,000 people, and is at the hub of an expanding media cluster that supports jobs, independent production companies and training opportunities.

The hon. Member for Torbay referred to the importance of the south-west franchise. I was delighted to receive in the post in the past 48 hours—bang on cue for this debate—the annual programme statements and reviews for the year ahead and the past year for each of the regional ITV licences owned by Carlton. They include the south-west, HTV, Central and London. Lest anyone should think that Carlton as the London franchise holder for Mondays to Fridays is not doing its bit for the London region, last night I attended the 10-year anniversary celebration of the creation of the Carlton Television trust. During those 10 years, it has provided more than £4 million in grants to more than 1,000 charities and voluntary organisations in the London region. No other broadcasting organisation or part of our broadcasting structure has such a commitment to the area that it serves.

I daresay that Members throughout the House, not only those present today, could give examples of how the ITV regional franchise holders have most involved themselves in the cultural, business, social and community life of their regions. It is extremely important that ITV retains its regional character. The way to ensure that is to stick to the method tried and tested during the past 13 years: to give the regulator the necessary powers, although not greater than necessary, to ensure that licence commitments are fulfilled, irrespective of ownership.

Two or three events, and general concerns about future trends, provide the background to the debate on regional television of recent months. One concern is what will happen should ITV come into single ownership. There will still be 15 licences, and there are currently 27 different news studios, broadcasting local and regional television news across the length and breadth of Britain. My study of the Communications Bill during the past three months suggests that Ofcom will have the power to ensure that all that is maintained.

There is concern about what might happen to the regional aspect of ITV in the multi-channel digital world. The hon. Member for Selby has referred to some recent concerns that ITV's regional commitment is weakening, prompted by the agreement between ITV and the Independent Television Commission on its regional programming commitments. That change coincided with the BBC strengthening its regional commitments, funded largely by a licence fee increase. Against that background, the ITC made a study of regional programme production as part of a study of television programme production in this country in general. It highlighted the concern, which is justifiably held, that regional television production for national network showing is in decline.

Several issues arise from that. First, it is clear that during the past three or four years, the BBC has got richer while ITV, Channel 4 and Channel Five have got poorer because of the decline in advertising revenues. Although we hope that those revenues will recover, there is no certainty of that. We therefore think that the case for a further licence fee increase, which the Government have announced this week, is barely credible. I hope that the Minister will confirm that that increase will mean a new regulation, which we could seek to debate in the House.

A second concern related to the ITC agreement on network arrangements. There is not enough time this afternoon for us to spell out in complete detail all the benefits that the agreement provided. I refer hon. Members to columns 590–92 in *Hansard* of the 15th sitting of proceedings in Committee on the Communications Bill, when I spelled them out. ITV competes with the BBC and for most people it is the main competing channel. In trying to produce a coherent network, it is sensible that the local and regional dimensions should reflect what the BBC is doing, which is something that ITV has not done previously.

What powers should Ofcom have to ensure that ITV's regional licence holders retain and maintain their regional programme commitments to ensuring that a significant proportion of ITV network programmes are made in the region? Someone posed the question of how tough those powers should be. Contrary to what people say, the Bill's framework is adequate because it places new obligations on Channel 3 licensees. If anything, it

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may be too prescriptive and unnecessarily interventionist. Thankfully, Ofcom will have the duty to consider costs of production and sources of income.

It is important to look again at some of the smaller ITV production centres such as HTV, Scottish Television, Tyne Tees Television and Anglia Television, which are at the extremities of the national map. They could be allowed to make programmes for other networks such as Channel 4, Channel Five or even the BBC, which would allow them to contribute to independent production quotas. The issue arising from the exchange of views between the hon. Member for Selby and the Minister is that we have to decide the No. 1 priority: is it to retain serious regional production centres, which are centres of excellence, or it is simply ensuring that production centres are genuinely independent?

I want to conclude my remarks to allow the Minister the same time as I have had. Before I do so, however, I want to refer to a comment made by Mr. Mick Desmond in one of the articles that appeared in the magazine produced by the Westminster media forum about people's attitude towards ITV's commitment to the regions:

"What concerns me is that despite this strong track record, there remains a belief that ITV would get out of the regions like a shot given half a chance."

That view misunderstands what ITV is about and the fact that its regional commitment will continue because it makes commercial sense.

3.18 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): My hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) is emerging as an authority on broadcasting matters. I take his advice seriously and his analysis is always sound, Mr. Winterton—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I draw attention to my little title? It took 32 years to get it.

Dr. Howells: Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the new working arrangements have driven me demented.

I thought that Yorkshire men were supposed to be phlegmatic and down to earth, but I am thinking of turning the conspiracy theory fantasy set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Selby into a film script. I can assure him that the clauses about which he was talking were drafted in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and we have the bloodstains on the wall to prove it.

Mr. Greenway: They are the longest in the Bill.

Dr. Howells: I should say they are.

Let me take a few moments to explain how the work of the Joint Committee chaired by Lord Puttnam, with the aid of extensive consultation and the Independent Television Commission programme supply review, has helped to shape and refine our views on how to support regional television. We have set out a range of measures to maintain and strengthen regional commitments so that public service broadcasters can continue to meet the needs of different communities and cultural interests. Those measures include targets for programme production and investment in the regions, and back-stop powers for Ofcom. In its report, the Joint Committee asked for reassurance that Channel 3 regional production and regional programming requirements would not be diluted and that Channel Five would have appropriate public service broadcasting obligations. That has been the general thrust of this afternoon's debate. The Government were able to give the Joint Committee those assurances, and I will elaborate a little further on our proposals for Channel Five in a moment.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the Joint Committee's recommendations was the Secretary of State's decision to ask the ITC to undertake a thorough review of the programme supply market, about which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby knows, I was very concerned. We shall hear a lot more about that. Intellectual property rights and what happens to the return on investment, particularly that of the independents, how many of those rights they retain, and how much they can put into future investment in programmes, are all crucial, especially for independent companies, which may be operating on the very margin.

The ITC accepted that task and produced an authoritative and incisive report in November last year. The United Kingdom programme supply review investigated the role of independent producers and ways in which investment in UK programming could be sustained, but, no less important, the ITC also considered the health of the programme supply market in the nations and regions and made recommendations on how it could be supported.

The review recognised that there is a long history of successful regional production, especially centred around some of the Channel 3 regional licensees, and that economic pressures were creating new challenges to the sustainability of production outside London. As the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) reminded us a few moments ago—I could not agree more because this is the key to my argument—the top 20 programmes in the United Kingdom, week after week, are produced predominantly in two regions: Yorkshire and the north-west, by Granada and Yorkshire Television. My hon. Friend the Member for Selby said that that is formula television, but it is very successful television—people watch it. As my hon. Friend said, it has also been a great training ground where many of our best scriptwriters, dramatists, actors, producers and directors learned their trade. We must be careful not to pooh-pooh such productions, because they have been enormously important.

The ITC suggested that all public service broadcasters, including the BBC, should have obligations for investment in programming at a range of production centres in the United Kingdom outside the M25 area. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), who suffered with us for 65 hours and 26 sittings of the Standing Committee on the Communications Bill, read a couple of marvellous sentences from *Broadcast* magazine predicting a nightmare vision of clusters of regional production centres in Amersham, at the end of the Metropolitan line—outside the M25. I am sure that that article has sped around Britain with the hon. Gentleman's words

and that house prices in Amersham have gone through the roof. We have had that argument before, but I do not believe that that nightmare vision will come to pass and I shall give my reasons in a moment.

The ITC also suggested that broadcasters should be encouraged to draw up schemes for supporting regional programming initiatives and extend their codes of practice to cover programmes commissioned in specific nations and regions. That is very important. I forget which hon. Member mentioned Stuart Cosgrove, but Stuart and Channel 4 have done sterling work in regional programming, and, in so doing, they have started to develop a lot of new talent and formats. As the hon. Member for Ryedale reminded us, that is the great strength of regional broadcasting. People are not brighter or more creative in London. In fact, a great part of the creative genius of this country is out there, hidden. Regional broadcasting—whether BBC or ITV—has started to attack that problem. Channel 4 has done well, and I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Selby mentioned it.

We accepted the vast majority of the ITC's recommendations, including all those I mentioned relating to broadcasting in the nations and regions. Although I understand that we are not supposed to mention it, those who have been following the Standing Committee on the Communications Bill will know that we have introduced Government amendments to make the changes necessary to reflect that. Such changes include regional production and investment targets for all public service broadcasters and greater powers for Ofcom should the ownership of Channel 3 or Channel Five change hands.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby concentrated on that issue a great deal. He was quite right to do so; it was a focus for the Joint Committee. If the Liberal Democrat members of the Standing Committee had got up about half an hour earlier in the morning, the amendments they tabled on that subject could have been moved, and we might have had a debate. We shall probably have that debate at some other time.

Channel 3 will have targets for programmes produced in the regions for the regions, programmes made regionally for national audiences and investment in programme production in the regions. It will also have targets for the provision of high-quality regional programmes, including news, a sufficient proportion of which must be shown in or around peak time. My hon. Friend did not mention that, but I think that it is very important. The hon. Member for Ceredigion did us all a service by pointing out that there is a difference between quantity and quality. He could have added that it is very important that such material is shown at peak time. It is important because all too often regional productions are tucked away in the early hours of the morning. Nobody watches them, but the channels still meet their quotas. That does not do anyone any good.

Channel 4 and Channel Five will also have targets for programme production and investment in the regions. In addition, Ofcom will be required to publish a review of the tier 2 obligations in each Channel 3 and Channel Five licence whenever ownership changes hands. Ofcom will have powers to reset the baseline for such obligations—including targets for regional production—at the level achieved during the past year by the former owner, not merely the minimum requirements in the licence. That will provide good, cumulative build on best practice. It is very important that we incorporate that, because it means that the new owner will not be able to cut back on the existing quality of that service. We believe that the requirements will ensure that the quality of UK programming is maintained and enhanced for the benefit of regional audiences.

I do not want to miss out the very important subject of carriage by satellite. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) knows that I take a hard line on that. The public service broadcasters chose to pay for Sky's conditional access system. They could have gone direct to Astra—indeed, if ITV had been keen enough, it could have launched its own satellite; it probably would have been cheaper than ITV Digital, which had to be abandoned, turned out to be. It is not for Parliament to become involved in commercial contracts, as opposed to ensuring that regulation is good and proper. Oftel did a good job, and Ofcom has a much wider arena than Oftel had: it can look carefully at the problem and decide what a proper and fair charge for carriage ought to have been.

I am not the kind of Minister who gets involved in such commercial arrangements. There have been long periods in which ITV has done very, very well out of the commercial arrangements that were set in place for it. If we are to set up Ofcom and spend a great deal of money on it, we must trust its decisions. That is the definition of light-touch regulation. That is what we said we would do, and we will stick to it.

Argentina

3.30 pm

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): Last August, I was fortunate enough to take part in a study programme designed to provide me and three colleagues of various parties with an overview of cultural development in several different parts of the world. One of the places that we visited was Buenos Aires. The programme, the Norfolk trust fellowship, is run annually by the Norfolk trust charity and is designed to help to educate people in politics, though not just party politicians, in worldwide development issues in the widest sense. I put on record here my gratitude, and that of my fellow travellers, to use the phrase in the literal sense, to the trustees.

Argentina today contains a number of striking paradoxes. It is an astonishingly fertile, vast and beautiful country. Yet its food exports, to Europe at least, are modest and it attracts relatively few tourists, certainly from this hemisphere. The country has been fully democratic since the end of the last military junta some years ago—a famous event—yet politicians still appear to be subject to public ire, even hatred at times, that is easily observable and goes beyond what many people, even in this country, can imagine.

Argentina's economy has to all intents and purposes collapsed, yet Buenos Aires and Rosario to the north, which I also visited with the group, remain complex and functioning cities operating some thoughtful social policies and projects. The Argentine culture is notably European in feel and by instinct, with strong links to Italy and, in particular, to Spain. That contributes to the air of sophistication in the metropolitan areas, in spite of the economic difficulties.

The long historical links between the United Kingdom and the Argentine, particularly in respect of railways, farming and trading through Buenos Aires port, put more recent difficulties, or difficulties in the middle-distant past, into full perspective. It is encouraging to visit Argentina today, because it immediately becomes clear that our relations with it are historically and contemporaneously strong and improve with each passing year.

Immediately following the Falklands conflict—I shall say something about the Falklands dimension later—our relationships with Argentina were, naturally, at a low ebb. Reconstructing the relationship between the two countries in the ensuing period has been helped in no small measure by UK institutions based in Argentina. Our ambassadorial and consular services are of the highest order. The assistance that my party and I were privileged to receive from the ambassador, Sir Robin Christopher, and his staff was exemplary.

In addition to formal Government-to-Government links, it is vital to remember the long reach provided by such organisations as the British Council and the UK-Argentine chamber of commerce. The latter is assisted by a Department of Trade and Industry grant in the form of a salaried DTI official, which I suppose puts it outside the Minister's immediate ambit. However, that organisation, which enabled my colleagues and I to spend valuable time with the Argentine Finance Minister, Mr. Lavagne, seems to me to be an exemplar of the type of trade-based organisation that the United Kingdom should, and does, encourage across the world. Organisations such as the chamber of commerce are only as good as the people who run them, and I am pleased to report that our woman in the UK-Argentine chamber of commerce, Helen Diaz, is one of the best.

The economic crisis that the country faces continues to threaten the future well-being of the people of the Argentine. At present, there is no question but that Argentina is a developing country rather than a developed one—certainly in economic terms. Yet as recently as five years ago, many saw Buenos Aires as the engine of Latin American economic development. In the past five years, following a privatisation programme which perhaps did not yield all the long-term benefits that the then Government hoped for, the economy has been pretty much in freefall. Just a few months ago, it levelled out at what I earnestly hope is a trough.

Following the pesofication of the Argentine currency, which linked the value of the peso to that of the US dollar, the currency devalued to slightly more than a quarter of its previous worth against the dollar. That means that indigenous products consumed locally can still be bought and sold, but imports and hard currency exchanges of any sort remain off limits to all but the few who had significant offshore assets.

I am pleased to say that, although some international companies more or less fled in panic when the economic crisis struck, some United Kingdom companies, such as British Gas—British Gas owns Metrogas, which serves the greater Buenos Aires area—have committed themselves to Argentina for the long term and are at the heart of the fight to keep the country's infrastructure intact.

It is less pleasing to note that some other companies, including banks based in the UK and elsewhere, derived what in retrospect seems undue benefit from the collapse in the value of the peso. Since the savings of Argentine citizens with western banks would have been instantly converted into dollars or pounds for use on the international market, it should have been possible for the banks to guarantee their Argentine customers' accounts. They chose not to do so, and in doing that, I am afraid that they may well have made a great deal of money for their shareholders off the back of the bad fortune of Argentine savers.

It is worth bearing in mind that an affluent and large middle class is crucial to the success of any economy, and economic success is exactly what Argentina was achieving, even though in retrospect it appears that a fair measure of the apparent economic buoyancy of the mid to late '90s was illusory. Although I by no means blame western banks for the downfall of the Argentine economy, it remains the case that a large number of middle-class people, who saved for a rainy day and for their own future, were dealt a terrible hand when the currency crumbled.

At best, that has caused widespread insecurity. At worst, it has led to impoverishment and the creation of a new poor. People who were in the process of buying a house and whose money was temporarily lodged with the banks found that it dropped in value by three quarters, which virtually ruined many of them. Some have been unable to find work in the current climate. Some just about scrape a living by scavenging—highly effectively through the waste of Buenos Aires.

An impoverished Argentina is not in the interests of the global economy and therefore not in the interests of this country. It is true that China has an economy with an apparently prodigious rate of growth and enormous potential for UK interests, but Latin America, too, has enormous potential for our markets from the perspective of selling to it, and in due course, when it has a more developed economy, we could also buy products and services from it. The case of British Gas and its involvement in Buenos Aires shows that there is scope for success even in the current economic climate. Companies just need a bit of imagination.

For the moment, responsibility for the economy of Latin America—the leadership, as it were—seems to have transferred from Argentina to Brazil, which itself has a long way to go before its economy can truly be considered stable, let alone healthy. Yet Brazil is a huge country with a population eight times that of Argentina, so with the right encouragement and assistance, it should be possible for the smaller boat to turn more quickly and once again help to lead the Latin American charge.

Although my comments are about relations between the UK and Argentina, for many people in this country, the issue of the Falkland Islands remains a potent factor when considering a wider relationship with Argentina. I find that to be less true in Argentina, but that may reflect the current bread-and-butter problems there. Of course, for the people who fought to free the Falkland Islands 21 years ago, not least the Falkland islanders themselves, sovereignty and other related issues remain as important as ever in our relationship with Argentina. It is important to be unambiguous about the fact that the UK Government continue to endorse the right of the Falkland Islanders to self-determination—a right set out in the Falkland Islands constitution of which the UK is a guarantor.

None the less, relations between the Falkland Islands and Argentina have been much improved in recent years. For example, a new range of measures was established following a 1999 agreement between the UK and Argentina: they include enhanced co-operation between the Falkland Islands and Argentina on the sustainable management and conservation of fish stocks, with a particular emphasis on the reduction of poaching. In addition, all restrictions on Argentines visiting the Falkland Islands have been lifted and agreement in principle has been reached on the construction of a memorial to the Argentines who fell in 1982.

Relations between the UK and Argentina are becoming increasingly stronger, even in that crucial and emotional area, the Falkland Islands. With that in mind, I shall address one policy area that many people in both Argentina and the UK raise when I ask them, "What is the single thing that the UK and European Governments could do to assist the economic development of Argentina?" In reply, almost everyone refers to the common agricultural policy. I appreciate that the CAP is complex and that through the years it has delivered many benefits to the farming communities of Europe, but in its present form the CAP serves as a barrier to development in developing countries, which need as few barriers as possible if they are to prosper in the global economy.

I prepared for this debate by having dinner on Saturday evening at La Brasa, an Argentine restaurant in south Croydon, which I am willing to bet produces some of the finest steak dinners in London. Indeed, as I speak I can almost taste the delicious sauce mingling with the blood from the steak. It would be a jolly good thing if there were more Argentine restaurants with proper Argentine beef in the UK and throughout Europe. Of course, the export of Argentine beef to Europe is strictly controlled by the Hilton agreement made at the Uruguay round, under which, as I understand it, the total export weight of beef to Europe was agreed at 18,000 tonnes per year.

In view of the parlous state of the Argentine economy, it was agreed that an extra 10,000 tonnes could be exported for one year only—last year. Yet it seems that although we may hope that the Argentine economy has bottomed out, and might even be beginning to rise off the bottom, the economic conditions that led to the one-off, one-year deal remain in place. Perhaps the Minister will say whether there is any scope for the UK to encourage a continuation of that agreement for another year at least. That would do so much to help the Argentine economy and, of course, the taste buds of consumers in the UK and Europe. Will he also tell us what the UK Government intend to do in the longer term to augment the work that they are already doing in and for Argentina?

It is a privilege to have had this opportunity to raise the issue of relations between the UK and Argentina, especially at a time when other parts of the world understandably take centre stage. However, every dog has its day, and it is essential, especially in uncertain times such as these, that we continue to work in the background to ensure that in the medium and long term, potentially affluent countries can become affluent countries that are able to benefit themselves and us, not least through their full and free engagement in world trade.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) on securing the debate. I know that he takes a keen interest in this subject, because he and a number of other hon. Members came to see me after the visit he has described. I welcome that interest. We should do far more to promote healthy debate on our relationship with Argentina.

My hon. Friend will be aware from his visit last summer that the past 14 months have been exceptionally turbulent for Argentina—he referred to that fact in his excellent contribution. What happens in Argentina matters to us, to the international community, and, of course, to Argentina. It also matters to the rest of Latin America because Argentina is the largest country in south America after Brazil, and it has the third largest population, with some 37 million people. That is why I am especially pleased that we have the opportunity of today's debate. This is a good moment to take stock of developments in Argentina and review the state of our bilateral relations.

First, I shall touch on the economic situation, which my hon. Friend described graphically. We have watched the economic crisis unfold with great concern. In the

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mid-1990s, the picture was very different: Argentina had the highest income per head in Latin America, and the Argentine economy was in the world's top 20. From that position of strength, it went into severe recession due to falling confidence and an inflexible exchange rate. Between 1999 and 2002, income per head shrank by more than a fifth, and 55 per cent. of Argentines now live below the official poverty line. In the Buenos Aires suburbs, three-quarters of people are poor, half those live below subsistence levels, and there have been reports of malnutrition among children in some parts of Argentina.

The economic crisis has been the most serious in Argentina's history, and one of the worst anywhere in the world. That is worth underlining. These have been very difficult times. Furthermore, because of the country's relationship with the rest of Latin America, the crisis has had a negative impact across the region, especially on neighbouring Uruguay, which has suffered its own significant economic disaster.

There has been much discussion and debate and a lot has been written about the reasons for Argentina's economic collapse. Some blame the deficits of previous Governments, some the International Monetary Fund, the international banks, the downturn in the world economy, or the fixed exchange rate. We could spend some time debating it, but whatever the reason for the catastrophe a year ago, the country is still trying to find a way out of the crisis.

The British Government have certainly encouraged and supported the efforts of President Duhalde and his Government to tackle the serious problems that Argentina faces. Throughout the crisis, we have stressed to Argentina that the cornerstone of its economic policy should be to work as closely as possible with the IMF and the rest of the international financial community.

It is worth responding to my hon. Friend's suggestion that British banks might have taken unfair advantage of their customers when the peso was devalued. I think that all banks, whether British or not, did what the law obliged them to do at that time and in those circumstances—that is, convert deposits into pesos. Although that was unpopular in many instances, it was a valid business response under Argentine law as it stood at the time. The international community is working hard to restore stability to Argentina, and that is absolutely right.

I should like to echo some of my hon. Friend's positive comments. Although the situation remains serious and precarious, there are grounds for thinking that Argentina may have come through the worst of the crisis. The hyperinflation that many predicted has not materialised, restrictions on bank deposits have started to be lifted, and the fall in output seems to have bottomed out. I sense from my hon. Friend's remarks that he shares some of that optimistic perception.

It is clear that Argentina must now press on to lay the groundwork for a stable and productive future. Its aim must be to agree an economic programme that will lead to sustained growth and recovery. Price controls on privatised utilities should be lifted—there is significant concern about that—insolvent banks need to be restructured and progress must be made to lock in a sustainable fiscal position.

No one should underestimate the scale of the challenge that Argentina faces. In my discussions with ministerial colleagues from Latin American countries, especially from Argentina, it would be easy to lecture from the outside on the profound changes that are needed. We recognise that changes cannot be made overnight, but it is essential that Argentina start to tackle those problems now. The transitional agreement with the IMF to roll over debts until mid-year is a start, which will give Argentina some breathing space and should see it through until after the elections. I hope that President Duhalde will use his remaining time in office to make further progress towards economic stability.

Whoever is inaugurated as Argentina's next president after the elections in May will have a daunting job. Top of their agenda will be to continue to work with the IMF to rebuild Argentina's shattered economy, re-engage completely with the international financial community and help Argentina to fulfil its economic potential. I hope to visit Argentina later this year to engage with ministerial colleagues there and discuss how to deal with some of its problems.

I turn to the current state of bilateral relations. In most respects, relations between our two countries are very good. With the exception of the conflict in 1982, which was an aberration in historical terms, relations have been very positive since Argentina won its independence in 1816. The British invested heavily in Argentina during the 19th century and early 20th century; we played a central role in Argentina's development and our trading relationship has always been strong. As a passionate lover of sport, I would say that sport, too, has brought us together over the years—albeit not always in the most uncontroversial circumstances, but that is a debate for another day.

We share many concerns and common values with Argentina. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I discussed some of those issues, including the war against terrorism, with the Argentine Foreign Minister, Dr. Ruckauf, when he was here last November. My right hon. Friend and Dr. Ruckauf agreed that annual talks would take place at senior level between officials at the Foreign Office and the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I believe that they will continue and that a dialogue with Argentina on international and bilateral issues of mutual interest and concern will develop.

That will mirror the practice that we have already developed with countries such as Mexico and Brazil. Those talks will not create a new mechanism for discussing south Atlantic matters, because established bodies already exist for that purpose. However, it will be open to both sides to take note of progress on south Atlantic issues under discussion elsewhere. I shall return to matters relating to the south Atlantic.

The UK and Argentina have strong links in trade and investment. Trade in both directions was worth almost £500 million in 2000. Since then, economic difficulties have eroded that figure somewhat, but we still have substantial investment in Argentina, and our market share rose between January and November 2002. Argentina is now our fourth largest trading partner in Latin America, after Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela; and the UK is the fourth-largest European investor in Argentina, accounting for 5 per cent. of total foreign

investment. A significant number of UK companies, including British Gas, BP, National Grid, HSBC and Lloyds TSB, are significant inward investors.

On that specific point, it is worth making it clear that some of those firms are concerned that the Argentine Government have not paid sufficient attention to the problems facing foreign investors in Argentina. Our ambassador and the embassy are keen to take the opportunity to raise concerns, and I hope that we will all be able to explain them. Despite those problems, there are real opportunities for British firms and a regular flow of trade missions visits Argentina.

The nub of my hon. Friend's argument was trade liberalisation in Europe. We are playing our part to ensure a deeper and committed relationship between Argentina and Europe as a whole. We are strongly committed to negotiations for an association agreement between the European Union and Mercosur, which will bring the benefits of political co-operation and free trade to both regions. The United Kingdom fully shares Argentina's desire for liberalisation of both the EU agricultural market and the global agricultural market. Our prominent role among our EU partners in efforts to secure quotas for Hilton beef stands as an example of that.

We fully intend to press for a further extension of those quotas for Argentina in view of the prevailing economic conditions, as my hon. Friend requested. We also strongly advocate a generous EU offer in negotiations for a new World Trade Organisation agreement on agriculture, which requires reform of the common agricultural policy. The recent reform proposals advanced by the Commission will take us some way along the path towards achieving that.

Any assessment of relations between the United Kingdom and Argentina must take account of progress on south Atlantic issues. I will briefly restate the Government's policy on the Falkland Islands, to which my hon. Friend referred. Sovereignty is not negotiable unless that is the wish of the islanders themselves. The Government remain committed to the right of the Falkland islanders to determine their own future. The islands will be British for as long as the islanders wish them to remain so. We make that clear in all bilateral discussions with the Argentine Government.

However, our goal is to maintain a fruitful dialogue with Argentina on issues of mutual interest in the south Atlantic. Those two approaches are not contradictory. It is to the advantage of both the islanders and the Argentines to work together on challenges such as the preservation of fish stocks and continental shelf delimitation. We also want to make further progress on implementing the 1999 joint statement. We are working with the Argentine and Falkland Islands Governments on the construction of a memorial to the Argentine fallen in the Falkland Islands.

We continue to make progress in the South Atlantic Fisheries Commission. That commission, which comprises UK, Argentine and Falkland Islands officials, will meet again soon to discuss issues of mutual concern, including the prospects for a multilateral high seas fisheries agreement. However, we are concerned that that welcome progress will be set back if the draft fisheries poaching Bill that is currently before the Argentine Congress becomes law. I have discussed that matter with my hon. Friend. The Bill would have damaging implications for the Falkland Islands fishing industry as well as for the work of the commission.

Although there are still differences on south Atlantic issues, the important thing is to manage them sensibly and discuss practical matters affecting the Falkland Islands in a low-key, constructive way. That is in the interests of the people of both Argentina and the Falkland Islands. Such an approach is encouraging. It shows a new maturity in our relationship with Argentina, and we want to build on that. That maturity was also demonstrated by the way in which the 20th anniversary of the south Atlantic conflict was remembered in the United Kingdom, the Falkland Islands and Argentina. The emphasis was, rightly, on reconciliation rather than recrimination. That view was reflected during visits to Argentina by my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary and the Chief of the Air Staff, and by the visits to the Falkland Islands of His Royal Highness the Duke of York and the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram).

Argentina faces many challenges in 2003. The path to economic stability and prosperity for the people of Argentina is a difficult one. They have been through one of the worst recessions experienced anywhere in the world. Our role is to work with the Argentine Government and help in whatever way we can to ensure that they take the right decisions and seize opportunities. In the longer term, the prospects for Argentina are very positive, and the British Government very much want to work with its Government. The fact that we are having this Adjournment debate and that people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West take a real interest in the subject can only serve that purpose.

Seabed Management

4 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): I am delighted to have secured this opportunity to examine the workings of the Crown Estate Commission, which is one of the slightly gloomier corners of Government business. It is an area of public life that is not often overly troubled by the bright lights of public accountability, but it has a profound and real effect on the life of my constituents and many people who live in coastal and island communities throughout the United Kingdom. It was the subject of a considerable part of my maiden speech.

I would be delighted if the Minister were to say today that the Government will examine the question of ownership of the seabed. Such an initiative is long overdue. However, I realise that this is a Westminster Hall debate. I have been an MP long enough now to be realistic about what can be achieved. For that reason, I have asked that today's debate be limited to the management of the seabed. Nevertheless, it never hurts to place on record my belief that it is fundamentally obnoxious that a body such as the Crown Estate Commission should exist and should exert power in the way that it does over coastal and island communities. I speak as one who represents several island communities and was born and raised in one.

It is questionable that we should allow such a body to raise money from things on which we depend, such as piers and marinas. We have no alternative but to use them, but rent is exigible by the Crown Estate Commission on them. It is worth noting that the Scottish Parliament has just debated the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, which does a great deal to remove the blight of landlordism from the highlands and islands, but for some reason the extension of community involvement and democratic accountability stops at the low water mark.

I have no doubt that the ministerial brief will contain all sorts of details about the great munificence of the Crown Estate Commission in giving this much for this course and that much to the North Atlantic Fisheries college and so on. Of course, I am very pleased that such projects get money. However, I hope that the Minister does not expect me to be grateful for it, because it is an exercise in giving beads to the natives. Why should the Crown Estate Commissioners have the right to say that a project here or a course in a college there deserve support? Surely, people who are better qualified should have such power in their grasp, rather than the Crown Estate Commission.

I wish to examine three areas in which the Crown Estate Commission's work affects island life: aquaculture, which is a significant contributor to the economy in my constituency; the use of sub-sea cabling, which will be of interest and concern to the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. MacDonald), who is here today; and the development of renewable energy on the islands and through offshore wind farms, about which I may have an opportunity to say more later.

From our perspective, the roots of the difficulty lie in the terms of the Crown Estate Act 1961. When one speaks to the commissioners and the chief executive, there is always a great deal of wringing of hands and sucking of teeth. They say, "Of course we would like to help you, but we are bound by the terms of the Crown Estate Act 1961." When one then asks them, "If I were to find legislative time, perhaps in the private Members' ballot, to introduce a proposal to reform the 1961 Act to give you more freedom, would you be prepared to accept that?", the answer is always a resounding "Well, definitely maybe." They have never yet given a commitment.

The first provision of the Act of which hon. Members should be aware is section 1(3), which provides:

> "It shall be the general duty of the Commissioners, while maintaining the Crown Estate as an estate in land . . . to maintain and enhance its value and the return obtained from it, but with due regard to the requirements of good management."

The following subsection is interesting. It gives a power of direction to the Chancellor of Exchequer or the Secretary of State for Scotland, or a combination of the two. As far as I am aware, that power has never been exercised. That gives me cause for regret, because it appears to have been narrowly construed. It is a power that can be exercised having regard to subsection (3)—the general duty on the commissioners—but that having regard is not exclusive. There would be scope, if the Government had the political will, for a direction from the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Secretary of State for Scotland, or the two combined, to use the power to alleviate some of the worst effects of Crown Estate policy.

The more significant point is that section 3(1) provides that the right of the Crown Estate Commissioners to

> "sell, lease or otherwise dispose of any land . . . or any right or privilege over or in relation to any such land"

is subject only to

> "the best consideration in money or money's worth which in their opinion can reasonably be obtained, having regard to all the circumstances of the case".

The Crown Estate's attitude to a number of issues is based on an unnecessarily narrow construction of that subsection.

For example, rents for salmon farms are set not, like a normal rent for land, as a cost per acre or per hectare but as a percentage of the turnover of the business. In my experience, that is pretty well unique. The Crown Estate will take about 0.8 per cent. of a salmon farm's turnover as a right. It is not exigible in profits, so it is a top-line cost of the business. That is the Crown Estate Commissioners' figure. The industry, particularly in my constituency, would argue that the figure is 1 per cent. or even higher. However, it is a complex formula and I am prepared to give the commissioners the benefit of the doubt.

We refer to it as a tax. I do not see what else we can regard it as. It borders on the disingenuous to call it a right. I do not understand why we consider it necessary to tax our own agriculture industry in that way. No other significant agricultural country—not Norway, Ireland, Canada or Chile—has anything even slightly similar. Scottish Quality Salmon estimates that that makes our salmon industry 15 per cent. less competitive than those of other European Union countries, and that figure was supported by EU research.

Scottish Quality Salmon is an industry body. It also estimates that 35 per cent. of the industry's profits are taken in Crown Estate rents. Why should an industry

that already pays corporation tax and all the other taxes, and that provides jobs—some of which are very good—in some of the most economically fragile peripheral communities in this country, where such jobs are most needed, have to sustain such an extra burden? What do we get in return? The only return that I can see is that I, my Member of the Scottish Parliament colleague and a handful of councillors and industry representatives get one meal every year in the Shetland hotel, at which occasion the chief executive and a handful of commissioners come up and get roundly abused for the privilege of feeding us for the evening—although it remains to be seen whether that will continue now that the Scottish Parliament has outlawed blood sports. Why do the Government continue to allow the Crown Estate Commissioners to charge rent based on turnover? Does that place them in breach of their obligations under section 3(1) of the 1961 Act? The level of the tax and its destination are unacceptable.

If rent is to be charged for use of the seabed it should benefit the islander coastal communities concerned, and that should be something that they can set. That is a long-term goal. Of more immediate concern, I wish to know whether the Minister will use the power of direction given to the Chancellor of the Exchequer under the Act to ease the immediate crisis in our aquaculture business by allowing the 30 per cent. cut in rents that Scottish Quality Salmon and other industry bodies are seeking.

I turn to sub-sea cabling. The Minister may be aware that a project to lay a fibre optic cable between the Scottish mainland and Shetland is under consideration, although it is rather on the back burner. It would be in tune with an important Government policy on broadband to get that cable laid, and it might well be supported both financially and politically by the Scottish Executive, the Shetland Islands council charitable trust, the Shetland Islands council and the Orkney Islands council. However, if that is achieved, the Crown Estate Commission will charge no less than £64,000 a year in rent simply for the privilege of allowing that cable to lie on the seabed.

The same situation will transpire in the event that we are able to lay electricity cables to allow the export of electricity generated by tidal or wave power or wind power in the islands, which are uniquely well placed for the development of renewable energies. Island communities have welcomed such developments in a way that mainland communities further south have not.

Mr. Calum MacDonald (Western Isles): I support everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. On the central point of the importance of seeing the Crown Estate levy as a tax rather than a rent, does he agree that the sums that will be raised by the Crown Estate Commission for the development of renewable energy will be in the tens or hundreds of millions of pounds? To continue operating the system through the commission as rents will become more untenable as the years go by.

Mr. Carmichael: That is a well-made point. It highlights why it is necessary for a body such as the Crown Estate Commission to be constantly subject to review and reform. The powers were previously considered in 1961. Island communities have moved on a lot in those 42 years. Cabling is charged on a linear rate, not on turnover. I raised the point with the Sir Denys Henderson, the former First Crown Estate Commissioner and Chairman, who replied to me on 5 September 2001 and said:

> "While I can sympathise with the desire of your constituents for improved telecommunications, I hope you will understand that for reasons of equity, consistency and fair and equal competition, the Crown Estate has no option but to make a charge on the basis proposed."

I did not agree with Sir Denys on that matter. It seems patrician nonsense to suggest that the Crown Estate's rights supervene the Government's policy on the role of broadband. It is complacency of the worst sort. He also prayed in aid European Union competition law. We have within the treaty of Amsterdam the concept of peripherality, which allows the Government to make special provision for remote and island communities. That may be news to the Minister. I recommend that she read the treaty. It makes good reading for those of us who care about island communities. Why have we not taken that concept on board?

As for renewable energy and the development of offshore wind farms, I was told in an answer on 15 October 2001 at column 862W of *Hansard* that, in respect of the wind farm at Blyth, and no doubt others, the Crown Estate will be charging rent at 0.5 per cent. of turnover. Several questions spring to mind. The hon. Member for Western Isles made a good point. When the offshore wind farms are up and running, the take for the Crown Estate Commission will be enormous and disproportionate. Can the Minister explain why the figure is 0.5 per cent. for an offshore wind power station, but 0.8 per cent. for a salmon farm?

Most recently, the Crown Estate Commission announced that it has appointed management agents for the highlands and islands. We shall wait to see what difference that makes. My one worry is that it will put management one step yet further removed from the local community. I hope that the Minister can reassure me that that will not be the case and that the little accountability that we have through Parliament will not be lost or diminished.

If the Crown Estate was considering how to change its dealings with local coastal and island communities, it could have taken the opportunity to say to the communities that it wanted to make changes and was thinking about management agents. It could have asked whether the communities were interested in that, what they would expect from a management agent and how they would expect him to interact with them. The first that I heard about it was when a journalist from the *Shetland Times* telephoned me at Heathrow airport. That speaks volumes about how the Crown Estate Commission conducts its business.

I have spoken for 19 minutes, and I am anxious to leave time to heap scorn and derision on the Minister's efforts to justify the unjustifiable, so I shall conclude my remarks.

4.19 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): I congratulate the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) on securing this debate and enabling the House to throw some light on the activities of the Crown Estate. As the hon. Gentleman rightly

[Ruth Kelly]

said, the role of the Crown Estate is defined by statute under the Crown Estate Act 1961, which places a duty on the Crown Estate Commissioners to

"maintain and enhance its value and the return obtained from it, but with due regard to the requirement of good management."

That is an important consideration. The Crown Estate must comply with the requirements placed upon it by Parliament under the Crown Estate Act. That includes ensuring an acceptable return on its assets, while excluding any monopoly value. The revenue obtained from the estate cannot be used to provide hidden subsidies for either public or private purposes; nor can it be hypothecated or ring-fenced.

The management of the Crown Estate is a reserve function under the Scotland Act 1998. In discharging its management functions, the Crown Estate consults the Scottish Executive, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, local authorities and other public bodies in Scotland. The land of the Crown Estate is held in right of the Crown, but all the revenue that it raises—£163 million in 2001–02—is passed directly to the Exchequer for the benefit of all United Kingdom taxpayers.

The portfolio is worth more than £4 billion; the Marine Estate provided net revenue of £30.6 million in 2001–02, of which £4.8 million came from Scottish marine holdings. About 40 per cent. of that came from fish farming. In this financial year, the figure will be significantly less as a result of the salmon farm rent review implemented with effect from 1 January 2003.

The Crown Estate must operate within the framework of law and regulation established by Parliament including, but not restricted to, the Crown Estate Act. It must not favour particular projects, but it must approach business in an open and even-handed manner. The Crown Estate has committed itself to the principles of commercialism, integrity and sound stewardship.

Mr. Carmichael: I know everything that the hon. Lady has said, but why will she not make changes to avoid the absurd situation in which the Crown Estate can stymie a project such as the fibre optic cable project that was so much in tune with Government policy?

Ruth Kelly: I will certainly come on to the issue of cables in due course, if I have time.

The role of a landowner requires the Crown Estate to manage the estate according to sound commercial principles, but also to understand and seek to work with the industries that use its assets to ensure that high standards of management and stewardship are followed. Aquaculture is a good example of how the Crown Estate has worked with the industry and has overseen an impressive growth in fish farms—more than 550 on Crown Estate foreshore and sea bed in Scotland. That development bears witness to the fact that Crown Estate charges are not repressing the industry.

In the remaining time left, I shall try to address some of the points that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman. The Crown Estate is landlord to more than 550 fish farms located on its foreshore and sea bed around the Scottish coast. It issues leases for fish farms, following a recommendation from the local authority subsequent to consultation with the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage and the general public. Royal Assent to the Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Bill, which has been debated on Third Reading in the Scottish Parliament, will probably mean that planning responsibility for fish farms will pass from the Crown Estate to local authorities, a fact that is welcomed by the Crown Estate.

The hon. Gentleman raised specifically the charge that approximates on an annual rental basis to about 0.8 per cent. of turnover. The rent for salmon farms was agreed in conjunction with the fish farming industry. It is based on production and it is linked to the annual average selling price rising or falling in step with the market. The formula is subject to five-yearly reviews, conducted in direct consultation with the industry. That seems an appropriate method of determining the charge that is levied.

Since 1987, the Crown Estate has invested about £2 million in research projects related to fish farming, which will help to improve environmental performance and to ensure the long-term future and sustainability of that important industry.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the support given in the Shetlands to the North Atlantic Fisheries college, although I have heard that he is not particularly appreciative of that support. If one adds that support to the provision of a gas chromatograph, two student bursaries and the establishment and running costs of a Benthic survey unit, there is significant support for the industry. Elsewhere in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, another current meter has been provided to fish farmers on Orkney. Funding for further projects in the northern isles has been committed for the coming financial year.

The hon. Gentleman asks why the Crown Estate should have the power to determine how resources are used to support the industry and what sort of research should be supported. I point out to him that the Crown Estate is advised by a fish farming resources committee, on which environmental interests and business interests are represented. The best possible advice is therefore taken on how to use the money to best effect.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the power of direction over the Crown Estate, but I remind him that the power of direction can be used only with regard to the commissioner's duties. It is not such a wide-ranging power as he seems to envisage.

Mr. MacDonald: Does my hon. Friend accept that although the out-of-date system might have been tolerable from the Government's point of view in running what is effectively a tax on the relatively small salmon farming industry, when it comes to the huge potential of renewable energy the Government must consider reviewing how the money will be raised in the future and how they can manage it directly?

Ruth Kelly: In the remaining minutes, I shall try to address the points raised about cables and renewable energy. If I fail to address all the points, I shall perhaps write to hon. Members with additional information.

The Crown Estate has an agreement with the United Kingdom Cable Protection Committee in respect of telecommunication cable systems that either transit UK waters or land at some point on the UK coast. The agreement relates to international systems and sets out fixed charges based on capacity agreed with the industry within the standard legal framework established in order to regulate the use of the sea bed. Annual revenue from telecom cables is £6 million. There are around 65 cable systems on the UK sea bed, and seven of those land in Scotland while three transit through Scottish waters.

The Crown Estate has been asked to provide information on the likely rental for such a length of cable, and the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland quoted the figure of £64,000 per annum, which is consistent with charges for similar cables elsewhere. I look forward to reading the Amsterdam treaty after the debate to check out his point, on which I shall write to him, on peripherality. As I understand it, competition law requires the Crown Estate to treat all cable providers equally, but I shall look into his additional point.

The Crown Estate is actively supporting the Government's initiative on renewable energies from marine sources, and in particular offshore wind farms. The first round of offshore wind farm development resulted in 18 sites being identified, which will potentially provide 1.5 GW of electricity to the national grid. The next round of tenders will provide even more electricity, resulting in a potential contribution of almost 50 per cent. of the UK Government's renewable energy target. It is clearly important that renewable energy is encouraged by the Crown Estate, which takes its responsibilities seriously. Recognising the benefits to local communities, there will be a substantial increase in funding for marine stewardship initiatives for the financial year 2003–04, primarily through a new community and renewables fund. That recognises the need to provide coastal communities with funding opportunities to benefit from the progress in offshore renewables development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The debate is very important, but time is up.

It being half-past Four o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 February 2003

[MR. FRANK COOK *in the Chair*]

Low Income, Debt and Poverty

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

9.30 am

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): It is a pleasure to initiate this very important debate, which is my first debate in Westminster Hall, having been locked up in the Whips Office for quite a long time.

For many of us, Christmas is now a distant and, I hope, happy memory of good food, companionship and gifts. We might wince a little as we think of the cost. Perhaps we will joke with friends about the need to cut back on our waistlines, as well as our credit cards, but for many families the cost of Christmas is no laughing matter. Indeed, for many of those whom we represent, the phrase "the cost of living" is no abstract economic theory. Many families are paying for last Christmas, the one before that and the one before that, too, and will go on paying not only until next Christmas, but even far beyond.

One mother told me, quite calmly, that she fully expected to die in debt. She is not a profligate woman, simply a single mum caring for a severely mentally handicapped son in a household dependent on benefit. She first got into what she called "a little bit of debt" when the washing machine broke down and she could not get social fund loan because she was still repaying a previous loan. So she borrowed money to buy a second-hand washing machine. Then Christmas came along, so she borrowed more money, as she put it, "to give the bairns a good Christmas."

She was struggling to keep her head above water when her son was reclassified from a dependant to someone in receipt of benefit in his own right. Inevitably, there were delays in processing the claim and, although the family are now once again receiving all due benefits, they had two weeks without any income at all. In those two weeks, it was necessary to borrow money to feed the family, as well as the electricity and gas meters, and she was unable to pay the catalogue, with the consequence that an already tightly stretched budget simply ripped apart. That case, which is replicated a hundred times over in estates in my constituency, illustrates the problems that face those on low incomes in our country. For too many people, debt is part of their day-to-day financial reality.

Debt has always been with us, of course. I have a 96-year-old aunt who regales family parties with tales of family members or friends pawning dad's suit on Monday, redeeming it on Friday for the weekend and pawning it again the following Monday. Often, those were laughably called "the good old days", but poverty in this day and age is no laughing matter. When people are poor, money is very expensive.

A recent survey by the company Datamonitor estimated that more than one in five adults—7.8 million people—are victims of financial exclusion. They are routinely refused credit by banks, building societies and conventional lenders. We stand at the beginning of the second millennium, in a wealthy country, yet hundreds of thousands of people have to borrow money not for foreign holidays, but for food, gas, electricity and rent.

Although hon. Members look at those figures and try to reconcile them with the raft of initiatives to fight financial exclusion—I am proud to say that they have come from a Labour Government—there are others who view the concept of social exclusion as a wonderful business opportunity. The only alternative for most people refused credit from a conventional source is to borrow from loan sharks. Loan sharks come in different guises and different sizes—some in the guise of reputable businesses—but they all have one thing in common: extortionate interest rates and charges.

Some weeks ago, during Deputy Prime Minister's questions, I raised the plight of one of my constituents—I shall call him Mr. X—whose £7,500 debt in 1986 had risen to a staggering £43,000. My constituent had multiple debts. I must take this opportunity to correct the record, because I attributed the £43,000 debt, to Provident Financial when I should have placed the blame fairly and squarely where it belonged, on another company, Paragon Finance—a successor to Universal Credit. Provident Financial was naturally upset about that mistake and felt that it damaged its good name, so I am pleased to put the record straight now.

Provident Financial is, however, a major player in my constituency and one of the most successful credit providers. It was actually founded by a Wesleyan Methodist preacher, Joshua Waddilove, to provide small loans to the poor. Nowadays, its main business is to offer short-term, unsecured loans of between £100 and £400, with weekly payments collected by company agents. On the face of it, Provident Financial's most popular loan of £100, requiring weekly payments of £3 over 53 weeks, sounds easily manageable to low-income families. The overall cost of borrowing that £100, however, is £59. I am told by the Library that that is equivalent to an annual interest rate of 95 per cent. In this industry, however, interest rates can reach a staggering 160 per cent. and more.

For many in Tyne Bridge and elsewhere, taking out a loan with the "Provy" is an accepted way of life. The "Provy" deliberately recruits friendly, local members of the community to collect its money. Incidentally, they are paid a commission on what they actually collect, not on what is owed, which also means that they are self-employed, thus saving Provident the tedium of personal injury insurance and other employment expenses. There is no doubt that they know their customers well, and they help their clients to take out new loans for Christmas, birthdays, new school uniforms and so on. Knowing the market is a feature of the enterprising lender.

Cattles, another big shark in the pond, claims that it knows when to collect because

"we have to get our money back before they spend it on alcohol, cigarettes, horse racing or whatever".

[Mr. David Clelland]

That is a cynical stereotype, of course, but several common threads unite the cases of constituents who come to me for help. All are on low incomes. All bump along financially until an unexpected event—a cooker breaking down or, as in the case of Mr. X, sudden unemployment. All are at the mercy of high interest rates and charges.

Unemployment meant that Mr. X could not meet his monthly repayments and he was therefore taken to court. Imagine his relief when the court decided that he should repay the debt by a fixed payment of £40 per month, but froze the loan at its then level of £9,500. At least he could see an end to the debt, albeit many years away. Imagine his horror when, in 2000, the House of Lords, in its wisdom, decided that lenders should be able to continue charging interest on their loans even after courts had set fixed repayments. Within months, Mr. X's loan account resembled a list of telephone numbers as the interest accrued. Perhaps the £60 it costs to borrow a Provident loan fades into insignificance in comparison, but both illustrate the same high cost of borrowing for desperate people.

I do not think that unscrupulous lending is confined only to loan sharks. Many banks offer payment protection insurance—PPI—to people taking out loans. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson) recently outlined a case in which a constituent of his had been advised to take out PPI, adding another £1,000 to the loan that she took out with Lloyds TSB for her daughter's wedding. That was no problem, except that PPI is insurance to ensure repayments in the case of loss of employment. My hon. Friend's constituent was unemployed and therefore ineligible for the benefits of PPI . She was not advised of that; on the contrary, she was advised that the insurance was in her interest. I had a virtually identical case in which a woman had taken out a loan with Lloyds TSB and had also taken out PPI. She, too, was unemployed—in fact, her income came from maintenance payments from her ex-husband—so she, too, could not benefit from PPI. Yet the policy had added massively to the cost of loan repayments: more than £1,000 extra on a £3,000 loan. It was virtually worthless to the borrower. To add insult to injury, interest was charged on the full amount including the insurance premium.

No one would advocate that Provident, Paragon or any other lender should lend without charging any interest. We do not expect them to behave like charities. There should, however, be a maximum level of interest that a lender can charge. Interest rate ceilings operate in several European countries and most US states. In Ireland, for example, lenders are required to register their charges, while Holland has an interest rate ceiling of 40 per cent. Right now, in the UK, the only curb comes from the Consumer Credit Act 1974 and the Office of Fair Trading. The Trading Standards Institute has admitted that the legislation is ineffective and that successful prosecutions are rare.

The Labour party has a manifesto commitment to crack down on loan sharks, and to consider statutory limits on credit interest rates. The legal definition of extortionate credit therefore needs to be redefined to provide effective protection against creditors who charge extortionate rates or operate oppressive practices or impose oppressive terms. There should also be an obligation on finance companies and banks to advise customers that payment protection insurance is not relevant in all cases.

Too little attention is given to the regulation of the activities of the alternative credit market, yet that market is growing. We are now subjected to television advertising by debt management companies, unsolicited e-mails from loan companies, and mountains of junk mail offering easy money. The rights of low-income customers to financial services are not sufficiently supported or enforced and too little is done to promote consumer power or confidence.

We penalise our poor several times over. For instance, it is cheaper to pay for gas, electricity and water by direct debit, but that option is not open to people who do not have a bank account. They pay correspondingly more for their fuel because they use the key system, in which a meter key is charged up to enable access.

On one estate in the north-east, two thirds of the people who took part in a recent survey had had credit applications to conventional sources refused. That was for a variety of reasons, such as postcode, outstanding debts, the credit history of a previous occupant, or too low an income. Of those surveyed, 46 per cent. were in debt to buy clothes, 37 per cent. to buy food, and 16 per cent. to meet fuel bills. We drive our poor into the arms of loan sharks.

There is an alternative. Credit unions exist in many communities to offer credit to people who are excluded from the high street banks and building societies. Of course, they charge interest too, but at a much lower rate—usually about 13 per cent. A person taking out a £100 loan would pay back as little as £106.50, compared with the massive £159 they would pay back to the "Provy". A credit union is owned and run by its members, who save regularly into a common fund and who share the common bond of where they live or work. Credit unions keep money within a community and increase people's control over their finances. In the areas where credit unions operate, they have an obvious and immediate impact on the amount of extortionate borrowing.

The Government support credit unions and have done much to promote them. I hope that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will be able to tell us today that more will be done to help the development of credit unions and to curb the worst excesses of those who prey on the financial problems of too many low-income families in our constituencies.

9.42 am

Mr. John Battle (Leeds, West): I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) back to the land of the living from the Whips Office. He has done his constituents, the House and the country a service by raising this deeply serious matter, and I hope that this will not be the last time that it is debated in the House. Unjustifiable charging locks the poorest into deep and long-term debt and people are left with no alternatives to get the basics they need to survive.

In the heady world of economics, we refer to financial shocks. My hon. Friend put it well when he spoke of unexpected events. A new baby will need a pram or a

carrycot. If a relationship breaks down, people may need a new home, for which a bed, sofa, cooker and curtains will be needed. To people who are poor, £4.99 a week may seem a manageable offer. However, in practice, a degree in maths is usually needed to work out the compound annual percentage rate noted in the small print.

I am pleased to see the Financial Secretary to the Treasury here today. She was at the launch of the "end doorstep debt" campaign, which was set up by Church Action on Poverty and others. I know that she takes these matters seriously, so I am pleased that she will be responding to the debate today.

We must take steps to tackle this injustice. The loan system is generating poverty. All our efforts at regeneration are being undermined by the increase in poverty that is caused by the loan system—loan sharks and legal lenders who lend at incredibly high rates of interest.

In my neighbourhood, at the corner of Armley town street and Branch road, in Leeds, West, a Lloyds bank was boarded up for some months but has now been reopened as the Western Union Cash Connector. It sounds like something from the wild west. It is plastered with luminous red and yellow signs advertising financial services, pawn broking, cash loans, cheques cashed, and pay day advances. The signs also say "Goods back later, raise your cash today." It is not the only such lender in the neighbourhood. Non-standard loan companies offer loans to people who cannot get credit from banks and buildings societies and who do not have enough money to have a bank account or an ordinary credit card. Such companies are proliferating, especially the cheque-cashing companies or what are known euphemistically in my constituency as the wage-stretcher businesses. A company called Clear-a-Cheque has two branches in Wortley and Old Farnley and it offers to cash wage cheques, pension payouts, social security cheques, giros or even a lottery ticket if it can be seen to be a winner.

Companies, such as Provident Financial, First National and others, put leaflets through doors advertising their rates of interest, but their charges for cashing a third-party cheque include a deduction of between 8 and 15 per cent. They then add on a cheque-handling charge of between £2 and £5. Therefore, in practice, cash advanced against a personal cheque for £100 to be settled 28 days later can run up interest charges of at least 17 per cent.

The injustice is that a loan of £100 can mean repayments of—to quote three companies—£191.76, £202.80 or £220.24 at unbelievable APRs. I have worked out the APR in those cases at 280.5 per cent., 329.9 per cent. and 440.1 per cent. respectively. How out of line those rates are with the current bank rate of 4 per cent.! As my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge spelled out, a credit union commendably offers a rate of 12.6 per cent. The figures I cited illustrate how the poorest in our neighbourhoods are being deliberately targeted to tie them to long-term unsustainable debt.

In my neighbourhood, there is a company called Brighthouse, which used to be called Crazy George's, and it put a catalogue through doors with the offer:

"Discover Affordable Shopping Made Easy".

Its brochure says:

"All our products are available with no deposit and no credit checks."

Unlike other discount stores, the goods are expensive and all the goods are quoted at the per week hire purchase price which appears, in bold letters, as £4.99 a week. However, the total cash price is buried in the small print underneath. The cost of a bed is £4.99 for 156 weeks—that is three years—and that runs at an APR of 29.9 per cent. In other words, the actual cost of the bed, without a mattress, works out at £432.38. At MFI, the same bed costs £189 with a mattress. People are getting over-priced goods at incredibly high rates of repayment.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I am glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned Crazy George's as there is a branch of that outfit in my constituency. Does he agree that action should be taken to ban such activities or, at least, ensure that the true costs of lending and the true interest rates are made clear and visible to customers, who should not be misled in the way that he has highlighted?

Mr. Battle: I completely agree.

We should be open about the fact that this activity is perfectly legal. It can be licensed. But we need to spell out who is paying the highest price. Brighthouse is funded by a major bank, so we are all locked into an unjust loan system for the poorest. Those involved are fostering deep debt, so I could argue that use of credit cards by the rest of us is at the expense of the poorest, because the cards are being subsidised by those paying the highest rates—inflated rates—as in the case of Brighthouse customers.

We could also make it plainer that there are alternatives. The cost of a second-hand washing machine at £421.51, with a payment of £6.50 a week over three years, will work out at £1,028.04 on an APR of 29.9 per cent. In addition, service and insurance charges can be as much as the price of the machine. Remploy is reconditioning washing machines that can be bought for a quarter of the cost. People need to be aware that there are alternatives.

I stress that what the companies are doing is not illegal, but what little the poorest have is being taken off them by incredibly exorbitant interest rates. The poorest are being forced to pay the most in our society, not least because they have nowhere else to go. An estimated 7.9 million people in Britain, one in five, unable to obtain money direct from a high street bank or a finance house, have no choice but to borrow at very high rates of interest from those money lenders.

This sub-prime lending market, as it is sometimes described, is not illegal, but it is highly lucrative. The market analyst, Datamonitor, claims that it is huge, worth at least £16 billion a year. Who is that money coming from? Answer: the poorest.

Datamonitor published in January a report on sub-prime lending, "UK Non-Standard and Sub-Prime Lending 2003", which provided five-year forecasts for these markets, examining competitive and regulatory developments. It suggested strategies for new business developments, providing non-standard lending products to the poorest. Chapter 6, on home-collected credit,

[Mr. Battle]

contained an assessment of the impact on the debt of the doorstep campaign, led by Church Action on Poverty and other charities, commenting:

"Government initiatives: despite the hype they currently pose little threat"

If my hon. Friend the Minister wants her Department to buy the Datamonitor report, it will find it quite difficult, because the report costs $3,215, which is beyond the budget of the Library of the House.

If that organisation is suggesting to sub-prime lenders that the Government will do nothing to interfere with them, but will enable them to expand their market, we should be interfering more to tackle the problem and not leave reports advising the bankers buried in documents that no one can afford. It is big, lucrative business.

On 26 January *The Sunday Times* spelled out that some of Britain's banks are behind the sub-prime lenders. They are making millions by charging interest rates of up to 80 per cent. on loans and credit to the poorest. The Associates, owned by Citibank Group, is pushing unsecured personal loans at rates of up to 36 per cent. Next the newspaper referred to First National, then owned by Abbey National, which recently sold it to GE Capital.

I pause for a moment to reflect on Abbey National and First National. First National was the consumer credit arm of Abbey National. It was sold to GE Capital last week for £848 million. GE Capital pointed out on its website that the £848 million price included £355 million cash or "surplus equity" as well as £630 million underlying net tangible assets. Where has that £355 million surplus come from? Answer: the poorest in our society, locked into paying high interest rates for years.

Brighthouse is owned by Nomura bank, which is making money out of the poorest and hiding behind the high street banks and finance companies, perhaps hoping that we shall not notice.

The huge profits that are going to the banks are being sucked out of the poorest areas. A study of residents of the Meadowell estate on Tyneside found that 85 per cent. of households on three streets were paying moneylenders nearly a third of their weekly income in credit. Collectively, they were paying an astonishing £370,000 a year. The average income was £200 a week. What are we playing at when that amount of money is being sucked out of poorer neighbourhoods? Those companies, which charge up to 20 times more than the base rate through their subsidiaries, are targeting low earners in a £16 billion lucrative sub-prime money lending market.

It is not simply a matter of leakage, as the New Economics Foundation calls it, as money is pulled out of poor areas, but a matter of the banks making a profit from the poorest which they use to run their whole organisations. In practice, the banks are forcing the poor to subsidise the credit cards of the better-off by making them pay the highest rates of all. What sense can we make of social inclusion policies when the poorest are forced to pay the most? It is the inverse of justice. It is not just one circle, in which poor people go to those companies because they do not know any better and cannot add up while the rest of us sit by and say, "If only the poor were not so ignorant and organised their affairs better, the world would be a better place." We are all locked into the problem. Our lower-cost credit cards come on the backs of the poorest in society, who are locked into deeper debt by extortionate lenders. We are tied into the same system. The credit cards of the better-off are provided at the expense of the poorest who are crippled by debt.

What should we do about it? I have three suggestions, and I thank the 140 Members who signed early-day motion 257. The first is to have a cap on lending rates, as set out in the Consumer Credit Act 1974. Let us put that cap back so that people are not allowed to lend on APRs of 100 per cent., 200 per cent., 80 per cent. and so on. The second is to ask the Minister to ask her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to revamp the social fund. People who apply to the social fund are told that they cannot get a grant. Instead, they have to get a loan and, as they are not wealthy enough to pay it back, they are locked into the system run by the sub-prime lenders. The social fund should give people an alternative.

My third suggestion is to back up the plea by my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge for more support for alternatives, such as credit unions, in our neighbourhoods to give people a practical choice. They need a collective bank and lending organisation that lets them get at the basics. The issue will not go away overnight, but I am convinced that the Government could do more to introduce preventive measures now to ensure that the poorest do not pay the highest price.

9.58 am

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) on securing this important debate. It takes place in the context of a Government who have done more than most to tackle poverty, first and foremost by cutting unemployment, but also by such means as introducing working tax credits, the national minimum wage and the extra and targeted help for pensioners. For some loan sharks, however, the prospect of the poor getting a bit more money is a mouth-watering proposition to be exploited to the full. Judging by the news I read last week, the Low Pay Unit has been disbanded. That is a great shame and I hope that steps will be taken to maintain an organisation that speaks up for the low paid and identifies the causes of poverty, because it is still widespread.

Poverty is not simply about having a certain level of income, but about how that income is spent. In contrast to the poor, it is often the case that the rich pay less, and sometimes nothing, for their loans. Better interest rates, more understanding from the banks and special deals are always on offer to those who have a decent income. For those who have an indecent income, there is always the lure of offshore tax havens, where they can shelter their no doubt hard-earned cash out of reach of the taxman.

For many of my constituents, no such opportunities arise. Their financial advisers are of a different, unscrupulous variety—loan shark is the name that we mostly associate with such people. However, in my constituency it is more common to find respectable companies making a killing from selling expensive loans to people in urgent need of money. Those public limited

companies sport well-designed websites, produce glossy leaflets and no doubt have a sales patter to match. Loans are not their only business. Being the caring people that they are, they are into expensive insurance as well.

A case brought to my attention involves a constituent who was loaned £500—not much by today's standards. On top of that, he bought health care insurance at £130 and optional payment protection insurance for another £100. In addition, he faced a £65 acceptance fee, making a total of £795. He received the whole sum on credit, and the APR was 90 per cent. Such charges are both extortionate and disproportionate, especially as the loan was only for 12 months. None of that insurance protected my constituent when repayment became difficult for him. Indeed, the authors of his misfortune, Welcome Financial Services Ltd.—a misnomer if ever there was one—called at his mother's house threatening court action. To add to the irony of its name, the company has won an Investors in People award. It would say that it is doing nothing illegal and would, no doubt, point to other loan sharks whose behaviour is 10 or 100 times worse. However, that is no defence. Those rip-offs may seem more respectable, but they are still rip-offs. According to a copy of my constituent's repayment record, he had managed to repay about £290 of the original loan—more than half of the lump sum that he wanted—before he ran into difficulties.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): One of my constituents borrowed money for a car. He took out a protection loan of almost £700, but he was fooled into taking out extra insurance, most of which was covered by his car insurance anyway. After a year of paying back a £2,000 loan, he was still almost £3,000 in debt.

Mr. Challen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that example, which shows that insurance mis-selling is rife. Never mind interest rates and so on, we must urge the Minister to address the problem of insurance mis-selling.

The loan period for my constituent began in May 2002. By 5 November last year, his debt was £902.43, despite the money that he had paid back. I am dealing with a similar case, in which one of my constituents borrowed £7,000 plus an astonishing £1,400 insurance fee in 1990. She now owes more than £11,000. Some of that debtor's problems stem from the fact that shortly after getting the loan, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The lender, the Consumer Loans Company Ltd., apparently thought that she should have known about that before taking out the loan. A sum of £8,000 has been repaid, but £11,000 is still outstanding. The loan company is a subsidiary of a larger, respectable corporation and is part of Nikko Principal Investments Ltd. We are therefore not talking about little back-street outfits which double up as cowboy wheel clampers. These are companies that pride themselves on their image as big players, but their apparent corporate social responsibility does not bear scrutiny.

There must be much tougher regulation of consumer loans and, indeed, other types of personal finance. Like, I am sure, every Member here today, I fully support the work of credit unions, and am pleased to have attended an exploratory meeting in Morley, which sought to extend the credit union movement to the town. There must be an attack on two fronts; not only do we need the sound, reliable credit union alternative but we must crack down on loan sharks. I think that some credit card suppliers fall into that category. We must establish limits on what companies can charge in relation to loans. All the insurances that prove to be useless when the time comes to call upon them must bear some relation to the amount that is borrowed, and it must be clear whether they are optional. There should also be a statutory limit on interest rates. We should not permit extortion. I want local registers of licensed loan companies to be publicly available, and door-to-door loan selling should be outlawed.

Perhaps some of those measures could be described as anti-market. So be it. I remember a loan market that did not operate unscrupulously. My first record player was bought in 27 instalments of £1 a week, funded out of my pocket money, and £27 was the ticket price of the item. I might add that at the age of 13 or 14, I did not have a previous credit record, so by today's standards, I would never have been given the opportunity to borrow in the first place. Now it seems that what people are being sold is not the merchandise so much as the loan and insurance, and that the people at whom the loans are being targeted are generally the low-paid. This is a market in misery and it is time for the Government to stamp it out.

10.6 am

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) on securing this debate. Of course, this is not the first debate in this Session on subjects related to debt. The fact that the issue arises time and again in Westminster Hall shows that in constituencies throughout the country, this is a problem of which we as Members of Parliament are all aware and on which the need for continued action grows day by day.

I should like to highlight a particular aspect of the difficulties faced by people—especially those on low incomes—who fall into debt that they cannot repay: the growing business of debt management companies, which is taking an increasingly high profile in many of our constituencies. I am sure that hon. Members will be aware of the activities of debt management companies, which offer an apparently attractive way of dealing with the mountain of debt that presses down on people by bringing all their debts, whether they are from credit cards, store cards or loans, into one easy-to-pay monthly offer. Such companies appear to offer an attractive way of getting out of the financial difficulties caused by multiple debts.

Many hon. Members will have seen that advertising by such companies is appearing increasingly frequently on television, in the newspapers and elsewhere. Such advertising could persuade the consumer that the companies are altruistic enterprises that offer their services almost out of the goodness of their hearts. What customers often do not realise until they become trapped in debt management companies' tentacles, however, is that they are commercial organisations that are rapacious in the charges and fees that they extract from the people whom they have encouraged to use their services.

Customers of debt management companies typically pay charges for the service provided that equal about 15 to 25 per cent. of their total debt. They will normally

[Mr. Mark Lazarowicz]

have to pay an initial set-up fee and will be charged an ongoing monthly fee that can be a very high percentage of their total repayments. Guidance is provided by the OFT and there is legislation that seeks to regulate this area of activity, but the evidence shows that the regulation is not effective and needs tightening up. People often need to be freed from the further entrapment in debt that can result from their taking out contracts with debt management companies.

A recent survey by the Consumers Association published in *Which?* magazine investigated the behaviour of a total of seven different debt management companies, most of which were big operations functioning throughout the country. For every single company, there was at least one instance of its having breached the OFT guidelines. Indeed, the Consumers Association came across other examples of practices which may not have been in breach of the guidelines but which were certainly unacceptable.

I would like to highlight some examples of the practices of these debt management companies. One of the most obvious ways in which such companies operate—one that I find totally unacceptable—is to use misleading advertising. This issue was drawn to my attention not only by the Consumers Association report but because one of these organisations has recently started advertising in the Edinburgh area. That stimulated my interest in this subject. I have here an advert from a company called EuroDebt, which advertises the fact that the company has opened a new Edinburgh office this month. The advert itself is described as "advertorial", which is obviously designed to encourage readers to believe that it is not what it seems to be. It tells us that the regional adviser for EuroDebt in Edinburgh is aware that

"personal debt is a huge and growing social problem ... EuroDebt's staff are fully aware of the trauma that debt problems can cause an individual or family. The never-ending stream of threatening letters and phone calls causes untold problems and stress."

The advert ends by urging its readers:

"If you want further information, why not call"—

it gives a number—

"for a confidential meeting—it costs nothing to talk and listen."

Nowhere is there any mention of the fact that charges or fees will be involved. The innocent reader could well get the impression that this is some kind of altruistic enterprise by the company. This company is not unique and these practices are not unique to that part of the country.

Miss Begg: I do not know whether my hon. Friend has satellite or digital TV, but I was quite shocked when I discovered that most of the adverts on such TV channels are about debt relief. These adverts often give the impression that if someone signs up to what the adverts propose, all their debts will suddenly disappear or be managed much more easily. What they do not say is that, in offering these services even to people with a bad credit record, the companies will demand ginormous repayments that will leave people with a worse debt than the one they already have.

Mr. Lazarowicz: That is absolutely correct. My hon. Friend has illustrated how the advertising and publicity for this type of company is now very widespread. It appears in all forms of media, but it is typically directed at those who are likely to be either on a low income or suffering from heavy levels of debt, or both. I am glad that my hon. Friend has drawn that issue to hon. Members' attention.

The fact that people are not aware of the initial set-up fees—the cost of getting involved in this type of service—was highlighted by the Consumers Association report, which found that only three of the seven debt management companies that it investigated made it clear that an initial set-up fee was involved. This was just one example of ways in which companies were extracting more money from those who were already in a difficult financial situation.

I have received a briefing from Citizens Advice Scotland on this issue, which gives a host of examples of ways in which a fee-charging system can operate. There is not time for me to outline them all, but I would like to highlight two examples that illustrate the type of practice that is going on. A citizens advice bureau in east Scotland told of a single female client who received incapacity benefit. She had multiple debts incurred through illness, which required her to leave her full-time job. She contacted a debt management company to deal with debts of approximately £58,000. The company calculated a repayment of £526 a month, of which £95 would be a fee. If the agreement ran its term, the client would be required to make payments to the debt management company for 11 years, during which it would receive more than £12,000 in fees.

At the opposite end of the financial scale, a CAB in the south of Scotland told of a client with two children who received income support. Her debts amounted to approximately £2,000. She had used a debt management company and was paying £110 a month towards her debt, of which £19 was the fee to the company. In her case, the CAB could offer her a free money advice service. She got the service for nothing from the CAB when she was paying approximately 20 per cent. of her debt repayments to the debt management company.

EuroDebt, as I said, has begun to advertise in the Edinburgh area. The Consumers Association, in its investigation, was shown a letter from that company which suggested that a client should pay £10 a month to be split between various creditors but EuroDebt would charge £29 a month for its services. It charged more for its services than the sum that it suggested for repaying her debts.

I have given examples of the way in which debt management companies frequently behave. The Consumers Association and Citizens Advice Scotland have a host of other examples of the way in which such companies rip off the people whom they have encouraged to use their services.

Mr. Clelland: Does my hon. Friend agree that if our debate conveys any message to low paid people in our constituencies, it is that those who get into financial trouble should contact an accredited credit union or, if none are available, the CAB, which does fantastic work and can guide them along the right path?

Mr. Lazarowicz: Absolutely. We must always advise people not to use to such loan companies and to go to

the CAB and bodies such as the Consumer Credit Counselling Service, which offers a free service, as hon. Members know. People should also use the debt helpline, which the Government have set up in various parts of the country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge and others have said, one of the most effective methods of dealing with debt management companies is providing alternative services and ensuring that they are funded and well publicised. No matter how tight the regulations, some companies will try to find ways round them because debt is big business, and big companies and big interests are involved in it.

EuroDebt claims in its advert that it employs approximately 200 people nationwide. I am sure that that represents the tip of the iceberg. Alternative forms of debt management advice and credit need greater publicity and support. However, the legislation and the guidelines need to be tightened. Such businesses currently operate legally, and conditions and guidelines are meant to be in place. Evidence that I have gleaned from surveys by bodies such as the Consumers Association and Citizens Advice Scotland shows that the guidelines are not being enforced as tightly as they could be.

Under existing guidelines, we want the Office of Fair Trading and, when appropriate, the Financial Services Authority to police debt management companies and clamp down on their practices, which drive so many of our constituents into ever deeper poverty. That should be a priority. I hope that the Financial Secretary can give a commitment that she will tell the OFT and the FSA that they should clamp down on the practices that I have described more effectively and directly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): I ask hon. Members to remember that it is normal practice to set aside the final 30 minutes of 90-minute debates for the three winding-up speeches. Each generally takes one third of that time; at least, they do not exceed it. The exception is the Minister, if time allows. We have 41 minutes and I expect the winding-up speeches not to exceed one third of that time.

10.19 am

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): I am sure that I shall be able to comply with that request.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) on raising an important issue. It has been debated before, but it is essential that we keep returning to it. It is felt that a lot of talk is going on, but no action has yet been taken to deal with the abuses perpetrated by a range of companies—not just small loan sharks, but some of the major high street retailers, through store cards, and some of the major credit card companies.

Much has already been said today about the lower end of the market, the most disreputable end—loan sharks, for instance. I want to concentrate on the behaviour of the major high street retailers and credit card companies, some of whose practices are also pretty disreputable.

There is nothing wrong with borrowing; we all indulge in it, myself included. It is when borrowing gets out of control that it causes real problems. Those on the lowest incomes are affected most, and the misery that they suffer is quite unacceptable.

Back in October, during a debate initiated by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz), the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson), said

> "Ultimately, individuals have a responsibility to manage their own finances effectively, but the Government's role is to empower them to do so. We need to be able to create the right regulatory framework to facilitate a competitive market environment and ensure appropriate consumer protection." [*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 30 October 2002; Vol. 391, c. 294WH.]

I agree with all that, but we are not there yet, which is why this debate is so important.

A recent report by the Select Committee on the Treasury examined the issue of credit cards. The Committee found a serious lack of transparency in the information given to consumers. Everyone thinks about the APR advertised by credit card companies, but the Committee discovered that it was possible to have three credit cards with the same APR, but to pay a different price for the credit in each case. That is because a number of other charges are involved, depending on the length of the interest-free period, on whether there is an interest-free period, and on which debts are paid off first. Changes in the rules are often not made clear to consumers. When taking evidence, the Committee was told that it would take a mathematician to calculate the amount that was actually due.

That is not acceptable. I would like companies themselves to regulate the situation by agreement, but they are reluctant to get to grips with the problem. They are, as it were, drinking in the last chance saloon. They need to get their act together and demonstrate that they can provide transparency. If they do not, regulation must be considered.

There has been a good deal of talk about amendment to the banking code, but nothing of any substance has happened yet. I think that all credit card companies should be required to present clear examples based on, say, borrowing of £1,000. They should say how much it would cost, in actual pounds, to repay that amount after a certain number of months. It is no good setting out an APR that, as I said, may mean very different things, depending on all the other charges. Consumers need to know about the actual cost of the credit, rather than the very complicated ways of calculating it. That reform is possible, but still no action has been taken.

The interest rates charged by some of the major high street retailers on store cards are absolutely scandalous, to the extent that they make credit cards look cheap. Again, it is the poor who suffer most. Those with financial nous and plenty of cash flow can play the system: they can take advantage of introductory offers and pay the card off within the specified interest-free period. However, those without that ability and cash flow end up getting themselves into real trouble.

Just before Christmas, my researcher and I conducted a small study. He went to Oxford street to find out how much credit he could get in one day by wandering into a number of major high street retailers. He built up, in theory, a total of £6,850—I should hasten to add that he did not actually spend the money—in a single stroll down Oxford street. The interest rates charged constitute a scandal. There is a real hall of shame of high street retailers, of which I shall give some examples. It is worth pointing out that most of these companies

[Norman Lamb]

provide a small discount for those who pay off the debt by direct debit, but for those who do not—often, people on the lowest incomes find it impossible to pay by direct debit—the example interest rates are as follows. British Home Stores charges an APR of 29 per cent; Laura Ashley charges 30.7 per cent; River Island charges 29.9 per cent; Top Man charges 29.9 per cent.—"Top Man", but a top rate of interest—Wallis charges 30.9 per cent; and Allders charges 29.8 per cent. So it goes on.

The House of Commons Library made the following calculation in respect of Allders, which offers up to £2,000 credit on the day that one goes into the shop. If minimum payments are made on that maximum credit limit, the cost for just one year is £451. That is totally unacceptable. Total borrowing on credit and debt cards was estimated to have reached some £20 billion by December last year. The lack of transparency in respect of store cards that is unacceptable. The details are often hidden in the small print, so the consumer simply does not notice them when they take out the card. Here, I should mention the honourable exception of John Lewis, which charges only 13 per cent. That demonstrates how unacceptable the others are, and if John Lewis can do it at 13 per cent., so can they.

I want to add to the comments of the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith about the outrageous behaviour of debt management companies. The Consumers Association made a serious contribution to the debate by carrying out the investigation to which he referred. However, such companies prey on the fear and panic of people who are already having real difficulty paying off debt. As we have heard, those companies advertise in all sorts of media, including daytime television. Their aim is to capture people who, in fact, do have the sensible alternative route of their local citizens advice bureau. There are also other means of obtaining free advice—advice that is often much more effective in determining what best such people should do to address their debt problems. As others have done today, I pay tribute to the work of citizens advice bureaux throughout the country, and to the army of volunteers who do so much to help people in these desperate situations.

Mention has been made of the Office of Fair Trading standards, but the Consumers Association found that those standards had been breached by all the companies that it surveyed. Some of the breaches have already been referred to, but I want to pick out one or two examples. Companies often fail to carry out a proper assessment. Sometimes, assessments are made merely after a nine-minute telephone conversation. That is an inadequate basis on which to determine the scale of the problem and how best to resolve it.

There is a complete lack of transparency about the fees charged by debt management companies. Having to pay fees when one is already deep in debt simply makes the debt worse. The same applies to the penalties for terminating contracts early.

Companies do not deal with the priority debts. They put to one side debts such as council tax payments, rent arrears and court fines, which is extremely irresponsible. If those debts are not given priority, the person could lose their home or go to prison.

Extraordinary means are used to sell products to people in desperate need. For example, Gregory Pennington Ltd. recommended that the Consumers Association investigator take out an account with the Royal Bank of Scotland, that had a £25 set-up fee and a charge of £8 a month thereafter, when a basic bank account would have been a much more sensible choice. The same company advised taking out payment protection insurance, a point to which the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge referred. The charge for the insurance was £7.50 per £100 of cover. That is completely unacceptable. Pressurised selling techniques were also used by another company, Baines and Ernst. Such companies play on the fact that people are desperate for help.

People are persuaded to consolidate their debts or to secure debts against their property. A range of debts may pose real problems for an individual, but if they end up with a loan secured on their house that they are unable to repay, they could lose the house. That can only make the situation worse.

I referred earlier to the Minister's comments in the debate last October. What is being done to ensure that the abuses are addressed? At present, we have an over-indebtedness taskforce; a Department of Trade and Industry working group on marketing techniques; a performance and innovation unit report, "Lending support: Modernising the Government's use of loans", which recommended a review of Government policy on over-indebtedness, so a further review was set up; a review of the Consumer Credit Act 1974; and the Cruickshank report. There is a lot of talk, but where is the action?We need proper controls in this sector, ideally by agreement and voluntary self-regulation, but if that is not possible, the Government must look into regulation.

10.33 am

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland), not only on securing the debate but, as he rightly said, on escaping from the Whips Office. This is his first outing since that event.

The hon. Gentleman brought out the issues at the heart of the debate by highlighting the general question of debt through personal stories. The key point is the link between low income, debt and poverty, which is why the title of the debate is so apt. Money is not the only thing that we should consider when we are trying to break the cycle of low income and poverty. We should also give people opportunities to help themselves and make their own way in the world. We need to bear that wider point in mind.

As well as providing immediate practical help, whether dealing with loan sharks or with other problems, we should think about the wider issues. We should try to create ladders of opportunity, especially in education, so that we can help people genuinely and permanently to break the cycle of poverty.

At the heart of the Government's plans to assist people on low incomes are tax credits, which are not the only way of providing real help. In 1971, Keith Joseph introduced family income supplement with the express intention of boosting the incomes of people in low-paid jobs. In 1988, it was replaced by family credit, which by 1997 had provided more than £2 billion of support to families on the lowest incomes. The new Labour Government could have chosen to invest in that scheme but tried to introduce their own system of tax credits. The Public Accounts Committee has identified many of the problems of complexity and administrative cost.

The first problem that I have identified is low take-up by the very people whom the system is meant to help. The latest figures from the Child Poverty Action Group show that 600,000 low-income families are losing out on anything up to £1.4 billion a year. That represents 30 per cent. of those entitled to help, and, for families, that can mean anything up to £42 a week.

We should have realised how bad the figures were by the way in which the Government issued them. Late on 23 December—the eve of Christmas eve—the figures were quietly posted on the Inland Revenue's website. If it had not been for the prompt action of the CPAG and others, those figures might have been missed. That kind of behaviour, whether intentional or the result of incompetence, undermines public trust. I hope that the Minister will address that point when she replies.

The second problem with the tax credit system is that it can trap people in low-paid, part-time work when increased income from working longer does not cover the loss in benefits. Since the introduction of working families tax credit, just 9 per cent. of lone parents have been able to work longer. The Minister will say that the new child tax credit will raise the threshold before recipients lose out but does she recognise that such traps are inherent in the system and explain how the Government intend to deal with that?

Miss Begg: The hon. Gentleman must live in a different world. The Government measure that has helped to alleviate poverty more than any other is family tax credits. Many of my constituents have benefited greatly from making work pay for the first time and are far better off. The remit of the debate is how rapacious loan sharks take money from such families. That is where the problem lies, not with the Government giving families extra money, which is what tax credits do.

Mr. Prisk: The hon. Lady ignores the fact that one third of those entitled to the benefit are not helped and are still stuck in the trap.

The third problem with tax credits is their effect on the self-employed and their families because the system is inflexible and does not deal with income fluctuations. The average income of the self-employed is only two thirds of that of the rest of the work force. One example is farming, where the average income has dropped 70 per cent. in recent years, to just £10,000 per year. No one would suggest that farmers are not in need of help, but because their income fluctuates throughout the year and between years, farmers and farm workers—many of whom are also self-employed—find that the tax credit system does not work for them. Debates on poverty and low incomes often focus on the inner city but I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to respond on rural poverty. It is not right that people who live in generally affluent areas in the countryside but who are on low incomes should be excluded. I am sure that the Financial Secretary will wish to refer to that point in her reply.

Many hon. Members have rightly mentioned debt and the link between low incomes and rising indebtedness. The figures on indebtedness make worrying reading. According to the Government's figures, UK consumers owe £151 billion in outstanding unsecured debt. The Bank of England has reported that household debt stands at 110 per cent. of annual disposable income and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has highlighted that a third of those on the lowest incomes are in debt, with the average amount owed being £3,337. Debt is rising in value, and drawing in many thousands more families. It is most acute for those struggling to make ends meet. The stories that the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge mentioned closely underline the problem.

In my constituency, we have some excellent citizens advice bureaux that provide a caring and professional service in tackling debt problems, and I echo the comments made by hon. Members about their excellent work. Nationally, the citizens advice bureaux reckon that they have seen new cases of problem debt worth more than £1.2 billion in the last 12 months. Of course, as hon. Members have pointed out, most people with debt problems are on below-average incomes.

One aspect of the problem—it has not yet been mentioned, but I would be interested to hear the Financial Secretary's view—is that half of all people on income support are trying to pay off loans not only to loan sharks but to the Government, in the form of the social fund. Indeed, some pressure groups have called for a reform of that fund. Perhaps in her reply, the Financial Secretary could tell us what plans the Government have to respond to those calls.

There is a clear need to provide improved consumer information and financial education. Can the Financial Secretary tell us what plans she has to improve financial information and advice for those on low incomes? What resources have the Government provided to assist the citizens advice bureaux with their role and does she envisage that that will increase? Will the resources provided by the Government target both urban and rural centres? Given that the Financial Services Authority, for which she is personally responsible, has an important part to play in consumer financial information, what discussions has she had with it to encourage it to form greater links with the citizens advice bureaux, nationally or locally?

The challenge of helping those who earn the least is one that has vexed Governments of all persuasions. Our shared aim must be to provide a genuine hand-up out of poverty to enable people to be independent and help them to avoid the traps of benefit dependency and prowling loan sharks. The Government's tax credit system is, sadly, too complicated and inhibiting to help many people; as I said, at least a third of the poorest families fail to claim the money to which they are entitled. Equally, the burden of debt is growing and it hurts the poorest most.

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive approach to helping people to tackle debts, while at the same time deterring millions of others from making the

[Mr. Prisk]

same mistakes. The Government have made great claims about their commitment to tackling those problems and I look forward to the Financial Secretary setting out her vision for the future and the Government's plans for answering the vital questions raised in this debate.

10.44 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) on securing this important debate. He spoke with passion about the plight of his constituents and their experience of debt and poverty. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), who has long campaigned on these issues. I know that he was closely involved with Church Action on Poverty and I am pleased to see that his campaigning continues, so that we all remain aware of the issues faced by those who suffer from debt and low income.

I firmly believe that the approach that we take to low income, debt and poverty defines us as a society. It also says a lot about the Government themselves and the approach that they take. We inherited an extremely difficult situation, but we recognise that the problem needs to be tackled on many fronts.

First, we believe that high levels of employment are essential to combat poverty, and helping to secure decent family income is an essential part of our strategy. Secondly, we have to deliver excellent public services. Thirdly, we support parents so that they, in turn, can provide better support for their children. Fourthly, we have to harness the power and expertise of the voluntary and community sector so that people are enabled and empowered to help themselves. Finally, as many hon. Members have said today, we have to work to combat the problems of financial exclusion, debt, the associated menace of loan sharks and the threat that borrowing at exorbitant rates of interest presents to our most disadvantaged communities.

Before examining that issue in greater depth, as it has been raised most in the debate, let me say in response to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk), who speaks for the Conservative party, that the key to the Government's strategy for reducing poverty is to ensure decent family incomes. Tax credits have played an enormous role in boosting family incomes, and it is disingenuous to say that, because take-up has not been 100 per cent., the Government have made no real effort to tackle poverty and that tax credits have not been immensely beneficial to those who claim them.

Mr. Prisk: Is not the fact that 600,000 people are not taking up those tax credits a serious problem?

Ruth Kelly: If the hon. Gentleman is specifically talking about the data on take-up so far in the public domain, I should point out that the only take-up data that we have relate to the first fiscal year for tax credits and show a take-up of 62 to 65 per cent., but that has risen steadily in the past six months to almost 70 per cent. The amount that is being claimed, rather than the number claiming, is higher still and has risen to up to 83 per cent. in the past six months. In fact, tax credits are having an impact and helping those who need it most.

In the remaining time allowed to me, I want to concentrate on the points about debt and loan sharks that have been made by many hon. Members today. All hon. Members will sympathise with the problems that have been experienced. Indeed, we have been disturbed by the stories that we have heard. Those problems often result from unforeseen circumstances—unemployment, a new baby arriving or, perhaps, family break-up—that cause huge strains on individuals and families in certain neighbourhoods.

Part of the answer must lie in the work on loan sharks being undertaken by the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson), and I shall convey to her directly the views that have been expressed today. She is determined to ensure that action is taken in a number of areas where vulnerable consumers may be at risk. To that end, on 30 January this year, she published her response to the second report of the taskforce on tackling over indebtedness, which was set up to examine what measures are necessary to ensure responsible lending across the full range of products and lenders.

In her response, my hon. Friend identified her concern that the industry should follow the principles of responsible lending that have been set out. She outlined a number of ways in which that could be encouraged, including the importance of carrying out appropriate checks prior to making a loan. She and officials at the Department of Trade and Industry are talking to the industry about those measures.

In addition, the DTI is undertaking a major review of consumer credit legislation. The review is intended to deliver on the Government's manifesto commitment to improve protection against loan sharks, delivering a consumer credit regime that is relevant to the modern market. There have already been consultations on the Consumer Credit Act's financial limit, and on proposals for new rules on the early settlement of credit agreements, to achieve a fairer balance between lenders and borrowers. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) specifically mentioned the difficulty of comparing interest rates being charged on store cards and credit cards. The DTI review will specifically consider how such comparisons can be made much easier to understand, and how more clarity can be introduced.

Mr. Battle: Will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government have not ruled out capping interest rates? That has happened in Europe—in France, Germany and elsewhere—where the Crazy Georges have been driven out.

Ruth Kelly: On 30 January, the DTI launched a consultation specifically on strengthening the consumer credit licensing regime, and it will issue a consultation on extortionate credit later in spring. One of the issues that will be considered in that consultation is whether there should be a cap on the interest rate charged. I encourage hon. Members to feed their views directly into the DTI during that consultation period, as, clearly, that will be important in influencing the outcome of the reviews.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge raised the sale of payment protection insurance and how that is marketed by banks, sometimes in inappropriate

circumstances, adding to the financial difficulty that some people have in servicing their loans. That is another issue that the DTI has looked at. I believe that it has already approached the FSA to ask it to consider that issue as part of its consultation on insurance selling and administration. If my hon. Friend wants to contact the FSA directly to make his case again, I suggest that that would be very valuable.

Part of the answer to all these questions must lie in much better financial education, as well as working directly with the financial services industry to end financial exclusion. Many hon. Members referred to the role that credit unions can play in that regard. As not-for-profit organisations, credit unions are run for the benefit of their members, with their lending interest rates set by statute at no more than 1 per cent. a month. Their ability to offer savings and affordable credit have made them particularly attractive to those on low or variable incomes. In particular, their ethos of thrift and self-reliance, together with their aims of member education and training, means that they are well placed to extend the availability of basic financial services to parts of our society that are often ignored by other financial providers.

I am pleased that the credit union movement has been growing although it remains much smaller than those in some other countries, such as Ireland. In the five years from 1995 to 2000, the number of credit unions grew by about 30 per cent. The Government are very keen to support the growth of the credit union movement, and we have worked hard to encourage an environment in which it is easier for credit unions to grow. The Financial Services Authority is now the authority that is legally responsible for regulation of credit unions. Moving regulation to the FSA and the new regime have produced clear benefits for credit union members, giving them greater financial independence and access to prescribed complaints arrangements, including, for example, the financial ombudsman service. That should help to build confidence among prospective savers with credit unions.

The new regulatory regime is one of a number of changes that we have introduced that will benefit the credit union movement. We are also close to implementing further changes to credit union legislation, which we have introduced through a regulatory reform order. The changes should enable credit unions to compete more effectively with other credit institutions for deposits, and facilitate the further growth of the movement. Those and other legislative reforms will improve the value of the services that credit unions can offer their members and will help to protect some of the most vulnerable members of society from the problems of debt, exorbitant interest and financial exclusion.

We never shut our door to suggestions on how to encourage the growth of credit unions or other alternative sources of financial services. We keep an open mind on how we can encourage diversity in the sector and work to combat financial exclusion more effectively.

An initiative that has so far been successful has been our work with the banks on the introduction of basic bank accounts. That issue was raised today. I am pleased to say that every high street bank now offers a basic bank account. When the universal bank is launched with the Post Office later in the spring, all benefit recipients will have the opportunity of using a basic bank account. That will offer them the advantage of no longer incurring a penalty, or a higher charge, because they do not pay utility bills, for example, by direct debit. Such accounts are also attractive to people on low incomes because they protect savers from falling into an overdraft. They are attractive to people who have not had access to financial services before.

The social fund was mentioned. It clearly has a role in helping people to overcome especially difficult financial circumstances. We listen to concerns about the social fund and the way in which it operates. That is why, from April, £90 million will be added to the budget of the discretionary social fund over the three years to 2005–06. The maximum payment for the fixed element of the funeral grant will rise from £600 to £700. Combined with other administrative improvements, the investment will enhance the fund's ability to help those on low incomes to manage their finances. However, the door to suggestions is not closed. The Government are considering, and will continue to consider, the case for future reform of the social fund, to improve its ability to help those on low incomes.

Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the work of citizens advice bureaux in providing debt advice. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford asked what action the Government were taking to build on that work. The Treasury is working closely with the FSA to see whether we can build on the debt advice service in citizens advice bureaux and other voluntary and commercial institutions and offer a broader financial advice service that is especially accessible to those on low and middle incomes. That work continues and I hope that it will be successful.

The Treasury is also working specifically on financial education and advice, joining up the work that is being done across Government Departments, to ensure that we have appropriately expressed and clearly defined objectives, and that we bring all the work of financial education and literacy together. We must have a joined-up approach to these issues, which are central to our objectives.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now turn our attention to the next topic.

Buses (Young People)

11 am

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Although many people decry the debates held in this Chamber, I welcome the greater flexibility that its layout offers. It enables me to hold an Adjournment debate by addressing the Minister face to face instead of talking to the back of his neck.

I make absolutely no apology for returning to a subject—young people and public transport—that I have raised before, particularly in the ten-minute Bill that I introduced in the previous Session on travel concessions for young people. Public transport and, in particular, affordable public transport is a key issue for young people. Whenever I speak to young people in my constituency, every discussion always comes back to transport. The issue is top of their list, because it affects every other aspect of their lives.

In many ways, young people are like pensioners. Both groups are heavily reliant on public transport and have low access to cars. Both are, in general, low-income groups. Unlike pensioners who, regardless of their income, are all eligible for travel concessions on public transport, only specific groups of young people are entitled to travel concessions. Usually, those concessions are for those in full-time education and training, and sometimes only for journeys to and from school or college. The scale of the concessions varies widely across the country, since they are offered at the discretion of local authorities. The transition from half-fare to full fare also occurs at different ages across the country and, sometimes, it takes place for people as young as 14.

Access to affordable transport is a social exclusion issue. The cost of transport excludes many young people from full access to other facilities and services. However, there is another important transport reason for providing concessions: it is to encourage young people to use public transport. The Government have rightly set a target for increasing bus passenger usage by 10 per cent. by 2010 and they are trying to discourage the use of cars in urban areas.

As I said, young people are already, relatively speaking, heavy users of public transport. Some 13 per cent. of all journeys by 17 to 20-year-olds are by bus, which is more than twice the proportion of other age groups. However, all too often, their dissatisfaction with public transport means that, as soon as they can, they acquire alternative means of transport. They see public transport as the transport that they use if they have nothing else available and not as the transport that they use out of choice.

If young people were encouraged to use public transport and found it affordable, reliable and convenient, they would be much more likely to regard it as a reasonable alternative to car use, at least for some journeys. As they got older, they would be more likely to continue using public transport instead of reverting to using private cars. We need to promote familiarity with public transport in young people if we are to have any hope of building greater bus usage by adults.

The Commission for Integrated Transport considered how Government funding can best be used to promote greater bus usage in its recent report, "Public Subsidy for the Bus Industry". Its recommendations included the idea that the Government should increase the total public subsidy to buses and that the subsidy should be related to bus passenger usage rather than bus mileage.

The commission also recommended that, since bus passenger growth in London has already exceeded the 10 per cent. target—I think it has increased by 30 per cent.—the Government should set a separate 10 per cent. target for the rest of England, excluding London, to provide an impetus to everywhere else to try to catch up with London's example.

The commission recommended that travel concessions should be used to reduce social exclusion by being extended to socially disadvantaged groups on means-tested benefits, and that half-fare concession fares should be introduced, where not already provided, for education journeys for those in full-time education. Finally, the commission suggested that half-fare concessions should be introduced, where not already provided, for all under-16s for all journeys, to promote a more positive attitude to bus use.

My hon. Friend the Minister is well aware that affordable transport is a big issue for young people. In November 2002, the Youth Parliament held a special session at Westminster on public transport. My hon. Friend attended and responded to the concerns expressed by the members of the Youth Parliament, who were gathered from all over the country.

Last week, the Youth Parliament held a further meeting at Westminster, and again transport issues were raised. Its members identified a number of problems in relation to bus transport: the low frequency of services and, particularly, the fact that there were few services in the evenings and at weekends; the poor quality of many buses, and the often hostile attitude of staff to young people; and poor information about service frequencies and routes. But above all, affordability was still the major issue.

The Government's social exclusion unit has gathered statistics on young people and transport. They show that nearly half of 16 to 18-year-olds say that they find transport costs hard to meet. In 1999, the average annual transport cost to students in post-16 education was £371. Six per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds had turned down training or further education over the previous 12 months because of transport problems.

A survey carried out by members of the Youth Parliament in Essex showed that the problems are just as real for younger students. The Essex survey of 732 14 to 18-year-olds showed that 309 identified cost as a reason why they do not use buses more. That is more than two out of five of those young people.

The same barriers affect people on benefits as well as young people. More than one in six people in low-income areas have turned down a job in the past 12 months because of transport problems, and 38 per cent. of jobseekers say that transport is a key barrier to getting a job. It is a depressing thought, when we are trying to persuade people out of cars and on to public transport, that jobseekers with driving licences are twice as likely to get jobs as those without.

I turn to the Government's role in addressing this issue. As I said, the Government are committed to increasing bus usage, particularly in urban areas. Young

people should be considered an important target group. At present, the Government try to encourage bus usage through a variety of mechanisms. The first is direct public subsidy to bus companies, through the fuel duty rebate, at a total cost at present of £253 million. That is a substantial direct subsidy.

Secondly, the Government give guidelines to local authorities. For example, the guidelines on various transport schemes indicate that local authorities should include an element that will encourage greater bus usage, through schemes such as quality bus partnerships. The third mechanism is travel concessions.

In the past, the Government have pointed out that local authorities already have the power to fund travel concessions for young people, and indeed for any other excluded group. That is true, but the Government's own survey of local authorities showed that there was huge variation across the country in whether travel concessions were available for young people and in which groups of young people were eligible. The view expressed last week by many members of the Youth Parliament was that central and local government all too often tried to pass the buck on this issue. When they speak to their local council, they are told, "We would do it, but we need funding from the Government," while the Government say, "We don't need to do it. Your local authority already has the power to do it if it wants to."

The Government have established the precedent for pensioners by granting them an entitlement to a travel concession of at least a half fare across the country. It is open to local authorities to provide a more generous concession, but they are all obliged to provide at least that. There is no reason why the Government should not pursue the same policy by providing such a concession for young people.

There is another player: the bus companies. They should be much more active in encouraging greater passenger usage among young people. Although young people are an important group of bus users, bus companies seem to be apathetic about encouraging greater usage and tapping into a potentially huge market of young bus users. When the Youth Parliament held its session in November, it was disappointed that more bus companies did not take up its invitation to attend. They were only interested in going if they could sell their wares and did not want to listen or respond to what young people wanted. Even when bus companies provide young people's travelcards entitling users to cheaper fares, publicity is often poor and many young people are unaware of their availability. The member of the Youth Parliament from Hertfordshire said that he had a £5 card that entitled him to a half-fare, but he did not know of any other young people in Hertfordshire who knew of it or had applied for it.

In recent discussions with my local bus company in Milton Keynes, it suggested that it was necessary to change the way in which Government and local authority subsidies are offered to bus companies. Most bus subsidies support particular services and give the company little or no incentive to attract extra passengers. The services remain essentially dependent on subsidy, locking the local authority or the Government into continued funding. An alternative would be to use subsidies as seedcorn to help the bus company to break into the youth market.

For example, a subsidy could be given for a set period only, perhaps for three or four years, with the level of subsidy reducing year on year. Specific targets could be set for increased passenger usage, especially by young people, and part or all of the subsidy could be dependent on reaching those targets with perhaps the possibility of a bonus if the bus company exceeded them. Such a subsidy regime would encourage bus companies to grow passenger usage and to retain it as the subsidy diminished because they would keep the extra fare income. I suspect that the Treasury would welcome such an approach, because any public spending commitment would be time-limited and clearly linked to the achievement of Government aims.

The Government say that they are committed to encouraging people to switch from the private car to public transport, especially in urban areas. Reducing social exclusion is also a Government target. By establishing the children and young persons unit, the Government have demonstrated their commitment to responding to the needs of young people. Buses are an extremely cost-effective, efficient and flexible mode of public transport. The Government should bring all those different aims together and respond to young people's calls for affordable and accessible transport.

I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to two things. The first is to introduce a national half-fare travel concession for young people that is modelled on recent legislation for pensioners. In my ten-minute Bill, I asked for concessions for all young people aged under 25. Perhaps that was over-ambitious but I would be satisfied if, in the first instance, the Government introduced a national half-fare concession for all under-16s, extending it to all under-18s subsequently. Will the Minister estimate the cost of a national half-fare concession for under-16s and under-18s?

Secondly, I would like the Minister to investigate using time-limited seedcorn subsidies to bus companies that are specifically linked to those companies that deliver increases in the number of young people who use their buses. That might be a way of kicking the bus companies into exploiting the youth market. I am sure that the Minister will give me a positive response, as he always does. I depend on it, as do all those young people whose horizons are currently limited by the lack of affordable transport

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) both on securing the debate and on her gritty determination on this and many other issues. She made an excellent point about making young people familiar with public transport to secure their commitment to using it. The bus companies should look at that, and we should look at how it could inform our policies.

Last November, I very much enjoyed attending the Youth Parliament here in Westminster. It did not surprise me that transport was of substantial interest to young people around the country, as I know from soundings taken in my constituency that such views are common. I take my hon. Friend's point about the sometimes hostile attitude to young people of bus

[Mr. David Jamieson]

operators or drivers and conductors. However, it must be appreciated that drivers and conductors can find large numbers of young people formidable—it is a two-way process.

I also know that young people's high spirits on buses, particularly when travelling to and from school, can spill over into antisocial behaviour. Two groups of people are affected: the drivers and people who operate the buses, and the vast majority of young people who use buses sensibly. Cracking down on such behaviour and getting good responses from bus companies is important to encourage the use of public transport, especially buses.

My hon. Friend's conclusion was about the importance of getting the views of young people. The Department has been looking carefully at all our policies, not just on buses but on all relevant issues, to see how we can glean young people's views, and evaluate and respond to them. In a healthy democracy, it is extremely important to listen to young people. My experience is that we sometimes get a refreshing view entirely different from that of the conventional groups whom we consult.

My hon. Friend raised the subject of extending concessionary fares to young people under 25 and referred to the recent report by the Commission for Integrated Transport on public subsidy for the bus industry. The Government are keen that young people should be encouraged to use local buses to get to the places where they need to go at fares that they can afford. We also want young people to continue with education and training beyond the statutory school-leaving age. I was therefore particularly concerned to hear those statistics on the number of people who may have been put off taking certain jobs or training because of lack of access to public transport.

We all acknowledge that young people are often on lower incomes and have limited means of travel, but they are perhaps not as vociferous in drawing attention to their situation as older people. However, the Youth Parliament is putting that right, and I very much welcome its sensible, measured and consistent approach which, I believe, will bring it success. None the less, concessionary fare schemes are expensive and we cannot overlook the cost implications.

A number of measures are already in place to help young people who are continuing in education and training with discounted transport costs. For example, under the Transport Act 1985, individual passenger transport authorities and local authorities outside London may extend their concessionary travel schemes to children aged up to 16 or to young people aged up to 18 who are still in full-time education. That power applies to all journeys by young people and not just those to and from school or college. Most bus operators also offer reduced fares for school children and many offer season tickets for young people at school and college, sometimes in partnership with colleges.

In London, responsibility lies with Transport for London, under guidance from the Mayor. Cheaper bus and tube fares are currently offered to children under 16 and there are also discounts on period tickets for young people aged 16 and 17 and student card holders. The cheaper child fares—I use the expression for want of a better one—will be extended to all aged 16 to 17 from 1 April this year.

The Government are also promoting the Connexions card project for 16 to 19-year-olds. The card, which was developed by the Department for Education and Skills, offers a range of commercial discounts for 16 to 19-year-olds. It is designed to encourage young people to stay in learning or training beyond the compulsory schooling years by rewarding attendance and is capable of carrying existing travel concessions. In addition, we should not forget that the young person's railcard extends to young people between 16 and 25. Train operators are required through the Strategic Rail Authority to offer the card, which offers savings of a third on a wide selection of ticket types.

Further work by the Department for Education and Skills seeks to evaluate best practice for the provision of transport for students in further education. That work is linked to recent changes to legislation in the Education Act 2002 that clarify the role and responsibilities of local education authorities and their partners in assessing and providing transport for students aged 16 to 19 in further education. In future, LEAs will be required to collaborate with transport providers and other key local organisations in developing and publishing their policy statements for local students.

The Department for Education and Skills has set up more than 60 local education authority-led transport pathfinders to test and develop innovative approaches to transport support and services. It has also set up a transport website that answers frequently asked questions, and a system to post LEA transport policy statements on the Connexions card website. To provide students with better information, our two Departments also aim to bring closer together the work of education and transport planners in local authorities.

I turn now to the Commission for Integrated Transport's report. After a major study to examine the best use of subsidy, the commission suggested that patronage growth and better value could be brought about by reducing the existing concessions to elderly and disabled people, where they were more generous, to the statutory half-fare minimum. The commission suggested that that would assist in the provision of half-fare concessions to additionally socially disadvantaged groups and, where they are not already provided, to under-16s and over-16s for education journeys.

The commission's report makes a useful contribution to the debate on the funding of the bus industry, but I must point out that we have no intention of changing the present statutory half-fare minimum requirement for concessionary travel for elderly and disabled people or of preventing local authorities from offering more generous schemes to those people if they wish to do so. I cannot stress that point too strongly, as it has been the subject of considerable concern among those groups.

My hon. Friend asked for an estimate of the cost of half-fare concessionary travel for all young people under the age of 19. Our estimates suggest that it would be very expensive—possibly as much as £500 million a year. There would also be a serious impact on the present arrangements because part of the cost is currently borne by commercial transport operators, so

would be a substantial switch of funds from private to public sector funding. We also estimate that to cover half-fare travel just for 16 to19-year-olds would cost in the region of £180 million a year.

I accept the argument that young people hear central Government saying that local government has the powers, and local government saying that it does not have the funds. It is quite right for members of the Youth Parliament to ask questions of the Government, but I said to them at the gathering—I have also said it to them privately—that these are matters that they should pursue with their local councillors as well. Those young people need a voice here at Westminster to help us to shape our policy, but it is also important that they make their voice heard where the policies are being enacted, in local councils. A lot of them had overlooked the fact that important decisions that affect their lives are taken at local council level. If they approach their local councillors and remind them that they can vote at 18, it might concentrate councillors' minds on putting issues important to young people higher up the agenda of the local authority. I am aware that young people in some areas have been quite successful in drawing these matters to the attention of their local councillors.

The commission's report is only part of the work informing the wider debate on the value of subsidies to the bus industry and its passengers. In addition, as announced in the Budget last year, we are also holding our own review of bus subsidies to look at the value and effect of the £1 billion a year paid by the Government to support bus services. We intend all this work to be drawn together in our review, which will report soon to Transport and Treasury Ministers. I can say now, however, that we see a role for the type of pump-priming support for new bus services that will deliver patronage growth and become viable over a finite period, as my hon. Friend has described today. We have been looking at the scope for this in the bus subsidy review, and we are now considering, as a first step in this direction, the funding of some pilot projects as part of this year's urban and rural bus challenges.

Dr. Starkey: Will my hon. Friend give me an assurance that, as part of its consideration of pump-priming grants, his Department will look seriously at whether targets might be set for passenger usage, specifically to increase usage by young people?

Mr. Jamieson: I have to say to my hon. Friend that we have not recently been in the business of gathering more targets. She should accept my reassurance, however, that improving and increasing bus patronage across the age groups—and across the country, geographically—will certainly be our aim and intention. I shall take into consideration the issues that she has raised about targets, and we will put the matter into the process of the review.

This has been a useful and interesting debate. My hon. Friend is urging us to get on with our work, and we certainly have a great deal in hand at present. We will evaluate carefully what the Commission for Integrated Transport and the social exclusion unit have to say, and then draw all the strands together in our bus subsidies review. My hon. Friend raised some vital issues on behalf of young people, and I assure her that her views and the other views that have been expressed outside the Chamber will be given the most careful consideration by my Department.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended until Two o'clock.

Emergency Planning

2 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome the opportunity to introduce this timely debate—indeed, it is perhaps timelier than I expected. I start by thanking Lord Macdonald, who briefed me recently, and Zyg Kowalczyk of the London resilience team, who briefed me last night. I also thank Nick Rowe—Kent county council's emergency planning officer—for keeping me well briefed.

For more than half a century, emergency planning in the United Kingdom relied heavily on the Civil Defence Act 1948. For many years after the end of the cold war, there was a steady real-terms reduction in expenditure on emergency planning. That continued until the fuel delivery crisis and the major flooding in autumn 2000 finally brought an acknowledgement that all disasters require robust, integrated response arrangements. The events of today notwithstanding, the majority of disasters do not relate to hostile attack.

The Government's commitment to review the emergency planning process, their establishment of the civil contingencies secretariat and their promotion of the concept of a resilient UK capable of bouncing back from any emergency were encouraging, but, sadly, the momentum appears to have been lost. There have recently been many changes among the secretariat's senior staff, and new guidelines on important issues have been slow to appear. Furthermore, there is still no certainty as to when a civil protection Bill will be introduced, although discussion papers that touch on its possible contents give cause for concern, and I shall provide two examples.

First, two levels of duty might be imposed, one much more onerous than the other. The effect could be that water and electricity utility companies, which currently, and for very sound reasons, conduct extensive emergency planning and emergency exercises with other agencies, might in future have a statutory excuse merely to provide information and to co-operate. In other words, there would be a lower level of emergency planning.

Secondly, it is recognised that local services usually handle large disasters such as rail crashes effectively, but things break down at national level. That is due in part to a lack of integration between the emergency arrangements of central Government Departments and agencies, and local services. It is therefore worrying that Departments do not appear to be included among the bodies on which a duty will be imposed. Lord Macdonald highlighted the position of the Benefits Agency when I met him. Clearly, the agency is not a front-line organisation, but it would be required to play a key role in the aftermath of any incident by providing assistance to those who had been displaced. However, it appears to have no emergency plans in place—at least, it has no relationship with local authorities when it comes to providing assistance. I hope that the issue is being investigated as a result of my discussions with Lord Macdonald, and the Minister may have something to say about it.

Will the Minister confirm, if he can, the expected publication date for the civil protection Bill? Will he undertake to ensure that it imposes similar duties on central Government Departments and agencies, local government and the emergency services?

The slow progress that I have described is all the more worrying given increased public concern since 11 September. That concern has been exacerbated by the position regarding Iraq, and by the number of occasions recently, including yesterday and today, when the Prime Minister has stated that we are at risk of terrorist attack.

Should a terrorist attack occur, it might well involve biological or chemical agents or sources of nuclear radiation. The seriousness with which the Government treat that possibility is evidenced by the many millions of pounds spent since 11 September in training and equipping the emergency services to work in contaminated environments and to stockpile equipment for decontamination and treatment of victims.

In that case, why have the Government not taken steps to educate the public about what they might do as individuals to help themselves and others? Clearly, it is expected that individuals will help themselves. The Government and other agencies will not be in a position to help every individual. They will be overstretched in dealing with the number of people who are vulnerable.

Everyone in this country who lives in a possible flood zone receives guidance about flooding. There are regular flood warnings. Every time we climb on board an aeroplane we are given emergency instructions. Before the recent fire brigade strikes an extensive publicity campaign was launched to draw to people's attention the things that they could do to help themselves. Why is that not happening with respect to a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear incident?

Other countries are providing relevant advice. I am aware of that in one country, at least. I spoke to someone at the BBC yesterday who had just been e-mailed by a friend in the USA, who said that she had been advised to stockpile water and food, and to buy plastic sheeting and so on, to enable her to secure a safe area in her property. That is happening in other countries.

I am afraid that available Government guidance will not necessarily be all that helpful. For instance, on Monday 3 February the Government published strategic national guidance on the decontamination of people. However, anyone who has visited the website and worked through the 38-page document will have found little to suggest what assistance could be provided to them if an incident occurred.

In addition, that document is fundamentally flawed in respect of the procedures that it sets out. It appears to take no account of human behaviour—particularly crowd dynamics. I doubt whether anyone in the Chamber today seriously believes that, if there were an attack of some sort, we would all wait calmly for the fire brigade to arrive and set up their spraying equipment outside, after which we would take off our clothes and be washed down with the conveniently located buckets and sponges that appendix B of the guidance specifies, and then proceed to the welcoming arms of the ambulance service.

Clearly, that would not happen. If an incident took place, some people would be seriously affected and seriously ill. We need much more honesty.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): The hon. Gentleman seems to be suggesting that America is better prepared for such attacks. He itemised a couple of issues that the Americans have pursued. Will he go into some detail about what practical help he thinks could be offered? His argument so far seems to be a philosophical one. Has he any concrete suggestions about how such advice could be applied in the UK?

Tom Brake: I shall indeed come on to that point. I did not necessarily mean that the USA is better prepared in all respects, but it is clearly making more information available to its citizens and considering a wider range of possible threats. A state senator told me that thought is being given to the placing of one-way valves in the water supply system to ensure that no one can install a pump in a flat or house and pump some sort of toxic chemical back into the water system. Clearly, if we go into that sort of area, a huge amount of effort and funding will be necessary, so I am not suggesting that we should follow that route. However, we may have struck the wrong balance on making public information available.

Why has no official guidance been provided so far? I appreciate the risk associated with taking the "Protect and Survive" approach, because people may belittle the information provided or think it of no value, but we need to go further than we have. Will the Minister tell us his thoughts about what form the information should take? Will it take the form of leaflets distributed by local authorities or television advertisements or a website?

In the case of a possible biological attack, it is probable that a disease, such as smallpox, would be introduced covertly and that we would find out about it days or weeks after it was introduced into the population, perhaps picking it up in hospitals. However, central Government have issued no policy guidance and no local discussions have taken place between health authorities, police forces and local government about how an attack should be managed, including what emergency powers might be needed. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

Clearly, the Government fear the potential of such an event and the casualties that might result. I understand that the Home Office has commissioned a retired coroner to survey existing arrangements to deal with mass fatalities, but I do not think that the initiative will bear much fruit. I understand that most local authorities and other agencies have made no arrangements to deal with mass fatalities because no policy exists. Therefore, although it was clear how large volumes of animal carcases should be dealt with, the legal, political and social issues of doing anything with a human body that departs from current normal procedures are so huge that no local agency will want to stick its head above the parapet and dream up plans to deal with the problem. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us when the Government will issue policies on the management of pandemics of contagious diseases and when they will issue policies on the management of mass fatalities.

I do not want to overemphasise resources. I know that the Government have made funding available for the emergency services, but issues remain regarding local authority grants. The size of event with which local authorities may have to contend goes way beyond the sort of event that we have had to get used to, such as a car bomb attack, so a step change is needed in emergency planning, and that carries a price tag. The necessary plans, equipment and arrangements will place additional demands on finances. The Government have not recognised that yet. I hope that as part of their preparations for the Civil Contingencies Bill, as they identify what roles and responsibilities local authorities and other agencies will play, the Government will see the extent of what is involved and address grants as part of that process.

We need a clear statement from the Government that contingency funds will be made available in the case of an exceptional incident, because that has not clearly been stated. It would be extremely remiss if, following a major incident, there were delays in the system because some organisations had concerns about whether they were going to be reimbursed for the extra costs incurred, so I would welcome a comment from the Minister on that.

Central London and the Palace of Westminster are presumably prime targets for terrorists, who aim to strike at the heart of the nation. The London resilience team has been preparing plans and arrangements in order to respond to a major disaster in London, and the civil contingencies secretariat refers to its work. However, we have heard rumours about the London resilience team's proposals, rather than receiving any formal information or advice, which again raises the issue of what the public should be informed about. People who live in London and most of those who work there have not been provided with any formal information or advice. However, I understand that discussions are ongoing with larger businesses, so some work is being done. Little work has been done on sharing information or the content of those proposals with the emergency services and local authorities in the home counties, which would obviously both have a role in mass evacuation. Again, however, that work is in the pipeline.

The London resilience team published a report called "London Resilience" in March 2002. It contains more than 100 recommendations about how to improve emergency planning in London, and I received a welcome briefing on it last night. However, I have been denied a copy of the report, and I am seeking to obtain one under the code of conduct of access to Government information. Without having sight of the report, which contains recommendations and time scales that detail the times by which things must be done, it is impossible for me to judge whether London can handle a large-scale attack, or whether the actions that local authorities and others are required to take, which must be reported quarterly, are being taken with appropriate swiftness. I understand the need to keep some of the content of the report concealed from people, including Members of Parliament. Equally, however, I hope that the Minister will understand that Opposition Members, who want to be able to guarantee that the necessary action is being taken and who want to see that improvements are being made and that plans are being put in place, will not be satisfied only with reassurances that that is happening.

Mr. Watts: I am somewhat confused. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will address the practical issues to do

[Mr. Watts]

with what he suggests. Does he agree that publication of the document that he seeks might put the lives of Londoners at risk, but that partial publication would raise more questions than it answered?

Tom Brake: I am not advocating publication of the report in the *Evening Standard* or *The Sunday Times*. I am suggesting that there might be an agreement by which a copy can be made available to hon. Members under certain conditions. That has happened in relation to other reports, albeit reports that were commercially confidential as opposed to confidential for reasons of security. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that if he were an Opposition Member, he would not be satisfied with listening to Ministers' or the London resilience team's assurances that everything was in hand and under control. He would want to see the detail of what had been proposed and would want evidence that it was happening. I am sure that the Minister is honest and candid, but I would hardly expect him to provide a list of matters on which there are significant weaknesses, on which appropriate action has not yet been taken, or on which there has been slippage. It is up to hon. Members and others to put pressure on the Government to ensure that things are delivered.

I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman said about the risks of publishing or partially publishing the report, which might lead to scare stories or the distortion of available information. However, there is an equal risk that rumours will circulate, and that inaccurate reports will be published about the number of recommendations and what is planned on containment of people. Indeed, that is already happening, regardless of whether the report in its entirety, part of the report, or none of the report is published. For instance, there are reports about what would be required from the train operating companies and about the role that they would have to play in helping to move people out of London.

I should like the Minister to consider whether there are circumstances in which the report can be made available, to ensure that Members have an opportunity to review progress regularly against the key action points. That would reassure Members that appropriate action is being taken.

Will the Minister deal specifically with the vetting of security staff? That issue is associated with emergency planning and with what is happening at Heathrow today. I understand that that is not in the Minister's brief. He may need to refer to colleagues or perhaps respond in writing. However, he may be aware that in a debate on 23 October 2001, I raised with the Minister for Transport the question of staff who work airside in airports. They can work with a temporary pass before they receive appropriate security vetting, provided that they are supervised by a full passholder. It is unlikely that the full passholder will look over his shoulder every moment of the day. He will hardly be able to accompany the person to the toilet or watch them wherever they are. The full passholder would need eyes in the back of his head to do that.

I raised that point during that debate, as did other hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) asked:

"Is the Minister totally satisfied that existing arrangements for supervising those without full security passes are 100 per cent. adequate?"—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 23 October 2001; Vol. 373, c. 37WH.]

The Minister, perhaps not surprisingly, could not give any such undertaking. However, he did say subsequently that the issues were important and he undertook to look at them. I contacted BAA yesterday to ask whether that particular loophole had been closed. I consider it to be a loophole, and the Minister of State accepted that that was something that must be looked at. BAA's response was that the loophole had not been closed, and that it was still possible for someone to work airside—in the secure part of the airport—without having had full security vetting.

We are 18 months on from that debate and more than 18 months on from 11 September. It is extremely remiss that that loophole has not been closed. This may not be a subject with which the Minister is familiar, but I hope that he and his colleagues will investigate it. BAA assured me that it would be happy to close the loophole if asked, but the Government have not asked. BAA said that some transitional arrangements would be required. There must be a question mark over whether we have time for transitional arrangements, but BAA would like them in order to ensure that the loophole is not closed overnight. That matter must be looked at; it has not been dealt with in the past 18 months, and that is a major failure with which the Government must deal.

With the heightened state of security that prevails in the UK, the Government must show that their commitment to protecting our citizens is flawless. They must show that there is no chink in our protective amour, and that there are no loopholes in our security apparatus. I regret that that is not the case, and our security is the weaker for it. Warm words of reassurance will not do; we need action from the Government.

2.24 pm

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon): I am primarily concerned about the advice that has been given to schools and teachers in central London. I declare an interest: I have a daughter at a school in central London. Her mother constantly asks me what advice the school has been given and I must answer that I am not at all sure what advice has been given, or if it goes far enough.

After the disastrous events of 11 September, my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) asked the Minister what plans there were to update civil defence guidance to parents of schoolchildren. The Minister replied with a holding answer on 15 October 2001 that his Department would shortly issue further guidance for local education authorities to disseminate to schools and others on a range of issues resulting from the terrorist attack in the USA and subsequent events.

As we all know, and as the chairman of the parliamentary Labour party said today, London has never been in more danger, and I am not at all sure that schools have been given the advice that they should have had. Our problem is to reassure the public without heightening anxiety. In dealing with impressionable schoolchildren, we must be extremely careful that what we do and say does nothing to fuel well-grounded fears. There are long-term and short-term matters to consider.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) made some interesting points, and he referred to the American senator with whom he had spoken about one-way flow valves the water system. As well as the horrendous financial implications, that would take years, not months, to implement.

We must do all we can to face what could be an immediate threat. It will not disappear if we go to war with Iraq; it will continue long afterwards. How can we judge? Even a successful war that topples the evil regime of Saddam Hussein may create many more international terrorists linked to al-Qaeda who wish to wreak revenge on this country. We cannot deal with this as a one-off event; we must deal with the long-term implications, some of which might require an alteration in how we live and go about our everyday business.

The Minister is a man of great intelligence, but I note that he has not been taking many notes. I hope, however, that he will deal with the points of hon. Members on both sides rather than reading a prepared statement, as these are matters of public interest. I would be grateful if he would spend a little time reassuring me about the training and advice that schoolteachers in London have been given in how to evacuate schoolchildren and how to deal with them in schools.

There was much debate earlier on the comparative preparedness of the United Kingdom and the United States of America to meet a terrorist attack. Members may have seen the report in *The Times* this morning on the "All-American survival pack: What everyone needs". It gives the advice of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and goes into great detail on how to store water, how long food should be stored, and the contents of a first-aid kit—including moistened towelettes, whatever they are, and tongue blades, which are, perhaps, not an item usually found in hon. Members' wash bags. It lists the necessary tools and supplies, clothing and bedding for babies and adults, and important family documents. A guide entitled "Are you Ready?" from the "Guide to Citizen Preparedness" says:

"You should have duct tape, plastic sheeting and scissors. Have an adult turn off air-conditioners, vents and fans ... Find an interior room, hopefully a room that does not have windows. Seal around doors and windows with duct tape and plastic sheeting. Take your battery-powered radio with you, so you know when it's all clear."

That sounds a terrifying note. Unlike the Liberal Democrats, I, as a member of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition, would not dream of asking the Minister to compromise our preparedness by saying what might be going on. Particularly, I would not ask him to go into detail on the 100 recommendations made by the London resilience team.

Tom Brake: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. Will he explain how he would ensure that necessary action was being taken? Would he simply take the Minister's word for it?

Mr. Swire: I was just coming to that. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I shall continue. Although I would not ask for details of those recommendations, I would greatly reassured to know how many of them the Minister thought had been met and how many he would hope to meet in the next two or three months.

We parliamentarians would be in a difficult position if there was a disaster and we were found not to have paid enough attention to help prevent it. I am convinced that the reactive services and emergency services are well prepared, are being trained and are properly funded to cope with the aftermath of an emergency. I am concentrating on our preparedness—the bit that comes before the disaster. If we spend the money now, we may avert a disaster on a much larger scale.

I ask the Minister to answer my various questions in order to reassure those who have young children at school in central London, which, as we have heard, is high on the list of targets.

2.31 pm

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): I had not intended to speak in this debate, but I am interested in the subject and I am glad to be here. I was looking forward to hearing the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) itemise some of the things that he believes the Government should be doing, but we did not get much substance. We heard that we need more information and that we need to do more, but he made no concrete suggestions about what the Government should be doing to deal with this serious situation.

I would not like anyone to go away from this debate believing that we are unprepared. My local authority in St. Helens pools its resources with the other four Merseyside authorities in order to deal with the sort of circumstances that we have been discussing today. The police, the fire services and the other authorities plan for such occasions, should they be called on to take action. I have some chemical factories in my constituency; in order to deal with explosions there my local authority has had to put its plans into effect, and they turned out to be effective. I wish to place on the record the high regard that we all have for the emergency services and for local authority planning teams.

Some of the things that I have heard said about America remind me very much of the debates that used to take place about the possibility of a nuclear attack—about, for instance, the advice that we should put sandbags behind the doors, stock up with tins of baked beans and ensure that we had enough bottled water. Frankly, that would not have been effective, and I was interested to discover whether the hon. Gentleman would make concrete proposals about what could help in such an emergency. I was disappointed.

It is important that the Minister addresses the issues raised about what the Government are doing, but there are limits on what they can do for civil defence. Those limitations are fairly obvious. We would have great difficulty in defending ourselves against the sort of terrorism that we have seen recently. However, we have had plenty of experience over the past 25 years in dealing with IRA attacks, which puts us in a better position than many other countries.

Finally, if some of the events occurred about which we have been speculating today, it seems that the Army would probably take control. Emergency powers would be introduced. The armed forces have regularly shown themselves to be equal to the most difficult tasks and able to deal with them in a most professional way. I have no doubt that they will continue to do so.

Tom Brake: I am aware that I did not respond to the hon. Gentleman's specific point about what public

[Tom Brake]

information should be available. The hon. Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire) referred to the situation in the United States. We need to move in that direction. The level of information released there is not necessarily right for us, but we need to provide something along those lines—for instance, to advise the public about what information might be given to them in the event of an incident.

Mr. Watts: I do not disagree. However, I should have preferred it if the hon. Gentleman had spelled out what sort of information he was seeking. He looks to the Minister, but a lot of the information that could be put out has been put out. It is important that Members of Parliament do not scaremonger. There are already enough worried people in the community, and we should accept the fact that there are limits to what we can do. Nevertheless, there are procedures, both locally and nationally, to deal with civil emergencies.

2.35 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The hon. Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) put his finger on one or two weak spots in the argument of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). Nevertheless, I congratulate the latter on securing a debate that is so topical and so timely. He asked why more had not been done to educate the public at individual, community or family level with regard to the preparations that they might take in order to mitigate the effects of attack by terrorists using radiological, biological or chemical weapons, and hinted at the answer when he referred fleetingly to "Protect and Survive". May I remind hon. Members what that involved?

In 1980, the booklet "Protect and Survive" was finally published. It was the guidance that was meant to be issued to individual households in the run-up to an anticipated nuclear strike. The issuing of that guidance turned out to be a public relations and a political disaster. It led the essayist E. P. Thompson to produce a counterblast, a radical manifesto called "Protest and Survive". The nub of the case made by Thompson, who later founded European Nuclear Disarmament, was that by suggesting that any effective measures could be taken to protect the community against the effects of a nuclear war, one was trying to anaesthetise the community, or to lull it into a false sense of security that a nuclear war would be survivable.

I am sure that if we could look into the minutes that have been flying around various Government Departments about the advice that should be issued to households, families and communities, we would see repeated references to the disastrous decision to make public copies of "Protect and Survive" more than 20 years ago. However, the parallel does not really hold; a nuclear war launched by a nuclear superpower, or any major nuclear power, would have been likely to overwhelm the majority of civil defences, whereas we are considering attacks that, although they might use weapons supplied by a state producer, will involve small quantities of weapons —I shall say more about that later. Admittedly, weapons of mass destruction, even when applied in small quantities, can still have large and horrifying results. However, we are working in a strategic and military environment in which the possibility of palliative action is much greater than it was in 1980. Therefore, it would be a mistake to hold back from issuing such practical guidance as can be issued, to the public in good time, despite the sensitivities arising from the lesson of more than two decades ago.

I was a little surprised by the naivety of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington when he said that we must ensure that there are no chinks in our armour against such attack. We can no more ensure that than we could ensure that there were no chinks in our armour against terrorist attacks by the IRA from 1969 onwards. The fact is that small numbers of people are all that are required to ensure that considerable numbers of people die or are seriously injured in such an attack.

I am not in a position to know the answers to the questions that need to be asked about the preparations that the Government should be taking, but I know some of the questions that should be asked.

Mr. Watts: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that little advice can be given to individuals about how to protect themselves? I am talking about what the institutions can do. If the hon. Gentleman does not agree with that premise, can he say what actions can be taken by individuals? When we had an emergency in my area, it was up to the authorities to inform residents about what was happening and arrange back-up support for the community. Individuals were not able to take any action; the organisations had to do so.

Dr. Lewis: The hon. Gentleman has made several contributions to the debate, but I do not agree with him about his latest one. After an attack, two courses of action can be taken. A radiological, chemical and biological weapons flying squad full of specialist techniques and equipment can descend rapidly on the area to help people. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is approaching the problem with that attitude. I should be interested to hear from the Minister whether the Government are approaching the matter with the same attitude and if they are building a network of flying squads to help the afflicted parts of the community as soon as an attack is reported. Perhaps the main emphasis will have to be placed in that direction.

Mr. Watts *indicated assent.*

Dr. Lewis: However, thinking particularly about chemical and biological, not radiological, weapons, there are probably some emergency measures that individuals who suspect that they have been showered with potentially lethal material could take in the first few minutes to lesson significantly the likelihood of fatal effects. I have no scientific expertise in the matter, which I am sure is blindingly obvious to other hon. Members. However, given that the Royal Navy, which for years has had pre-wetting systems on its ships to douse the superstructures and slough off radiation, chemicals or other material that is deposited on them, I am sure that some fairly basic advice could be given to individuals for them to follow if they knew that they had been attacked.

I admit—talking about biological weapons and germs—that people might not know that they had been attacked. Either my hon. Friend the Member for East

Devon (Mr. Swire) or the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said that there might be a time lapse, but in the case of a chemical attack there is a reasonable chance that people might know whether they had been contaminated. I draw attention especially to a biological organism, such as anthrax, or persistent chemical weapons that contaminate and work over time. They could be reduced in their lethality by the taking of immediate steps to wash them off, change clothing or take other simple but practical measures.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that providing advice might be one way of preventing large numbers of people who suspect that they have been affected by a chemical attack from turning up at hospital? The advice might be that they need not refer themselves to a hospital.

Dr. Lewis: In those circumstances, I think that emergency broadcasts would be made continually to inform the community whether it had been subjected to an attack. However, I accept the hon. Gentleman's basic point that some practical advice should be issued from the bottom up, even if the main focus of the Government's approach is for specialist organisations—which I hope we shall hear they are putting together—to descend from the top down and rescue the people who have been attacked.

I will not take up much more time, but I wish to make a couple of remarks on the history of some of these weapons to see whether we can learn any lessons from it.

Mustard gas was used to great effect in world war one, but it was not used in world war two because the Churchill Government made it absolutely clear that if the Nazis used it we would retaliate and our retaliation would be effective because we had huge stocks of it. Churchill even made that promise on behalf of our Russian allies: they did not have retaliatory stocks and Churchill said that if the Russians were attacked we would use that gas on their behalf. In that instance, deterrence worked.

At the end of the war, the allies occupying Germany were horrified to discover huge stocks of tabun—the first of the nerve gases—and small stocks of sarin and soman, which the Nazis were developing. They were also not used because of deterrence. Although the allies did not have those weapons and did not know that they could be made, the German leadership had been advised by its scientists that it was inconceivable that the allies would not have them too. Therefore, Hitler was deterred from using nerve gases by the mistaken belief that the allies had them.

In our current situation, the trouble with that sort of approach is that one does not know whether anything would deter an organisation such as Bin Laden's because the people who would launch the attacks do not care whether they die—and even welcome the prospect of death. In that context, deterrence does not work as effectively as it used to, which means that there is the prospect that some such attacks will succeed. As that is the case, people should receive at least some practical advice about what they can do, even if the main help will have to come from the Government. That was the most important point made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington.

The best way to negate such attacks is to prevent them. To achieve that, Governments who are producing these weapons with the possible intention at some point in the future of putting them into the hands of the fanatics who will not hesitate to use them—such as the Iraqi Government—must be taken out of the equation.

2.48 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing the debate. He has taken a lot of interest in the issue, especially as he represents a London constituency. The current security threats tend to focus on the London area, so it is appropriate that hon. Members whose constituencies are in and around that city are so engaged in the debate.

My hon. Friend was right to broaden the question of emergency planning by considering such situations as floods and fuel protests. There are other comparable situations, such as explosions in chemical plants, which have occurred, as people in Humberside know, although, fortunately, such an incident has not occurred recently.

Emergency planning will be far more effective if it covers all such situations: it should not be confined to terrorist attacks. It is better that we think of all the situations as having to be dealt with in similar ways, not least because civil incidents occur fairly regularly. We can, in a sense, try out procedures that might be needed in a far more serious military situation when dealing with civil problems such as floods, which occur quite frequently.

The hon. Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire) talked of young and impressionable schoolchildren being assailed or damaged by the atmosphere of fear. That does not apply only to young and impressionable schoolchildren; this slightly older person is absolutely petrified every morning as the news comes on. It takes me back to my childhood. I was 14 in 1980, when "Protect and Survive" was published. I remember it well. We had a slightly different version that gave all the instructions about getting under the table and putting the wet blanket on top, but ended with the injunction that we should put our heads between our legs and kiss our appendages goodbye. That version came out from some of the mickey-taking—*[Interruption.]* I am told that that must have been the Kama Sutra; perhaps it was a merger of the two.

There is a serious point to be made, however. Psychological damage is caused by an overdose of fear, although I hesitate to say so. We should remember that in our civil defence planning. We do not want to cause unnecessary alarm. We want people to be properly prepared, and unnecessary alarm is damaging. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington was right to talk about the human factors associated with civil defence planning. It is not just about getting inoculations to those who need them, but about dealing with issues such as crowd control, fear and panic, which can cause major problems.

We need to be clear when issuing advice. My hon. Friend was suggesting that we tell people not only what they should be worried about, but what they should not. We need to tell people when things are okay. We have had experience of that with diseases such as meningitis. That disease is a killer and causes problems, but we have been careful to issue advice that tells parents not only when they should take their children to hospital, but when it would be unnecessary to do so. That kind of advice is important.

[Mr. Richard Allan]

Fear can itself cause damage. There was evidence of that in Sheffield a couple of years ago. An incredible rumour spread around the city that the IRA was planning to attack Meadowhall, our local shopping centre. Everyone in the city knew about it. The evidence cited was the fact that body bags were being taken to the shopping centre in preparation for when people were killed by the supposed IRA attack. The whole city believed the rumour, and people did not go to Meadowhall in case the IRA attack occurred. It turned out that what had been seen was Marks & Spencer taking in a load of suit carriers; perhaps hon. Members know what they look like. The delivery had gone in through the back door, but because of the heightened state of awareness, that information had circulated around the city.

There is a serious point to be made. It is important to get accurate information to people, so that we do not cause fear or, indeed, unnecessary economic damage, which is the other major factor that the Government are trying to balance. In the present circumstances, if, as the papers report, there is a threat to aviation, one of the options would be to close Heathrow. That would cause huge economic damage. We always need to balance the damage—generally economic—caused by closing facilities because of an acknowledged risk, and the risk of the attack materialising. Striking a balance is a tough challenge for anyone in a position of authority.

Tom Brake: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not dwell too much on "Protect and Survive", as I am sure the Minister will issue some guidance soon, but instead consider providing guidance on where people can get their information from? That might be from announcements on the BBC, the radio, text messages and so on.

Mr. Allan: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. We are talking about accurate information and where it can be obtained. I am about to make some concrete suggestions about our information technology infrastructure, which will not surprise the Minister, as that is my main area of interest. It is an increasingly important subject in the context of civil planning.

My hon. Friend reminds me about the need to ensure that there is accurate information. One of the downsides of the great spread of the internet, for example, is that it is the perfect vehicle for circulating misinformation as well as good information. It would be helpful if people were told what kind of broadcasts they could expect and what channels they were on. They could take that information on board and—this could increase awareness—set it against some of the misinformation about increased suspicion that may circulate at times, either through word of mouth or through other less appropriate forms of the media, whether official or unofficial. Some of the more lurid stories that have been printed in the press have not helped people.

I turn to the information technology infrastructure. Some important questions must be answered. Computer networks and telephone networks have increasingly merged, so that it is hard to say what is one and what is the other. After 11 September, we saw how essential communications networks were in responding to civil defence situations, and we became especially aware of the fact that communications networks can be vulnerable. Whether or not information networks are deliberately targeted, if they are taken out, their loss can cause major problems for those who are trying to deal with the aftermath of a disaster.

At the time of the great millennium bug, the Government engaged in civil defence planning for the information infrastructure; I think that it was the last time that they seriously engaged in it. A good exercise was set up, in which the industry was brought together, Ministers took part, Government systems were rated for their vulnerability to the bug and all kinds of measures were put in place. That was an important exercise in the discipline of information assurance, which secures the quality and continuity of our information systems.

The Government said at the time that they did not want all that work to be wasted. They said that, although the millennium bug did not bite us seriously in the end, they wanted to take forward the work that had already been done. Because they had got people together and thinking about the resilience of information systems, they wanted to ensure that that work was not stopped at the beginning of 2000. I hope that the Minister will tell us that there has been some continuity and that the people who came together for the millennium bug are considering the resilience of our information systems in the context of other potential threats.

If any of our major infrastructure—one thinks, for example, of the banking system—went down and was unavailable for a time, the consequences in terms of potential civil chaos would be severe. We must think about what would happen if a major data centre were lost, whether through a deliberate terrorist incident or, referring back to my earlier comment on wider questions, through a major national disaster. The resilience of key infrastructure systems such as the banking system is essential. I hope that the Government will work with bodies such as the Information Assurance Advisory Council, which is a good industry body that is trying to deal with the issue, and with the major industry representatives to ensure that our infrastructure is as resilient as possible.

The public agencies also need to look at their systems. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned that the Benefits Agency may be important after some civil or other disaster. That agency is utterly dependent on its IT system. The question of whether that works will become critical at a time of potential civil disorder. Other systems are obviously important. For example, the air traffic control system will be essential to maintain transport. A direct or indirect attack on such a system due to some kind of chaos would be very serious.

Information systems could be put in place to improve matters. We recently saw chaos on London Transport caused by snow—a major civil disaster from an inch of snow. However, that situation was made worse by the lack of available information. There was a domino effect. People turned up at one tube station, were told that it had closed and went to the next station, which had to be closed because of overcrowding. Everyone then moved to the next station and so on.

If one is involved in such a situation, as I was a couple of weeks ago when I tried to use the transport system, the only means of information is apparently someone shouting up from the station and telling others whether platforms are overcrowded. If we are thinking about any major civil disorder or emergency, with millions of people in the centre of London trying to get out, we must have better information systems that tell people what they should do, whether they should stay put and what the best ways in and out of the city are. At the moment, the system seems to be far too dependent on turning up at places. By the time people have reached that place, they are already part of the problem, because they are adding to the crowd that one is trying to disperse.

The other area that I think the Government should look at is the law relating to attacks on information infrastructure. The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) referred to the issue of prevention. We may have some difference of political view over the context in which he mentioned it, but prevention of attacks on computer systems is an area in which the Government could strengthen the law. The current law—the Computer Misuse Act 1990—is old and outdated, given the nature of some recent attacks, including distributed denial of service, a well-known phenomenon whereby people try to block access to websites. At a normal time, such a problem may be annoying, but at a time of civil disaster, the blocking of access to websites that the Government have created to inform citizens about what is going on becomes a much more serious issue. The law may be too weak to deal with that occurrence at present.

The law could be strengthened to deal with attacks that are ancillary to the main function of the computer system, which try not to break the computer system but to cause mischief, and attacks that deliberately target computer systems. The smart terrorists of the future may carry out such attacks to cause disorder.

It is important to ensure that the public have information about who is responsible for what—it has been referred to a few times already. One may have the local authority, the health care trust and the strategic health authority involved. In my area of south Yorkshire, residuary bodies are responsible for civil defence; we used to have a county council. All sorts of bodies are involved.

We can have political debates at this level about whether we should have a homeland security tsar and about similar questions, but that does not matter to people on the ground. When something happens in their area, they need to know who to talk to—is it the chief executive of the local council or someone else? I hope that the Government can ensure that on the ground in local authority areas local contact points are clearly available to people. That would contribute to a sense of security.

3.2 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing the debate and on his perception, given that it is now more timely than when he applied for it. I agreed with several of the points he made, especially about security airside. There have been too many scares, not only at Heathrow, but at most airports. As he rightly said, it is outrageous that Britain continues to run such a risk.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire) referred to schools and to the fact that these issues need to be handled sensitively because of the risk of upsetting young children. I was a bit surprised to hear the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) say that he woke up frightened every morning—even I thought that the Liberals were bigger men than that, but we live to be corrected.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) spoke about deterrence. He is right to differentiate between the cold war scenario, when deterrence was a major factor, and the risks and threats we face today. The Civil Defence Act 1948—the original Act dealing with emergency powers—enshrined the words

"attack by a foreign power",

but, realistically, Britain is not under threat from a foreign power and, at least for the foreseeable future, it is unlikely to be. However, that does not mean that there is not a serious and significant threat.

As other hon. Members have pointed out, that threat has been present since 11 September nearly 18 months ago. Not only that, but we are daily reminded of the threat by arrests of suspected terrorists, ricin discoveries, the Prime Minister telling the nation that an attack is imminent, and yesterday's deployment of troops at Heathrow. The closer we come to war with Iraq, the greater that threat must be.

After 18 months and two Queen's Speeches, we still have not seen any Government legislation, or even a draft White Paper, on how we can better co-ordinate and prepare our emergency services and civilians for an attack. In the words of David Veness, the Assistant Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis responsible for anti-terrorism:

"the United States has spent $500 billion on anti-terrorism measures. In Britain we have set up 73 committees."

The Government have acknowledged, fairly, that existing legislative provisions for dealing with any type of threat to civil protection need updating. The Government have said that they are committed to introducing legislation to deal with such issues when parliamentary time allows—an age-old phrase. In the 18 months since the attack in New York, international terrorism has reared its ugly head in many other places in the world. Terrorism has shown its capabilities, yet the Government have found no time in the parliamentary agenda to introduce legislation to set up a more modern and sophisticated emergency planning system.

The Bill team gave their proposals to the Government only in December 2002. I have the discussion paper for a Bill team meeting dated 5 December 2002. The document is produced by civil servants, not politicians. It clearly states:

"Recent wide area emergencies have exposed weaknesses in UK resilience."

The emergencies to which the document refers are flooding, foot and mouth and the fuel crisis—goodness knows what it would have said in the event of a chemical or biological attack. It continues:

"The current framework is not working to a satisfactory standard for a number of reasons . . . There is also inconsistency in the basic approach to civil emergency planning which has never been properly defined and which needs to be broadened to develop

[Mr. James Paice]

a standard integrated and comprehensive framework of activities, from assessment to recovery, in accordance with the national goal of resilience."

It is agreed that we face a huge challenge to reform our emergency planning procedures, yet the Government have done nothing to speed up that process of reform, and the Opposition have not been asked for their co-operation. Only this morning, the Minister without Portfolio described the emergency situation that we face. Frankly, the excuse of having to find parliamentary time is an insult. The importance of legislation to provide a co-ordinating mechanism cannot be stressed enough; neither can the need for a dedicated person to lead and co-ordinate Government efforts. Liberal Democrat Members seem to forget that this is their policy, but they dismiss our call—which I now repeat—for a Cabinet Minister to take responsibility for homeland security.

That is still necessary. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary clearly do not have time to give the matter the 100 per cent. devotion that it justly deserves. Having shifted responsibility for the subject from the Home Office to the Cabinet Office, it is odd that the Prime Minister appointed the Home Secretary as chairman of the co-ordinating committee. However, an individual Cabinet Minister needs to take overall responsibility. The National Audit Office has reported that one in four of our hospitals and one in three ambulance services

"are not well prepared to deal with an attack involving chemical, biological, and radioactive weapons"

and that an incident involving 500 or more casualties would seriously challenge the national health service. What is being done to change that situation? Who is in charge of changing it? Should an unfortunate incident occur, would the Government be able to deal with the eventualities arising from it?

Hon. Members have referred to the different tiers of local government. I remind the Minister that district councils currently receive no funding and have no statutory obligation in this respect, yet, as the hon. Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) said, they are in the front line of dealing locally with any situation that may arise.

Other questions need to be asked. Have the Government made any provision to ensure that there are sufficient supplies of vaccines in the event of a smallpox attack on a large city? What measures have been taken regarding the issue of chemical and biological protection suits? Have any stockpiles of such suits been made and how would they be made available? Are there any measures to deal with mass radiation if we are hit by a dirty bomb of some sort?

Hon. Members have referred to the "Protect and Survive" document. When I attended a course at the Civil Defence College in the early 80s, I learned the advice perceived to be the best at the time. The hon. Member for St. Helens, North has referred to this. In hindsight we can look back and say that it was stupid and pathetic: clearly, hiding under a kitchen table is not going to help. Nevertheless, making people aware that there were measures that they could take—measures that seemed sensible at that time—reassured them. There is something that individuals can do.

Yesterday, America published advice to all its citizens on the self-protection measures they can take. When will the UK Government do likewise? I do not suggest that they should offer similar advice, because inevitably the advice for this country would have to be different, but they should offer advice on what individuals could do if certain events occurred. As hon. Members have said, the Government should also give advice on where people should look for information in the event that something happens.

Given that there is a legion of new radio and television channels coming on air almost daily, people need guidance on what mechanism will be used to disperse information—whether the Government will always use BBC 1, for example. The time has come for the Government to stop sending out cryptic messages to the public warning them to be vigilant. Those warnings have been in tube trains and railway stations for years, reflecting different threats of the time. What exactly do the Government mean by "being vigilant"?

It is too late to be accused of scaremongering: there is a scare. It is not right to argue that to take action would be to give in to terrorists. Why else do we have troops at Heathrow? The threat is already disrupting our lives and we have to face up to it. It is far better to take steps to ensure that the threat's long-term impact on our lives is minimised than to take short-term measures. The Government must admit to the people of Britain that there are huge threats facing the country, and they must assist the people to prepare themselves for an attack. That should be done in a calm and reassuring manner; but as with any threat, precautions must be taken. We should tell the people and trust the people.

Only a few weeks ago protesters entered the Sizewell B power station—an event that the Government dismissed as being of no importance. I was chairman of the local authority at the time of the Sizewell B enquiry, and I challenged the experts on what would happen if an aircraft intentionally impacted on the power station. I was laughed out of court—but I was also told that they could not guarantee the integrity of the structure in that event. Now, 17 or 18 years later, none of us would dismiss the possibility or the likelihood of such a thing happening.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to the London underground and the need to ensure that passengers understand what they should do in the event of an emergency. I would like to mention another matter, light-hearted but important none the less. Ten days ago, I was one of the many hundreds of people trapped on the M11 motorway. Some of my constituents spent 12, 14 or 16 hours trapped there. The emergency services did not co-ordinate to resolve the situation. Some will dismiss this as a trite and irrelevant observation, but countless people who were trapped in that traffic jam have since asked me, "If that is what it was like with a couple of inches of snow, how on earth will we cope if there is a chemical, biological or radiological attack?"

That is an important lesson for us to learn. If neither local nor central Government could deal with a spell of bad weather that we knew was coming at least 48 hours before it arrived, how can we be reassured that the Government could deal with what I pray will never happen—a terrorist attack?

3.15 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I have listened to the debate with great interest and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for securing time to debate these issues, which are significant for every resident of this country. I know from his discussions with my noble Friend Lord Macdonald of Tradeston how interested he is in these matters, as was evident from his remarks today. I also pay tribute to his colleague, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), for his measured questions.

I shall endeavour to respond, in the time available, to the points that have been made, beginning with one or two of the questions asked by the hon. Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire). He upbraided me for not responding immediately to every point that was raised and for looking at the material that was passed to me. I make no apology for speaking on these issues with great deliberation, and choosing my words carefully. I hope that all hon. Members would do the same.

Mr. Swire: If the Minister checks *Hansard* tomorrow, he will see that I did not in any way condemn him for not making notes. I just hoped that he would deal with my points, which he evidently is about to do.

Mr. Alexander: I am grateful for that clarification. With the hon. Gentleman's indulgence, I shall do exactly that.

The hon. Gentleman asked for guidance on the important issue of schoolchildren in the Greater London area. All schools and local authorities in England have been made aware that they can obtain guidance on dealing with terrorism from the UK Resilience website. Many local authorities have also issued guidance to schools in their areas to assist with emergency planning.

The Department for Education and Skills will again draw attention to the general guidance available in its routine mailing to local education authorities and to schools. However, in the event of a threat of an incident, the local police will of course work with schools to ensure that they are protected and will implement the relevant emergency plans. This is another clear instance of our responsibility to make people alert but, particularly when the constituency that we are dealing with is young children, not to cause unnecessary alarm.

As to the key points made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, I hope that all hon. Members appreciate that the widespread circulation of a document such as the London resilience report could be prejudicial to security. I reiterate to hon. Members that the London resilience team provided him with detailed briefings on the contents of the report. Indeed, I can think of few circumstances in which a Minister's officials, the night before a debate in this Chamber, would willingly participate in briefing an Opposition Member on a matter of this kind. I am glad that in this instance they were forthcoming.

I was particularly perplexed by the hon. Gentleman's line of questioning about the London resilience report, given that I am led to believe by my officials that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, who is responsible for London resilience, has said that he is happy to discuss any specific concerns that the hon. Gentleman may have. I hope that he will consider that invitation.

Tom Brake: Does the Minister agree that detailed briefings on the report are not the same as having that report, which is a lengthy one, in one's hand and being able to identify which organisations are not making swift enough progress with their emergency planning? Opposition Members with that information could put pressure on those organisations.

Mr. Alexander: Perhaps this is a matter on which there is a divide not only between the Government and the Opposition but between Opposition parties. It is perfectly appropriate for Ministers to remain accountable for actions for which they are responsible.

The reasoned question from the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) was an update on the stage that we have reached in implementing the London resilience report. All the recommendations have been progressed, although circumstances have changed in some cases. None the less, many of the recommendations have been or are being implemented. Implementation is being monitored by the London resilience forum, which is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions. The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, acts as deputy. A detailed, one-year-on report to the London resilience Cabinet Committee and the Home Secretary will follow in due course.

The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to acknowledge that the vetting of security staff lies outwith my direct responsibility, but I will ensure that his points are passed on and made clear to the Department for Transport.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Government's approach to warning and informing the public in the circumstances of a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack. The response to a CBRN incident will vary according to several factors, including the strength, volume, nature and method of release of the contaminant. In some scenarios—this is an important point, given the concern expressed by hon. Members—people would be advised to evacuate; in others, they would be advised to stay put. Advice would therefore have to be carefully considered, given the possibility that it might turn out to be unhelpful. Of course, work continues on the matter, but it is already clear that the public should follow the instructions given to them by the emergency services.

That leads directly to the hon. Gentleman's next point. He questioned the emergency services' capability effectively to direct people during an incident. However, the emergency services have vast experience of communicating with crowds following major incidents, using loudspeakers and a range of other methods. All the evidence shows that the public do indeed respond positively to instructions given by the emergency services following major incidents. Top-level strategic guidance will be given to all agencies, and protocols for handling crowds at CBRN incidents will flow from it. They will address the specific responses needed to deal with distressed people at major incidents, and I should make it clear that the emergency services are used to

[Mr. Alexander]

working closely together to handle such people. Regrettably, we can draw on experience when ensuring that preparations are in place.

Mr. Paice: The Minister is right in what he says about communication and the emergency services. I do not want to be accused again of scaremongering, but does he not accept that we could be talking about a scenario that has never been seen before in this country? What he describes as major incidents—perhaps a train crash, involving a few hundred people—may be tragic, but they could be absolutely minuscule compared with the worst-case situation.

Mr. Alexander: I hope that all hon. Members will understand if I do not speculate about particular instances. However, I think that there will be agreement across the Chamber that we are not talking about a direct analogy to the situation in 1980, which was dealt with under the "Protect and Survive" approach. The nature of that threat was specific, and the responses could reflect that. Now, however, there is at least the possibility of a range of different methods being used to precipitate an incident. That is why a different approach must be adopted, and that is reflected in the work that the Government are undertaking.

Dr. Lewis: Will the Minister address the specific point? If the type of attack is to be more limited than the all-out attack envisaged in the early 1980s, will there be specialised teams that can quickly descend on affected areas to help people?

Mr. Alexander: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, to which I was hoping to come. Local responders—this is an important caveat to what I am about to say—remain the building blocks of emergency response in the United Kingdom. However, specialist central support would be available to supplement those local responders, who will be on the front line in such incidents. In that sense, he is accurate in thinking that one must ensure that the emergency services in the location are supported by the appropriate skills and knowledge from the centre. That gives a sense of the work that the Government are undertaking on these matters.

Tom Brake: Although the Minister may be about to come on to these points, am I right in thinking that he would rely entirely on advice from the emergency services to be distributed to individuals in case of a CBRN incident, and that the Government have no intention of providing any information through either leaflets or contact points where people can get information about CBRN?

Mr. Alexander: No. The UK Resilience website is available. I have some sympathy for some of the points that were made about the fact that one of our key challenges is to ensure that the appropriate level of information is shared with the appropriate organisations in advance. However, there is of course ongoing work in the Government to ensure that in a major incident there are means such as the media, for example, through which direct communication can be achieved beyond the operational control exercise on the ground by the emergency services.

I am conscious of time and fear that I might not be able to cover all the points that hon. Members made. However, on the range of organisations that are being considered under the Civil Contingencies Bill, I shall endeavour to be specific. The Government have not yet reached a final conclusion on the list of organisations to be covered by the proposed statutory duties. However, we think it unlikely that the Bill will result in organisations doing less than they do now. Therefore I do not envisage the situation that it was suggested might arise in which a utility company would have a lesser responsibility than it has at present, whereby there is a range of regulatory and statutory duties to emergency plan.

On the separate, but related issue of the role of central Government and agencies, the roles and responsibilities of Departments are clearly set out on the UK Resilience website, but we are currently finalising a set of auditable standards for contingency planning for Departments. That bears on the question of whether there should be a statutory duty imposed on particular Departments. These auditable standards will set out the requirements in even greater detail than there has been in the past. We simply do not accept that there is a total lack of preparation on the part of the Benefits Agency, which is among the agencies currently considering such issues. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington raised those matters directly with my noble Friend Lord Macdonald, who undertook to respond.

On the general point of the public information campaign, I merely reiterate the point that the hon. Member for New Forest, East made, that we must be considered and measured in the advice that we give, and ensure that we strike the right balance, keeping the public informed and not provoking an overreaction. To be alert but not alarmed is the right attitude for the Government to strike in an evolving situation that is under constant review. The right response to an emergency, in terms of communications and the operational response, will vary according to the exact nature of that emergency. We are therefore concentrating on being able to get the right information to members of the public who might be affected as quickly as possible in any particular emergency.

As much as time allows, I shall address the points that the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) made about how the UK at national level is preparing to deal with emergencies and disruptive challenges, and shall demonstrate how matters are being organised. I hope that I can assure hon. Members that we are making reasonable efforts to ensure that we are sufficiently prepared to handle any of the variety of incidents that could affect the United Kingdom.

The Home Secretary has overall responsibility for the safety and security of the citizens of the United Kingdom. He is in charge of security and also supervises all current counter-terrorist and resilience work by Departments, in his capacity as chairman of all the relevant Cabinet Committees. He is the person best placed to do his job, as he has direct responsibility for the main elements of the work to counter the current threat from terrorism: the intelligence work of the security service; counter-terrorist policy; and building

resilience against the terrorist threat. He chairs the three Cabinet Sub-Committees, bringing together the work of the Departments. The first of those Committees oversees the work to strengthen the UK's defences against terrorism, which the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire mentioned. The second works to build the UK's resilience and ability to manage the consequences of major emergencies. The third meets to oversee the lead Departments' management of major emergencies and manage their wider effects. That Committee, the Civil Contingencies Committee, is also attended by representatives of the relevant emergency services and other agencies.

Supporting the Home Secretary in that work is Sir David Omand, who was appointed the Government's security and intelligence co-ordinator and permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office last summer. That new post was created to enhance the capacity at the centre of Government to co-ordinate security, intelligence and consequence management matters and to deal with risks and major emergencies, should they arise. Working in support of the Home Secretary and Sir David Omand is the civil contingencies secretariat in the Cabinet Office. It has the task of co-ordinating the UK's resilience to the threats and disruptive challenges that face us today. If—

Mr. Bill O'Brien (in the Chair): Order. Time is up. We must move on to the next debate.

Ex-offenders (Post-release Support)

3.30 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I should like to raise the issue of provision for people who leave custody and who have a history of drug problems. My raising it is prompted by the tragic case of a 20-year-old young man, Sean Wildman, who sadly and almost certainly unnecessarily died on the streets of Bristol shortly before Christmas 2002. It is worth putting my remarks into a national context because, although Sean's case is tragic, I do not believe that it is isolated, and there is clearly a national problem, that needs to be addressed. I was talking to a representative of the Prison Service in my area yesterday, who told me that more than four in five of the new inmates who entered Horfield prison in Bristol in December 2002 had some sort of drug addiction problem. There is clearly a widespread problem of people entering prisons, especially young offenders, with some drug problem.

What happens in prisons can be very good, but what happens when people leave prison often lets them down. In last Sunday's edition of *The Observer*, an officer standing in the gym at Pentonville prison is quoted as saying:

> "These guys look pretty well, don't they? They come in here like skeletons—the crack diet, we call it. Here we give them exercise and decent food. It's like a health farm. The problem starts again at the prison gate. I hate to say it, but most of them will be back a few months later, looking like skeletons again."

In other words, there is provision inside prisons. I shall come to Sean's case in a moment. What went badly wrong in his case seems to concern the link between what happened inside prison and what happened when he left. I do not doubt that there are often good intentions and that things are meant to work well. I have a board of visitors handbook in my hand, which says:

> "Preparation for release should begin in the early stages of any prison sentence."

In other words, and especially in the case of someone who receives a short sentence, one needs to be thinking right at the beginning about what will happen when they are released. That is obviously good practice. I also have a document produced by the Prison Service called "Male Prisoners and Young Offenders" which says to a young offender:

> "Your personal officer (if you have one) will be able to help you to prepare for release through your sentence plan."

So, the good intentions are clear, but the reality is often very different. To give one example, the chief inspector of prisons recently published a report on Ashfield young offenders institution in my constituency and, under the heading of reintegration planning, she said:

> "Re-integration planning was poor and there was little in place to prepare children and young people for release. Training plan conferences had become merely a form filling process."

I am sure that the intentions are good. There is no desire to let people down, yet what happens when people are released often seems to do so.

Earlier this week, the Home Office announced new initiatives that might begin to address some of the concerns that I am raising. I am grateful for the fact that the Minister took the time to brief me and other hon. Members about those welcome pilot schemes, which I

[Mr. Steve Webb]

wish well. My only observation is that they are pilots, due to start in 2004, and will be evaluated over a three-year period. Although I fully accept that a pilot must be properly evaluated, which cannot be done overnight, the process will not be concluded before 2007. Today, I want to ask not only what happened to Sean Wildman, and how we can avoid that happening again, but more generally how we can be sure before the pilots are evaluated that there will not be more cases such as his in the immediate future. It might be helpful if I tell Sean's story. I advised the Minister that I intended to do so.

Sean's family home was in Charlfield, in my constituency, where his father, Peter, still lives—I spoke to him this morning. I have also met Sally, his mother, who now lives in Taunton, and have spoken to her about their son's death. Sean was 20 years old when he went into Exeter prison in September 2002 with a relatively short sentence, having been convicted on burglary and other charges. I am not convinced that the prison is being very forthcoming about what happened, as even family members have had problems in obtaining documents and finding out what happened to their son, but so far as can be told, he acknowledged his drug problem on entering the prison, and a programme of treatment was arranged. I see the Minister nodding to that.

Sean's history of drug problems had put a great strain on his relationship with his parents at various times. He appears to have received help at Exeter prison from what is known as the CARAT—counselling, assessment, referral advice and through-care—team. I am told by my local drugs action team that, originally, funding for CARAT teams was made available with the intention of providing services for people not only while they were in prison, but for eight weeks after their release. Will the Minister clarify whether that was the original intention, whether it is still the intention and why that appears not to be happening?

Sean left prison on 19 November and, tragically, by 4 December he was dead. He died homeless, on the streets of Bristol, of a heroin overdose. Almost double the lethal dose was in his body. The question that we should all ask ourselves is how that could happen. Many institutions and public authorities are involved. I should like to examine the role of each.

My strong impression is that the authorities at Exeter prison failed effectively to liaise with the agencies that were to be responsible for taking on Sean's care after his release. First, they failed to put him in touch with the right bodies; they gave him details of a reintegration service—which is a good thing—but it was in Gloucestershire. Sean's family home is not in the county of Gloucestershire; it is in the South Gloucestershire unitary authority, which is nothing to do with Gloucestershire and has no contact with it. Apparently, he said that he would be living at an address in Bristol, so why did Exeter tell the Gloucestershire reintegration service about him? Even if it had been the right service, why was the fax sent only a few days before his release? Gloucestershire reintegration service, which I am sure provides a good service, prefers a month's notice so as to get to know the person in order to support him. Why was only a few days' notice given? Similarly, why did Exeter prison give Sean the details of a project called the Emmaeus project in Bristol, which is not even open yet? Why did the prison not know what was going on?

The Big Issue South West, which supported Sean by helping him to keep body and soul together after his release, has suggested that prisons such as Exeter might have online access to up-to-date information about which services are available for which client groups in which parts of the region. Although some information is available, the people in Exeter did not put Sean in touch with the right agencies.

At one stage, Sean lived in Stoke Gifford in South Gloucestershire. The drugs action team for the area is based in Stoke Gifford and runs just the sorts of services that could have helped him, but it did not know that he existed. It found out about him only after his death. Why did Exeter prison not put him in touch with the right authorities instead of giving him duff information?

When Sean was released on licence, why did the prison governor at Exeter not refer in the licence to the drug problems? The probation service has told me that it was not aware of Sean's drug problem—nor did it know about his homelessness until he turned up and said, "I have nowhere to live." I understand that Sean did not want it to know about his drug problem. The question that I ask about the system, therefore, is why are people not told when inmates consent or volunteer to begin a drug-treatment process in prison? Why is it not a condition that support services will be notified post-release—in other words, that ex-prisoners will be required to consent to ongoing support after release? Had that happened, the probation service would have known that Sean had a drug problem. Someone in the South Gloucestershire drugs action team should have known. The probation service told me this morning that it did not know that he had a drug problem.

I shall deal with the role of the probation service in a moment, but between his leaving prison and his death, Sean saw a probation officer three times in less than three weeks. It did not become apparent to the probation service until too late that he had a drug problem, but it could not do anything about it because nothing in the terms of his licence required him to have any drug treatment. I query why the prison sent Sean to the wrong places; I query why the licence did not refer to his drug problem; and I query how much care the prison showed him.

I have with me a letter to Sean's mother from Devon prison partnership, dated 21 January 2003, which says:

> "In answer to your query, I can confirm your son was released . . . on 3rd December".

Sean was released well over two weeks before that, so either Exeter prison had the wrong person or that was just another cock-up. I appreciate that prisons have to deal with huge numbers of young people and that there is a huge turnover—that is the subject of another debate—but it would help if the Minister would clarify whether the medical information that the prison gave to Mrs. Wildman was about Sean and not about someone else. The family deserve an apology for the fact that the prison could not get correct even basic information about Sean.

The other thing that the prison failed to act on was the fact that Sean had been homeless before he went into prison. It appears to have done little to check his address. He gave an address in the middle of Bristol, but none of the family or anyone else seem to know where it was, and he seems not to have intended to live there. He had not lived there before, and he had a record of being homeless before going to prison. Nevertheless, with negligible support, Exeter prison pushed him out of the door—a crude way of putting it—to an address about which it knew nothing. Despite such a lack of evidence and his record of homelessness, the prison did not tell the probation service that homelessness might be a problem. I query the prison's role, and I hope that the Minister will ensure that it cannot wash its hands of Sean Wildman by saying that he was not the prison's problem. There should be a thorough investigation of what went wrong.

The probation service saw Sean three times in three weeks. It did not know that he was homeless until he turned up and told them. It then referred him to Bristol council, but single, homeless, ex-offenders with drug records do not do very well in the housing stakes. The probation service tells me that it has a limited number of hostels, that—guess what—it needs to be told that someone is coming, and that no one told it about Sean. The probation service was not told about Sean's drug problem at his request, but I think that it should be a condition of entering the prison drug programme that offenders should consent to follow-up services after release.

Sean turned to *The Big Issue South West*. I pay tribute to that organisation and those who work there for what they did to support Sean. He was determined to make a success of his life. A support worker said:

"When Sean first came in he was really confident. He had lots of plans because he was going to have lots of money because he was not using. When I found out he had died I was really angry. It shouldn't have happened."

With the best will in the world, it should not fall to charities to pick up such people. I stress that Sean wanted to stand on his own two feet. He was in a relatively good condition when he left the prison.

After seeing Sean's body, his father said:

"What really haunted me was when I saw his body lying there and thought: 'This is the Sean that I remember two or three years ago, not the Sean I'd seen ten months earlier ... he looked something like his old self and why do you die when you are like that?'"

Sean did not want access to drug support services; perhaps he wanted to stand on his own two feet, but tragically he could not. My question is whether the authorities did enough to make sure that someone who may not have wanted to co-operate fully with official programmes none the less received the support that he needed.

Is Exeter prison looking into what happened to Sean Wildman, and learning from it? Is the probation service looking into what happened, and learning from it? Can we ensure that there is more of a follow-through when people come out of prison and enter a community? Can we ensure that the public authorities involved—the prisons, the police, the probation service, the health and local authorities, and the support services are talking to one another and taking responsibility? Despite all the good people working in those agencies, I have been unable to find anybody who will take responsibility. I hope that the Minister will assure me that steps are being taken to learn the lessons of Sean Wildman's death, and that notwithstanding the very good pilot schemes, which I fully support, steps will be taken immediately to ensure that fewer people meet Sean Wildman's tragic fate.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Hilary Benn): I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) for raising the issue and I wish to respond to some of the points that he raised. First, I wish to express my sorrow to Mr. and Mrs. Wildman on the loss of their son; it must be extremely difficult for them. Those of us who have not been through that experience find it almost impossible to imagine what it must be like. I know that the family will be particularly anxious to find out exactly what happened to Sean and the lessons that we can all learn from what happened.

If the hon. Gentleman feels that it may be helpful, I offer to meet him and Mr. and Mrs. Wildman. The most useful thing that we could do to get answers to some of his questions would be to speak to those who were responsible for the care of Sean and who tried to assist him. That would be the most effective way of dealing with the points that were raised.

As the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, the probation service did not have information about Sean's drug problem because Sean himself did not want it passed on, and that is very important. The hon. Gentleman raised the matter of whether we should change the system; that perhaps such considerations should not apply and that when someone goes to prison, information on the treatment and support that they receive should be passed on automatically. I realise that that poses difficult questions about confidentiality, and I see my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) shaking his head. We are where we are because we respect people's right to decide what information about them, their circumstances, and their treatment should be passed on and to whom. However, I recognise that one could take a different approach.

Sean was given a short sentence, so he would normally have received no supervision from the probation service. However, because of his age he was subject to a section 65 supervision notice, as a result of which he saw a probation officer three times. In such difficult situations, the individual, the family, society, the prison and outside services are responsible for providing support. It is a uniquely challenging task because of the life led by some of those who find themselves in the grip of drug addiction. They are not always amenable to doing what is suggested to them; they do not, for example, always keep appointments. That is a difficult process. I say that, by way of preface, to acknowledge the scale of the challenge. It is not as simple as saying, "If only all of those bits had been in place, the outcome may have been very different."

I am anxious, as is the hon. Gentleman, to learn lessons from all individual cases so that we can do better in future. I acknowledge completely that we, as a society, must do better. The case of Sean Wildman raises a big issue for society, because now we know much more

[Hilary Benn]

than we used to about the extent of drug addiction and drug-related offending. However, as I said a moment ago, it is hard for us to understand fully the effect that addiction has on individuals. Individuals are imprisoned—literally—by their drug habit. It impacts on their lives and those of their families, yet we see more clearly the impact that addiction has on society because of the effect of drug-related offending.

Therefore it is important for us to put time, effort, resources, understanding and learning into trying to tackle the problem. The Government recognise that more must be done, especially to provide post-release support for ex-offenders with drug problems. I learned that early on in my ministerial post when I visited Leeds prison and was told how one day there was a knock on the prison gate, and when it was opened the man standing there said, "Can I come back in?" When he was asked why, the man replied, "I need help, and I know that I can get help quickly in prison. I have been told that I would have to wait for some time on the outside." That is not the usual conversation that one would expect to have at a prison gate.

That story highlights the nature of the challenge that we face. I hope that in the meeting that I have granted the hon. Gentleman, he will come to understand the work that Exeter prison did with Sean Wildman, because, if I may say so, some of the hon. Gentleman's criticisms were unfair, and such a meeting would be a more appropriate way to get to the bottom of the matter than the forum of this debate.

I say that because there has been a transformation in the work that prisons do with offenders with a drug problem. "Transformation" is not a word that I use casually, but if one takes a historical view and goes back 20 years, there has been a transformation. Twenty years ago nothing was done, so it is important that we acknowledge the work that is done today. We are all anxious to make further progress, but at the same time, we must recognise the progress that has been made.

Real progress has been made in prisons, simply because prison officers were the first people to recognise that there was a problem that needed to be dealt with. We do not often pay enough tribute to what I describe as the pioneers within the Prison Service. They saw the problem that confronted them. They saw offenders with drug problems arrive in prison at a time when very little or no support was available. The pioneer programmes developed from there, and, together with Government funding, much better services and support are now available in prisons, including detoxification. From memory, around 32,000 or 33,000 prisoners went through that in the most recent year for which statistics are available—I do not recall whether that was 2002 or 2001. That is a very large figure.

The CARAT system, which did not exist 20 years ago, is now available in all prisons. It is intended to meet the non-clinical needs of the great majority of prisoners and forms the foundation of the prison drug treatment framework. As the hon. Gentleman has told us, Sean received support from the CARAT team at Exeter prison. There are 60 rehabilitation treatment programmes available in the Prison Service, yet because of their duration they are available only to prisoners who are serving longer sentences. The quality of those treatment programmes is at least equal to anything that is provided in the community.

Mr. Webb: The Minister touches on a point that Mrs. Wildman raised with me. She said that people who receive long sentences because they have done something seriously wrong can get treatment whereas people such as Sean who have done something fairly minor often cannot. Does the Minister think that that is fair? Can anything be done about it?

Hilary Benn: That is a fair question to ask. That is the case because such prison programmes need to run for a certain length of time. With regard to short-sentence prisoners who stay for a very brief period, it is difficult to start something that they might not finish. However, that makes the need for more effective through-care all the greater: I accept that argument without question.

One aspect of CARAT's work is to help to prepare offenders for when they leave prison. An important part of that is to prevent death by overdose. The Prison Service is acutely aware of the risk of such deaths for those who have been off drugs for a long time.

John Mann (Bassetlaw): Will the Minister look at detoxification, and especially at the medical evidence that certain forms of detoxification have a higher propensity than others to lead to death by overdose after they have been undertaken? Will he also examine whether the Prison Service is aware—nationally and in Exeter—of the various research evidence on different forms of detoxification?

Hilary Benn: I will be happy to look into that, and to reply to my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Northavon, if that would be helpful. The support that is currently available includes one-to-one counselling on the dangers, a video that highlights the risks, and guidance material. That is made available before release because the Prison Service is very conscious of that risk, but we recognise that improvements must be made in linking ex-offenders with community providers.

The CARAT service is able to provide long-stop support for those who have left prison, but it would be the first to acknowledge that it cannot provide the form of through-care that others must pick up, although CARAT will do its best in the circumstances—for example, by making appointments. The Prison Service is conscious of the need to continue to improve communications with external agencies so that information is passed on more effectively.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Prospects programme, and Bristol is one of the areas where it will be piloted. A number of schemes are already in existence across the country: voluntary organisations have been heavily involved in that work, and there is an issue for local authorities as housing providers.

As the hon. Gentleman knows because he attended my briefing earlier this week, the prospects scheme is specifically aimed at those who have come off drugs in prison. As a result of the mandatory drug testing system that now operates in prisons, the percentage of positive drug tests has halved in the past five or six years. When somebody who has come off drugs in prison—prison

having given them the space, opportunity and support to enable that to happen—the prospects programme directly addresses the issue that has been raised in general by this case, which is the need to provide continuity of support and accommodation.

The prospects project will be based in a number of hostels that we will seek to establish in the pilot areas. We aim to have two hostels in Bristol—one for men and the other for women. A crucial factor in determining whether the programme succeeds will be the support of communities because, to be frank, one of the key issues will be obtaining planning permission and community consent for the establishment of hostels.

Another reason why the debate is so important is because it helps to raise awareness of the importance of this issue. Ultimately, the problem comes from society. We pass it on to the Prison Service, the courts, the probation service and the health service to sort it out for us, but we have a role to play too. We all have to take responsibility for being part of the solution to help those who want to change and live their lives differently in the future. The prospects model is genuinely interesting and exciting because, by providing that support and continuity of drug testing to make sure that people continue to keep away from drugs, it will help us to know what will work successfully in providing support to individuals.

I shall finish where I began. We are anxious to learn from experience, especially from such a tragic case. We have made much progress, but we need to do more in the future.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Hoax Calls

4.9 pm

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): I shall condense my speech as best I can. I hope that there is not another Division, because it may scupper the proceedings.

I am delighted to have secured the debate. My early-day motion 115 on the subject has attracted 100 names. I have also asked questions about it at Prime Minister's questions, business questions and to the Deputy Prime Minister. I have been trying for some time to debate hoax calls. My wife was a manager at a 999 centre, so I have some knowledge of the subject and various pieces of information have been fed to me about it.

Hoax calls can be the result of young children playing with the telephone who hit 999 by mistake, or genuine calls that have been made in error. Someone may have a mobile telephone in his pocket and the number nine button may have been pressed accidentally. That is common. Silent calls are also attributed to mobiles when the buttons are pressed accidentally. Accidental calls account for 20 per cent. of 999 calls.

I turn now to inappropriate calls. They can be described as calls made to the emergency services that are made with unreasonable, although not malicious, intentions. For example, people have asked to top up their mobile phone, to have their freezer fixed or for the football results. A man phoned up to report a fight between two squirrels in his garden. He was obviously nuts. A couple rang up to settle a custody dispute over a pet hamster. A drunken man asked the police for a lift home as he had spent all his money in the pub.

Although such calls concern me and are important and numerous, they are not the kind that I wish to address. I want to talk about malicious hoax calls to the emergency services with totally fabricated stories. In the first six hours of the first firefighters' strike in November, 55 people in London dialled 999 to report non-existent fires. In the first 12 hours of the strike in Northern Ireland there were 319 calls to the fire brigade, 43 per cent of which were hoaxes. In the first two hours of the dispute in my area of Strathclyde the police received 259 calls reporting fires, and a mere 20—less than 8 per cent.—were found to be genuine.

There is no doubt that certain events, such as the firefighters' dispute, drew attention to people who either wanted to score some kind of political point or who used it as an excuse to make malicious calls, but the truth is far from the impression given by the media that this is something that cropped up due to the firefighters' strike: it has been going on for years. Figures confirm the ongoing problem of hoax calls: hoax calls or false alarms are estimated to comprise between one third and a half of the 22 million emergency calls made every year.

Most shocking to me are the figures published by Strathclyde emergency services in May, which showed that between April 2001 and March 2002 a third of 398,000 calls received were silent. Another third were non-emergency calls; a fifth were timewasters; and nearly 4 per cent. were abusive. Overall, only 11.5 per cent. of the calls were considered to be appropriate. In 2001, more than 31 million calls were made to 999 throughout the UK, of which 40 per cent. were found to

[John Robertson]

be false. Most hoax calls attempted to report non-existent fires and asked to be put through to the fire brigade. Such callers are statistically more likely to be intercepted by the operator and not put through, according to British Telecom. It says that of the malicious calls that do get through, 60 per cent. are to the police and 33 per cent. to the ambulance service. Only 7 per cent get through to the fire brigade, although such calls form the majority of hoax calls made overall.

British Telecom estimates that £32 million of taxpayers' money is spent on these hoax calls.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (in the Chair): Order. The Clerk has just looked at the Standing Order that applies to the new sitting hours. We can add the time on, so the sitting will continue until 4.39.

John Robertson: Thank you, Mr. O'Brien. I shall slow down somewhat, although it will probably please everyone that I still have plenty to say. The human cost of hoax calls is most worrying. Diverting resources poses a clear risk to others in genuine need. The emergency services are obliged by law to respond to every emergency call, even when they know that all they are likely to find is an empty telephone box and a laughing group of youths some distance away. When a hoax call is made—

4.14 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.24 pm

On resuming—

John Robertson: A hoax call diverts resources away from those in genuine need and from situations where there may be loss of life. Crews responding to hoax calls are unavailable to answer genuine ones. Any delay in attending an emergency incident could simply mean the difference between life and death. Furthermore, the lives of those who are called out to deal with hoax calls are also threatened. I invite hon. Members to imagine a hoax call being made to the coastguard and a lifeboat being sent out. The lives of every crewman are in peril, as they always are when lifeboats are called out. If the call is a hoax, their lives are put in danger simply for someone's amusement.

Who on earth would make a hoax call? The perpetrators may be children who are still too naive to know the full potential consequences of their actions, but who still know the difference between right and wrong. It could be an adolescent who uses the call to impress his or her friends or to alleviate boredom, or an adult who is fully aware of what they are doing, but who makes the call with the intention of causing confusion, disorder or chaos.

I outlined the groups most likely to make hoax calls, but the main problem is that there is not just one type of person who makes them. The reasons for making hoax calls vary from the mundane to the downright evil. The most likely perpetrators are a group of youths who hang around phone boxes trying to impress their friends and who, more worryingly, often show an early fascination with fire that often leads to arson. The operator centres that field 999 calls to the emergency services now hire extra staff during the school holidays as a matter of course. Next week during recess, when the schools are on holiday, more people than usual will be working in the centres fielding 999 calls.

Greater Manchester police have shown initiative. They have a schools liaison programme that explains what pupils should do in an emergency and that discourages them from misusing the emergency service by emphasising the danger of making hoax calls. It is important that children are not deterred from making emergency calls should there be a good reason for them to do so. However, they need to be aware that making a hoax call can and will get them into a lot of trouble. Education programmes make the young think about their actions. Most hoax calls are made by 10 and 11-year-olds. By that age, a pattern of offending may already have begun to develop, so we need to consider more ways of working with children of primary school age to deter them from making their first hoax call. I advocate slightly tougher action for teenagers who have developed a tendency to make hoax calls. In some community-based projects in inner-city areas, young arsonists have been taken to burns units in local hospitals to see the results of a fire.

I shall deal in more detail with adult offenders. Hoax calls can be made in three different ways: from a public phone box, as I described earlier; from a mobile phone; or by using a registered land line. Even if the caller attempts to withhold their number by dialling 141, it is easy for the number and location of the caller to be traced. The technology is in place virtually to eliminate hoax calls from mobile phones. A false 999 call can result in a text message that warns the caller that the false call has been traced from their phone. That is usually enough to scare off most hoax callers; some 90 per cent. do not call again.

Disconnection is used as the next step for those who continue to offend. As part of a local initiative in South Yorkshire, the fire and rescue service has teamed up with local police, the ambulance service and mobile phone service providers to cut off hoaxers at source. Ultimately, making a hoax call to the emergency services is improper use of a public telecommunications system and an offence under section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984. The penalty for hoax call offences is up to six months in prison or a fine of up to £5,000. However, although the Act was introduced nearly 20 years ago, it is only recently that anyone has been prosecuted under its provisions. Under the 1984 Act, if an individual is identified as a persistent 999 hoax caller, the usual practice is for the police to pass the details of the calls to the service providers, who then deal with the case individually.

The fact that the 1984 Act is not being used more extensively gives me cause for concern. I will give an example of the discrepancies in punishment given to hoax callers. In one case, an 18-year-old who was arrested for sending more than 2,000 hoax 999 calls in 26 hours using a radio handset that he had stolen from an ambulance service was sentenced to 240 hours community service. In another case, a 17-year-old was given a custodial sentence of one year after making a hoax bomb threat. The 17-year-old was prosecuted

under the anti-terrorism legislation because of the category of his offence, whereas the 18-year-old, who I would suggest had committed the greater misdeed, was prosecuted under the telecommunications legislation, which tends towards more lenient sentences.

I welcome the pilot scheme adopted by four police forces in August, which gave powers to issue spot fines of £40 to £80 for those found hoax-calling. I hope that that will shock offenders into ceasing to make further hoax calls, but I am not sure that those powers go far enough.

There are several areas that I would like the Government to address as immediate priorities. A more holistic approach is needed to discourage people from making hoax calls. Will the Minister tell me whether any initiatives are planned to collate and share examples of best practice, as happens in other areas of Government? Ambulance and fire services and police authorities around the UK could be invited to submit evidence to show the progress and effectiveness of particular education liaison programmes. If there are no plans for such an initiative, perhaps that could be considered.

We need a nationally co-ordinated education programme aimed at young children, based on examples of good practice from around the country. I would also like to see a tougher approach taken towards adolescents, whose first hoax call may be the start of the slippery slope into the world of progressively more dangerous crime. We could even consider the imposition of on-the-spot fines for parents in such cases.

There should be greater use of the existing legislation that was designed to combat hoax calls. Could the Minister explain why the 1984 Act is not being applied in more cases of hoax calls to the emergency services?

We need a tougher approach to repeat adult offenders. Prompt disconnection should occur when the call is made from their own telephone line or mobile phone, and custodial sentences and hefty fines should be imposed if hoaxing is repeated. Perhaps we need a specific charge or crime of committing a hoax call, with tougher sentencing attached than under the 1984 Act.

At present, making a hoax call to the fire brigade is a criminal offence, whereas making such a call to the ambulance service, the police or the coastguard is not. Surely a hoax call to the ambulance service is most likely to result in loss of life, because time is of the essence to reach someone in need. We need a new criminal offence of making hoax calls to any of the emergency services. We need to communicate much more successfully the message that hoax calls cost lives, and that those who show such a wanton disregard for life will be much more severely punished. I welcome some of the new initiatives that the Government have pioneered, but I believe that we have a long way to go before we see the necessary reduction in hoax calls. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

4.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Hilary Benn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson) on securing this debate after trying for some time, and on the way in which he presented the case. In particular, the information from his own sources brought to life the nature of the problem about which he is concerned. His speech was informative and measured.

The debate today is timely. The heightened terrorist threat means that all of us are anxious to ensure that the emergency services can devote their time and energy to dealing with real emergencies without being hindered by malicious or other hoax calls. I agree completely with the central thrust of my hon. Friend's argument, which is that the hoax calls can be very dangerous, because whenever a fire engine or ambulance is taking the time to answer a call that is not genuine, it is not able to respond to a genuine call. In other words, a hoax call is not a harmless joke: it threatens public safety and distracts the 999 call handlers from their work.

My hon. Friend talked about the need to take tougher action against hoax callers, and I understand his concerns. The Government's view is clear: when someone is proven to have made a hoax call, they should be prosecuted. On the penalties, the Telecommunications Act 1984, to which my hon. Friend referred, provides for criminal sanctions. It states that a person who uses the public telephone system to cause annoyance or needless anxiety to another, or who passes on a message that they know to be false, can, on conviction, face a fine of up to £5,000 or up to six months' imprisonment. I am aware of at least one case in which someone was prosecuted under the 1984 Act and received a custodial sentence.

John Robertson: But does my hon. Friend accept that that was due to the increased publicity provided by the media? The case that he is talking about involved malicious calls, which, believe it or not, are different from hoax calls. A malicious call is when someone telephones a person and harasses them. That, primarily, is what malicious calls are about.

Hilary Benn: I appreciate the point that my hon. Friend makes. I was simply trying to make it clear that the necessary criminal sanctions for dealing with hoax calls are in place under the 1984 Act and—for reasons of history that I think he would accept—the Fire Services Act 1947. As he will be aware, the 1947 Act provides the lesser penalties of up to a fine of £1,000 or three months' imprisonment. The Telecommunications Act 1984 has a wider range of penalties, which are not insignificant, and are available for use.

As my hon. Friend recognised, punishment under criminal law is not the only measure that we should take to reduce the dangerous menace of hoax calls. Public education is vital. I was interested in the point that he made about pooling examples of good practice, and I undertake to think about it and discuss it with officials. I shall give an example from personal experience. A few months ago, I visited a youth offending team in north Westminster. One of the approaches that it took with young people who had been making such calls was to get them to visit the fire brigade, and perhaps the ambulance service, too. That is similar to the example that my hon. Friend gave of the visit to the burns unit.

The visits allowed those who engaged in the activity, and particularly those in the younger age groups, to understand the impact of such calls, how they affect those trying to do a professional and extremely important job, and how those calls get in the way of those very important public servants coming to our aid when we need them most.

[Hilary Benn]

Clearly, the issue has achieved greater public attention and salience in recent times because of the fire service dispute. Normally, the percentage of hoax calls across the emergency services runs between 5 and 8 per cent.—a high figure. The percentage of hoax calls during the recent fire service dispute makes interesting reading. I know that hoax calls during a fire dispute are particularly malicious, because the level of fire cover may not be as high as it is normally, but during the eight-day strike from 22 to 28 November 2002, the percentage of hoax calls was about 7 per cent. During the 24-hour strike from 21 to 22 January, the figure was 5.8 per cent., and during the 48-hour strike from 28 to 30 January, it was 3.6 per cent. The rate was decreasing, but during the latest strike from 1 to 3 February, the figure went up marginally to 4.2 per cent.

Clearly, there were regional variations within the overall figures, but they show a gradual and welcome decline from the 7 per cent. figure recorded in the first dispute. That did not happen by accident.

John Robertson: I have heard those figures before. How many calls were filtered out before they got through? Traditionally, calls to fire services are filtered out by operator services. If he remembers, I said that only 7 per cent. of hoax calls get through to the fire services, whereas 60 per cent. get through to the police and 33 per cent. get through to the ambulance services. The publicity about the problem was amazing.

Hilary Benn: I do not know whether that information is available, but if it is I shall write to my hon. Friend. The point that he made at the end of his intervention is right: the fire service dispute raised awareness of the problem. It has been of particular concern to Ministers, which is why my fellow Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth), issued a press release at the time of the first dispute making clear the risks of being brought to account for making a hoax call, such as being disconnected. That important sanction was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland and backed by the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Ambulance Service Association and the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association.

At the time, Ministers also asked the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to disseminate to their colleagues the importance of identifying quickly and prosecuting those who make malicious calls. As a result, many hoax callers have been caught, and as we have seen, many have been processed through the court system. We have also worked with the telecommunications companies through the 999 liaison committee which brings together all interested parties to devise a code of practice to ensure that people who use their mobile phones to make hoax calls will be cut off. With the increased reliance of many of us on mobile phones, that can be quite a sanction, especially for young people, whose mobile phones may be an important part of their life.

Although in Scotland the issue is the responsibility of the Scottish Executive, I know that my colleagues in the Executive thought that, in general, the public responded well, which resulted in a reduced number of 999 fire-related calls during the industrial action. During the first of the eight-day strikes, steps were taken to try to minimise the number of hoax calls through an information campaign. The raised awareness of the damage and danger caused by hoax calls has been a positive consequence of the fire service dispute. Hoax calls have declined, although I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes about the context within which the figures were compiled.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's persistence in drawing this important problem to the public's attention and having secured today's debate so that it can be highlighted again. We must now ensure that we continue to drive the message home using machinery such as our links with the telecommunications industry in the 999 liaison committee. In the end, the issue is one of public safety and enabling the emergency services to do the job that they are employed to do on our behalf. Those who seek to divert them from that activity by making such calls bear a heavy responsibility. As a society, we must make clear the danger of hoax calls: they prevent the emergency services from doing the job for which we need them.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes to Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 February 2003

[MR. JOE BENTON *in the Chair*]

Legal and Advice Services (Social Exclusion)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Ms Rosie Winterton): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr. Benton, especially as you are a justice of the peace. I am sure that this will be relevant to your interest. This afternoon is obviously a good opportunity to debate an important issue—the role that the provision of legal and advice services can play in tackling social exclusion. I am sure that, like me, hon. Members who are present are acutely aware that, if our constituents do not know where to turn for advice, for example, on housing, debt, welfare or community care problems, they face enormous difficulties and those problems increase their hardship. One unresolved problem can lead to many others.

The downward spiral of the accumulation of interrelated problems leads to social marginalisation and exclusion has a huge financial and social cost both for individuals and society as a whole. The Lord Chancellor's Department has recognised for some time the link between social exclusion and poor provision of good quality legal advice and guidance. That is a reason why we worked with the Law Centres Federation to produce this document, "Legal and Advice Services—a Pathway out of Social Exclusion". I recommend it highly and I believe that if hon. Members looked at the arguments in the paper, they would join me in praising the Law Centres Federation for the excellent work that has been done, not only in putting this document together, but in its general work.

In addition, the link between social exclusion and the poor provision of legal and advice services has been highlighted by the first national periodic survey of legal need, which was recently completed by the Legal Services Commission. That is the first comprehensive national picture of unmet legal need in respect of social welfare and family problems. It produces hard evidence of the link between deprivation and a person's inability to resolve their problems in the areas that I have set out—housing, debt, welfare benefits, employment, immigration and community care. The survey demonstrates that people facing social exclusion face also a host of interrelated problems that all require independent expert advice.

Shockingly, the survey shows that many people take no action to resolve their problems. Either they do not realise that they need to take advice or they have nothing but fear about what to do, because they simply do not know where to go. I am sure that, because of the experience that many of us have in our constituency surgeries, hon. Members will recognise that the survey shows something that we have known for a long time: that these problems face many of our constituents on a daily basis and have done for many years.

That is why, in 1997, Labour's manifesto pledged to set up a community legal service to plan legal and advice services at local, regional and national level, very much according to the needs and priorities of individual areas. That pledge became a reality in April 2000 when, through the Legal Services Commission, the Government established the Community Legal Service. The aim of the CLS is to ensure that people, especially the socially excluded, get as early as possible the best and most appropriate help for whatever problems that they have.

The building blocks of the Community Legal Service are the CLS partnerships, which now cover 99 per cent. of the population of England and Wales. Altogether, there are 213 partnerships. Typically, they will consist of the local authority, local solicitors, local citizens advice bureaux, voluntary organisation, law centres and those providing advice in the community, such as local disabled groups and local housing associations. Help is given by the staff of the Legal Services Commission, and often by the local authority, in setting up the CLS partnerships. The CLSPs are very much about getting local people together to look at what provision there is for advice locally, to identify what gaps there are and to work out how to fill those gaps.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Everything that she has said I can understand and follow as a logical way for improving legal services for those who are socially excluded. However, could she look at the situation in Swindon, where it is now 18 months since any lawyers have provided housing legal aid, apart from in our law centre, which cannot cope with the demand? That is one of four areas where we do not have access to appropriate legal skills, and the CLSP needs extra help. Could she take a look at Swindon to see how we could help provision, especially for the socially excluded?

Ms Winterton: Yes, I will certainly undertake to do that. As I understood it, in the Swindon area, Shelter has been assisting with providing advice on the housing front, and I was going to mention that later. I shall look at that because I know that in both the Bath and Swindon areas, advice about housing has been identified as a difficulty.

Many local authorities have recognised how important it is to involve local people when CLS partnerships are set up. Certainly, in Brent, when a CLSP was set up, there were elections at a local advice centre, and three representatives from tenants groups now sit on the CLSP steering group, as well as representatives from the local authority, the Legal Services Commission and the private sector. That shows not only how important it is to have local people involved in the partnership, but also that, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), has identified, there is often a great interest from people in the housing sector. This is where the gaps may have been identified in Swindon because, once partnerships are established, a strategic plan is drawn up, which sets out what advice services are available locally, what the gaps are, and what needs to be done to fill them, with the

[Ms Winterton]

partnership identifying the priorities for its area. In turn, that strategic plan can assist the LSC in reaching its funding decisions.

I know that, for example, CLSPs across Kent identified a lack of advice about debt and access to responsible financial services, as being a particular difficulty for local people. As a result, Gravesham borough council has developed the "Really Useful" saving scheme with the Kent Reliance building society. That not only brought in debt advisors to work with vulnerable people, but provided assistance in addressing financial exclusion by offering people a means of saving small amounts of money and of borrowing at low interest rates, thereby preventing resort to the all-too-familiar loan sharks about which we all know. I know from discussions that we had with the Medway council, organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Paul Clark) that it is looking at establishing a similar scheme in that area.

I understand that in Bath and Swindon, where housing advice has been identified as an area of difficulty, an outreach service was developed through Shelter, to ensure that some of those problems were addressed. However, I take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon has said, because I know that the Legal Services Commission worked with Shelter—I am sure that we should all like to pay tribute to that organisation, which is the largest provider of independent housing advice—

Ms Drown: The Minister is generous in giving way. The experience locally is that far fewer people are able to bring forward their housing problems, so even if Shelter is helping, we are still not getting enough help. Local lawyers tell me that, until improved payment rates for legal aid are introduced, we shall not be able to get more solicitors on board and, therefore, more help. Are the Government looking at that problem?

Ms Winterton: We are certainly aware of the points that solicitors make about remuneration rates for legal aid work. It is something that we monitor constantly. I would be more than happy to look into the points that my hon. Friend says that solicitors are making in Swindon on that subject.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the Minister accept that I shall certainly be dealing with the question of the role of the Law Society in this context? Naturally, I declare an interest as a solicitor, but not one who has been dealing or is likely to deal with legal aid. Does she agree that one cannot expect people to give advice on extremely complicated legal issues simply on the basis that it comes free? One cannot require people to give advice when this Government, like previous Governments, stand accused of having generated so much complexity in legislation that there is a resulting problem of social exclusion. People simply cannot understand the law.

Ms Winterton: I am not sure which piece of legislation the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Mr. Cash: The whole lot.

Ms Winterton: I understand that the hon. Gentleman disapproves of what I would call protection for vulnerable people. I hope that what we do through legislative changes, which lawyers and others have to interpret, in many cases provides necessary protections. Many organisations would say that greater protection was required, particularly in housing. Hon. Members understand the problems that their constituents face from private landlords and know that vulnerable people need more protection in that regard. I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that we should always be careful to ensure that our laws provide protection for people. Often, the issue is to ensure that people are aware of their rights and that others are aware of their responsibilities.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Before the hon. Lady leaves the extremely important not-for-profit sector, may I say that the compelling point made by the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) is mirrored throughout the country? This morning I received a letter from the admirable Law Centres Federation, which is deeply concerned that the funding for law centres continues to be insecure. It tells me that, in the past two weeks alone, funding cuts by the Association of London Government have threatened the future of the central London and Paddington law centres. Those are areas of severe deprivation. The various points that the Minister has made are stark. Will she say something later in her speech about funding for the not-for-profit sector?

Ms Winterton: I am certainly very aware of the points that the Law Centres Federation has made. As I said, I believe that the work that it does is extremely good and well researched, and I pay credit to it. However, some of the problems that arose recently were, I think, due to the fact that the Association of London Government was looking at the overall funding of law centres. I believe that at a meeting last week, it agreed to put on hold some of the proposals that it had come up with, and was looking at a review of that whole area.

Later in my speech I shall make some particular points about how, through CLS partnerships, there can be access to other funds that are meant to tackle social exclusion. First, however, I should like to make two points. On the Legal Service Commission contract funding of law centres, the value of contracts has risen from £4,034,000 in 2000–01 to nearly £6.5 million in 2002–03, and the number of law centres supported by contracts has grown from 36 to 43.

There will always be an issue about grant funding versus contract funding, and the Law Centres Federation would like—I hope that I am correct in saying that this is still its position—to see a ring-fencing of local authority money for legal service provision. While I understand that argument, central Government do not want to dictate to local authorities how they should spend money in that area. We have moved away from trying to say exactly which services local authorities should provide. The whole idea of CLS partnerships is to enable people to identify what services are available and where there are gaps. I shall explain later how it then enables them to identify how funding can be accessed.

The funding that has been made available for citizens advice bureaux has increased recently. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the briefing from the citizens

advice bureaux, which acknowledges that CLS funding accounted for just over £19 million—almost 90 per cent. of citizens advice income. Since 2000–02, income from the LSC has increased by more than £5.7 million.

I hope that the way in which we have organised the CLS shows that we want to support the not-for-profit and voluntary sector. It is not only in the area of funding, however, that we are trying to improve matters; it is also in the quality of advice that is offered. We feel strongly that people must feel confident that the help that they receive is reliable and trustworthy, so we have also introduced a quality mark, which is the standard that underpins all the work undertaken by member organisations of the CLS.

Through the partnerships that have been developed, a whole host of new ways of working and new initiatives have developed. In addition to the basic partnerships and the money that has been accessed there, we have also set up the partnership initiative budget, and 76 projects across England and Wales have now been funded by that scheme. They look at new ways of working at a local level, both to increase awareness and to fight social exclusion by providing good advice to local people. For example, the partnership initiative budget awarded funding of nearly £130,000 to Redcar and Cleveland Women's Aid, which, in partnership with the Tees District benefits agency, has established an "advice circle" for women affected by domestic violence. The advice circle is supported by more than 50 member organisations from the local domestic violence forum and provides a "one-stop" holistic service through outreach working in the local community. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) has been extremely supportive of that project and, I think, helped to launch it.

In Brighton and Hove, the Brighton Housing Aid and Legal Centre is working with MIND and the local citizens advice bureau to improve access to advice for mental health service users. That need was identified in its strategic plan; it then put in a bid for it, and it is now providing an extremely useful service through advice sessions in GP surgeries, local hospitals and community health centres.

In Dorset, the local citizens advice bureaux have joined with the county council's social services directorate to raise awareness about welfare benefits, particularly among the elderly and people with disabilities. They set up a home visiting service, which has been up and running for about 10 months, and a further £500,000 has already been claimed by elderly and disabled clients.

As we all know, social exclusion can be tackled only by Government Departments working together. To that end, the CLS has been working closely with the social exclusion unit and the neighbourhood renewal unit, Jobcentre Plus, the Department of Health and the Connexions service. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), who is responsible for the Connexions service, and I met recently to look at how we could improve joint working between local CLS partnerships and local Connexions services. We are looking at how we can issue further joint guidance to ensure that cross-referrals are made, so that young people know exactly what is available in their local area and local CLSPs are made aware of what is available through the Connexions service. A scheme in Nottinghamshire has commissioned a video about the help available in the local area, which will be shown at all local Connexions offices.

In other areas, too—this goes back to points that hon. Members made earlier in the debate—local partnerships can assist in accessing the funds that are more widely available. I am thinking particularly of how CLSPs can link in with the Government's neighbourhood renewal strategy. As hon. Members will know, in England the NRS is delivered principally through local strategic partnerships. CLSP representatives are taking an increasingly active role with the local strategic partnerships and arguing the case that I have been making today: that the provision of legal and advice services has an important part to play in tackling social exclusion. Thus the CLSPs can achieve access to funds such as the neighbourhood renewal fund where it is identified locally that poor provision is contributing to social exclusion.

Mr. Cash: Does the Minister have figures to hand, or could she supply me with them, on the extent of the relationship between the problems that she has identified and the increased costs that, one must assume, follow from the increased numbers of asylum seekers entering the country? Are such figures available and, if so, may I have them in due course?

Ms Winterton: Some figures are available, although they may get mixed up with the figures on immigration advice. Where gaps have been identified and grants made to fill those gaps, the figures would apply not just to asylum services but to immigration issues. Obviously, there is an overall figure for legal aid and asylum seekers, but I shall see what figures are available.

The example that I was about to mention was that of Tower Hamlets, where the local CLSP has worked with the local strategic partnership and successfully put in a bid for funding from the neighbourhood renewal fund to support an income maximisation project. It targets low-income households in Tower Hamlets and provides special help to those who need assistance in claiming benefits and tax credit entitlements. By March 2004, the project will have delivered some £1 million in increased income in Tower Hamlets.

In Leicestershire, the local CLSP has worked with Leicester city council to secure funding from the health action zone, as well as £250,000 from the neighbourhood renewal fund, in order to run a welfare benefits advice service from local GP surgeries.

Thus the community legal service aims not only at tackling social exclusion through the partnerships, but at working alongside the neighbourhood renewal strategy. There are many other areas of the Government's social policy agenda on which it impinges. For example, long-term jobseekers can face any number of social problems that impede their ability to search for work or, once they have found a position, to retain it. They may face debt, housing or other domestic problems that make keeping a job difficult. The more that we can help unemployed people, for example, to address such problems, the fewer social problems there will be. If 1 per cent. of those on jobseeker's allowance returned to work just one week earlier than they would otherwise have done so, there would be considerable savings to the public purse.

[Ms Winterton]

Legal and advice services can also play a part in tackling the causes of ill health. Patients may be admitted to hospital with respiratory problems that may stem from poor accommodation or stress caused by debt. Health care professionals can tackle the initial problems, but it would be useful if we could signpost people to places where they can get other advice. That is why hospitals and GP surgeries have a central role in our plans for the development of the CLS.

I firmly believe that, over time, the benefits that the CLS can deliver will become increasingly evident. I hope that my remarks will convince hon. Members of the valuable role that legal and advice services can play, particularly in tackling social exclusion.

I know from my constituency experience that our communities recognise the problem. My constituency has a new deal for communities project. One of the first projects that local people decided to pursue was joining the college of law in York to set up "Streetlaw", a scheme through which trainee lawyers provided advice. People in a very deprived area of my constituency felt that that was top of the agenda in tackling social exclusion. By ensuring that the CLSPs remain firmly focused on local people's needs, we can not only make a real difference to people's daily lives but contribute to the Government's strategy of combating social exclusion and sustaining local communities.

3.3 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I am glad to take part in this debate. Westminster Hall debates often touch on matters of great importance. Only 10 days ago, we had one on voter apathy that was chiefly distinguished by the apathy of hon. Members, who refused to turn up, with a few exceptions. None the less, these debates are important, and this is an important subject.

I referred in an intervention to the problems that are parallel to social exclusion. I do not much like that expression because people have been poor for a long time. Such fancy, politically correct expressions are a modern invention. The real question is whether people need help or not. Some people cannot help the fact that they get themselves into difficulties, but some could help themselves an awful lot more in getting out of them. Having said that, part of the problem relates to legal advice.

I can say in all seriousness, having practised as a solicitor since 1967, that there is far too much law around, and it is immensely complicated. I do not criticise the Minister's point about wanting to protect people, but we could much better protect them by using our parliamentary capacity to produce fewer laws. That would be one of the most useful protections against exclusion of all kinds, and I regard it as a primary objective.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): The hon. Gentleman may be surprised to learn that I agree with him; it would help if we got what we did right. Does he agree that there is a problem in all manner of disputes in that when one side gets legal advice, the other is uniquely disadvantaged? That often leads to people coming to us and saying that they need such advice too, or the situation can never be fair.

Mr. Cash: I certainly agree. I know the hon. Gentleman's constituency well, and his predecessor even better, and can only add that beautiful, rural areas with great landscape value such as his and mine also have many amenity problems. I am not trying to formulate party policy on the point, but I can say in my present capacity and from my experience, that I have been troubled by something in my relations with the community groups for whom I have acted or against whom I have engaged in legal battles over the past 30 years. There is a great disparity between the vast public resources available to county councils, Government agencies and authorities or water or electricity bodies when they advance plans that have a massive impact on local communities, and those available to the poor people on the ground, who must try to defend their amenities without recourse to legal aid.

I shall come to legal aid shortly, but it is in the public interest that legal aid be available to amenity bodies where, for example, a properly qualified inspector issues a certificate of public interest. We would not want a group of people to set themselves up as representing the concerns of an area's residents or an amenity group, engage Queen's counsel and drive a project into the ground through having access to unlimited funds. A certificate of public interest would help resolve such problems. Speaking in my personal capacity as shadow Attorney-General, I can say that that proposal should be considered seriously in the public interest.

The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux has helpfully supplied a paper. I have long had the greatest admiration for that organisation and have campaigned to raise money for the one in my constituency. There are others who play a critical part in the citizens advice network—people called Members of Parliament. We all have streams of people coming to our surgeries and I like to believe that, in our own way, by giving practical—not necessarily legal—advice and by using the machinery of government, we can perform as useful a service as anyone else in helping to resolve problems on behalf of our constituents. That is true irrespective of party political interest and of the party political allegiances of those who walk through our doors. One of the great strengths of the British political system is that that service is available at no cost, and so it should remain.

As the 1998 CLS White Paper, "Modernising Justice", states:

> "Social exclusion would increase, and the rule of law itself would be threatened, if less well-off people ... were effectively excluded from justice".

I am sure that that is true, so strongly favour the principle of supporting the CLS. However, it is necessary to point out some of the problems that have arisen.

First, there are doubts about the impact that the CLS is having on access to legal advice. For the reasons that I have already given, I can hardly blame people for being daunted at the scale of the problem, because almost everything that moves these days has some legal implication. It is daunting for people to seek advice

because they are unsure whether a visit to a community service means that they are being recorded or are providing information that could be used against them. That factor must be borne in mind for purely practical reasons.

On the "Today" programme this morning, we heard the Information Commissioner, Mr. Thomas, counter a proposal for identity cards. The fact is that there are severe worries in the minds of the public and I hope that the Minister is aware of people's inhibitions about seeking advice when they fear that, by making such a visit, they will expose themselves to further difficulties. Many people who have got into difficulty arrived there partly as a result of their own mistakes. The issue of confidentiality needs further consideration.

The objective of the CLS is to

"offer seamless access to advice, information and representation at the appropriate level",

particularly in the context of social welfare law. Although I am a lawyer—I think that, among those hon. Members present, only the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) is not, and he is an expert none the less—the fact remains that social welfare law is a nightmare of complexity. A number of key issues are emerging. Although many advice agencies are contracting with the Legal Services Commission to provide specialist advice for people eligible for legal help, there are problems with the funding of advice services for the majority who are not eligible for help from the CLS. In a moment, I shall come on to the role of solicitors, which is presenting a particularly acute problem on which I have received advice from the Law Society.

Advice for people who are not eligible for help still relies on local authority funding which, in many cases, as we know, has been cut as it is a soft target for authorities trying to curb prospective increases in council tax. Given the current problems in the provision of public expenditure, there is evidence that local authority funding for legal advice is often cut or frozen. I founded an enterprise agency in Stafford and raised £40,000 from local businesses and other sources. It is still providing efficient and practical advice, some of it legal, for small businesses. I am about to set up another in Cheadle in my constituency—it is not just social welfare that people need but advice on enterprise and legal problems, the variety of which is about as wide as the statute book itself.

We must also consider the extent to which CLS partnerships have properly assessed the need for advice services in their areas. Whatever the analysis of the problem, the reliability of such assessments and the extent to which communities are involved in them is very variable indeed. More consistency in the assessments by CLS partnerships would be helpful. Inappropriate decisions on funding and the kind of advice services needed are common, and that needs to be addressed. Even when a need for particular advice services is identified, unfortunately funding does not follow.

Another problem is the provision of legal aid and the concerns about solicitors identified by the Law Society. We have recently heard serious criticism, some of which are justified, of those who are involved in a racket in respect of asylum seekers. On the one hand, unscrupulous lawyers will encourage people to come and see them on the ambulance-chasing principle, without any prospect of their getting proper advice. On the other hand, asylum seekers need legal advice because they often do not speak English and may face serious problems. I personally believe that our policy on asylum seekers, which I shall not go into today, is a better way of dealing with the problem, as it combines a stringent point-of-entry policy with good legal advice at the point of entry. Cases are to be cleared as quickly as possible in locations where people can be fairly and properly looked after, but not for any great length of time.

We must consider the question of advice for asylum seekers and the unfortunate contrast that I have discussed repeatedly in the newspapers between people who, by any reasonable standard, should not be entitled to legal aid and people with middle-ranking incomes who are excluded from legal aid. I cannot accept that people with access to public funds who are subsequently discovered to be terrorists could not have been weeded out earlier. It is wrong that people can have legal bills that run up to millions of pounds on appeal even though, by any reasonable standard, they should have been deported. They should be excluded, not just socially but excluded altogether. However, we cannot prove that that is the case until we reach the end of the legal process. We should try to get the ducks in a row, and not give into political correctness when dealing with such people. They may be a minority, but the problem is serious none the less.

The Law Society says that access to legal advice and representation for everyone who needs it is a hallmark of a free and democratic society. We agree that legal services are a critical public service that ranks alongside health and education. If legal rights are not enforced, taking into account my point about reducing the complexity of the law, people are denied justice. The current system of publicly funded legal services is simply not good enough, and the Government have made the prospects for access to justice very bleak indeed. When I took up my present post on the Front Bench, one of the first things I was asked was, "What is the biggest problem facing the legal profession?" I said that it was the problem of legal aid, and that we needed a radical review.

The Law Society believes that the time has come to open a debate on the future of legal aid, with which the profession as a whole has become disillusioned. As I have said, solicitors are mostly in private practice. Short of nationalising the legal profession, which would be nonsense, we cannot oblige people to provide advice. However good CABs and Community Legal Service advice centres, most advice comes from solicitors. Anyone who believes that solicitors can be dispensed with is a fool. People become solicitors and remain in the profession because they have the expertise to deal with such problems. The legal aid system is central to the question of whether people can get access to the professional advice available from solicitors. Records for the past 10 years show that the cost of running a solicitor's practice has risen by 67.52 per cent. On the other hand, legal aid rates have risen by only 26.35 per cent. The very best interpretation would be that legal aid is only marginally profitable.

Every year, the Law Society puts a cogent case to the Lord Chancellor's Department for an increase in legal aid rates. The Law Society is clear about the necessity of delivering a high quality service to the most

[Mr. Cash]

disadvantaged members of our society. It suggests that recourse to the law should be available not only to those on middle incomes and above, but to all. It has to be provided on a basis that will ensure that a solicitor can get the job done. That is not a free market nostrum; those are simple hard facts.

Despite the necessity to pay lawyers a reasonable rate, and the efforts of the Law Society,

"rates have increased only once during the last five years: that was in 2001 when the Government had to persuade criminal practitioners to sign up to the Criminal Defence Service. Both the current Lord Chancellor and his Conservative predecessor"—

I believe strongly in putting forward the case fairly, and not just in scoring party political points—

"have made it clear that legal aid rates will only be increased insofar as it is necessary to maintain coverage."

The Law Society and the Legal Services Commission have looked into this, and their statistics demonstrate that solicitors are turning their back on legal aid,

"disenchanted with the bureaucracy and the difficulty of attracting and retraining staff. Law graduates, burdened with debt, are reluctant to take poorly paid training contracts with legal aid firms . . . The market philosophy of the Lord Chancellor . . . is about to be put to the test. In theory legal aid rates should rise to attract solicitors back into the fold. The reality is that the Government requires legal aid to be delivered within a cash limited budget. The 2002 spending review makes no allowance for any significant increase in that budget during the next three years. Given the competing priorities of health, education and pensions it is unrealistic"—

although the problem has to be resolved—

"to expect any increase in the legal aid budget during the coming years."

There is a dilemma. The Lord Chancellor's Department has only three main levers within which to manage the budget: scope, eligibility and legal aid rates. In that context, the Law Society's policy of arguing for an increase in scope, eligibility and legal aid rates appears increasingly futile. In addition, given the remorseless increase in unit costs per case, there would seem little chance of securing a substantial increase in legal aid rates.

The Law Society will continue to make the case for a reduction in bureaucracy and for economies within the existing scheme. In particular, the fact that 1 per cent. of Crown court cases account for 49 per cent. of Crown court expenditure seems wholly disproportionate, and we may have to deal with that when the Courts Bill comes before the House shortly. That is tied up with the question how the reallocation of the functions of courts impinges on the delivery of justice at local level.

The Law Society believes that the apparent use of the legal aid fund to support the QC system is a matter of concern to all legal aid solicitors. One need only speak to a barrister these days to discover that they, too, complain vigorously about the fact that they are not paid on time. The whole problem of the slowness of legal aid payments is a contributory factor in this.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I was interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about the QC system. Will he sign up to my campaign to abolish it?

Mr. Cash: Most emphatically not. I say that not wearing any political hat, but having spent a large part of my life practising law before I came into this place, I must say that the quality of advice that the QC system offers is infinitely greater than anything one could get from the average, or even the finest, solicitor. I conducted my practice at an extremely high level. Some QCs work in areas of the law that are not particularly complex, but the idea of not needing a QC in areas such as tax law, given the absurd complexity of that law at present, or administrative or constitutional law—in which I used to practise—is a joke. I cannot believe that the average solicitor would be able to deal with that sort of problem in the same way as a QC can.

Mr. Dismore: I am not advocating the abolition of the Bar, but of the QC system. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is getting a little confused. If the system were abolished, lawyers would be as qualified and able to give the same advice without the letters after their name, and probably with a much smaller bill.

Mr. Cash: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but one could apply that analogy to almost any business. There is always a pecking order, and those who are further up the tree get there only because they are better than others. It is a mark of distinction. That, and the pay that goes with it, is not as great as some people think. I know quite a few QCs who have been earning less money since they became QCs than they did when they were senior juniors. But that is getting away from the subject.

In the absence of a new and radical Government policy—for example, the introduction of compulsory legal expenses insurance, which I hope the Minister has taken on board—the choice for those in private practice is stark. Practitioners can either attempt to carry on as now, accepting continuing reductions in real hourly rates, or they may reconcile themselves to accept a significantly reduced role with only the most complex of cases being referred to private practitioners on the basis of more realistic hourly rates.

I see the difficulties in a compulsory legal expenses insurance scheme, but if it were possible to come up with a policy around that principle it would be a sensible way forward. Have the Government done any thinking along those lines at all? The alternative is to increase the legal aid rates in line with the arguments that I have been making.

The problem is not unique to England and Wales. Even allowing for the fact that an adversarial system requires substantially greater legal representation than an inquisitorial one, our current legal budget is significantly larger than that of our continental neighbours. We can compare the way in which the law functions in this country as compared with others. For example, when countries such as Sweden and Holland dramatically reduce their legal aid budgets, it is perhaps time to re-examine the means by which legal services are delivered to the most disadvantaged members of our society.

The paper and the arguments that I am presenting must be addressed. It is important to ask this question: within the context of a cash-limited legal aid budget, which scheme will deliver legal services most effectively

to disadvantaged members of society and provide those entering the profession with a fulfilling career in publicly funded work?

I have dealt with most of the issues that I wanted to raise this afternoon. I end by making a plea to the Government. We must have a system that provides proper, reasonable legal advice to those who cannot afford it and particularly to those who most need and deserve it. It involves moral judgments, but they have to be practical, too. The system as it functions at present prevents people from getting the sort of advice that they should be allowed to get at a reasonable rate—provided from public funds if necessary—in a manner that guarantees proper access to justice and the opportunity for people to be properly legally defended and to have their case properly examined. I trust that the Government will take on board some of my arguments, because there are serious problems. This is about access to justice, and about enabling people to be properly protected.

3.36 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Benton, and I declare at the outset that I am a lawyer, although I do not practise as one. I put on record my gratitude to Richard Miller of the Legal Aid Practitioners Group, the Law Society, NACAB and the Law Centres Federation for the material that they have given me.

I shall not dwell on the niceties, as there are quite a lot of compelling points to make about the legal aid system. I welcome the opportunity to debate legal and advice services for tackling social exclusion. The debate has come at an opportune time.

In common with the Minister, my case work is not unusual. All Members will be aware from their correspondence and their advice surgeries, week in and week out, of the inadequacies of the system and the inability of individuals to access legal advice and assistance. Access to justice is meaningless without the assistance of a lawyer. Individuals are bereft if they cannot access justice in the courts. Either their complaints and representations will never be heard and redress never given, or, if they seek to act for themselves, they are at a considerable disadvantage and major miscarriages of justice will ensue. On that matter, the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) made a compelling point when he said that if one side gets legal advice and the other does not, that other party is uniquely disadvantaged. The hon. Gentleman is right. That has happened to a number of my constituents, to their grave disadvantage and, in two recent cases, has resulted in bankruptcy.

In cases where there is a litigant in person, the chances of miscarriages of justice are greater. The courts complain bitterly that litigants in person cause delays and frustration to the system.

Mr. Drew: The hon. Gentleman quoted me correctly. The one thing worse than an individual trying to take the law forward in his own right is if he has advising him someone who is not a lawyer but who professes to have legal knowledge. I am sure that, like me, the hon. Gentleman has heard of cases of barrack-room lawyers becoming involved and giving completely the wrong advice which gets someone from a difficult situation into a crisis.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It will add to the cogency of my case.

I will make a critique of the current legal aid system. Before I am accused of speaking with hindsight, I remind the House that these were matters to which I and others adverted not only during the progress of the Access to Justice Act 1999, but in different debates on the justice system both in the House and in Westminster Hall. With the changes introduced by that Act, we have under the Legal Services Commission a financially demand-led criminal defence service and a civil legal aid system that is also under the aegis of the Community Legal Service. I said on more than one occasion that that arrangement would wither on the vine, and it is now doing so.

I want first to address the difficulties faced by firms that are dropping out of the system and are not prepared to do public work. The facts show that there is a substantial exodus of firms, which are not prepared to do civil legal aid work. I have the advantage of having in front of me the Law Society's *Gazette* of 23 January 2003. The headline on the front page is:

"Legal aid close to crisis, survey warns",

and the first paragraph of the article that follows states:

"Low pay and overbearing bureaucracy will force most legal aid solicitors to reduce or even quit publicly funded work in the next five years, a major survey by the *Gazette* has shown."

About 270 law firms were surveyed.

Lest anyone think that I am praying in aid only a self-interested organisation, I shall also refer to the Legal Services Commission's annual report for 2001–02, paragraph 2.7 of which states:

"Between March and April 2002 6 per cent. of CLS suppliers left, including some firms of good quality."

In the same paragraph, the commission makes it clear that it was receiving intelligence through its regional offices showing that

"up to 50 per cent. of firms are seriously considering stopping or significantly reducing publicly funded work."

The vast bulk of legal aid work is done by private practitioners.

The Minister must agree that, unless there is access to legal services, there can be no access to justice. She must ask herself why firms and individuals are ceasing in droves to do publicly funded work. I put it to her that the major reason is the appalling level of funding. I refer her to the November 2002 National Audit Office report on the community legal aid service, and to paragraph 3.10 in particular. The NAO also emphasises the reduction in the number of firms and individuals who are prepared to do publicly funded work. The stark reality is that it is financially almost impossible to do that work. I am aware that remunerations were increased by 10 per cent. for licensed work and 5 per cent. for controlled work in April 2001, but as the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) stated, and as the NAO reports, the rates

"had previously been held constant for six years."

[Mr. Burnett]

Effectively, if my mathematics are correct, when the April 2001 increases are backdated for six years, they can be calculated at less than 1.5 per cent. a year for licensed work and less than 0.75 per cent. a year for controlled work.

I must emphasise that the freeze for the six years prior to 2001 was exactly that—a freeze. No allowance was made in those years for inflation, and one does not have to be the Lucasian professor of mathematics at Cambridge university to calculate that the April 2001 increase did not even cover inflation.

Mr. Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burnett: If the intervention is about the Lucasian professor of mathematics, I shall not give way, but otherwise I shall do so.

Mr. Cash: My intervention is actually about the Lord High Chancellor. It would be remarkable if we did not at least allude in this debate to the extraordinary circumstances last week of the pay increase awarded to the unelected Lord High Chancellor.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. It had occurred to me to ask whether the increase that the Lord High Chancellor has forsaken will also be reflected in the pension that he has forsaken—

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. I do not think that that is relevant to the debate. I ask the hon. Gentleman to revert to the subject under discussion.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful to you, Mr. Benton, as always, for bringing the hon. Member for Stone and me back to order.

As I said, one does not have to be an eminent mathematician to realise that the increases made in April 2001 do not even cover inflation. The point that the Minister must understand is that no one can do publicly funded work in those circumstances. During debates on the Access to Justice Act 1999 and on other occasions, I said that civil legal aid would wither on the vine. That process has not only started; it is accelerating.

I also wish to raise with the Minister the current difficulties that practitioners are having in relation to something that is referred to as "matter starts". As the House will know, a firm with a contract can take on a specified amount of cases during any financial year. During the first two years of contracting, the Legal Services Commission increased the contract numbers when firms requested it. Last November, firms were told that they could not take on extra cases because the budget had run out. There is often only one contracting firm in large rural areas, which can mean that the victim of domestic violence or someone with benefit, welfare or housing problems has nowhere to go for advice. It can mean that a vulnerable child will not have representation. That is not good enough and the Minister's Department must urgently introduce a more flexible system of coping with "matter starts".

We should not forget in this debate the plight of the vast bulk of middle England—people who do not qualify for legal aid. Unless somebody is on income support, it is likely that they will have to make a contribution towards any civil legal aid that they receive. The House will be aware of my grave reservations about conditional fee agreements. Of course, at the core of such agreements is a conflict of interest. There can be such a conflict between the solicitor and the client, the client and the barrister or the client and the insurance company, and between any other combination of those parties. Can the Minister tell us about take-up by the Bar of conditional fee agreements? For example, are most barristers prepared to enter into such agreements?

The Minister will know—I have mentioned this issue before—that an excellent report on such agreements was conducted under the aegis of Richard Southwell QC. It was entitled "The ethics of conditional fee agreements". I do not know whether her Department is making a study of effectiveness or whether many hon. Members have seen the agreements, which are extremely lengthy. Does the Minister believe that a client who is presented with such an agreement should go to a separate firm of lawyers for advice before entering into it? A spate of litigation occurred and some have suggested that conditional fee agreements were one of the reasons for the dramatic increase in insurance premiums. The lawyer, who now gets a cut, will pitch the damages to tempt the insurer into settling so as to save legal costs. The fact that the lawyer has a financial interest in the outcome of the case will influence some lawyers in their conduct of the case. Some will bend the rules or evidence, especially if their finances are tight.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I should also like to say something about CFAs if I catch your eye, Mr. Benton. Is not the hon. Gentleman confusing contingency fees with CFAs? That seems to be the thrust of his argument.

Mr. Burnett: I shall allude to contingency agreements shortly. The fact is that for the first time, under conditional fee agreements, the lawyer will get an uplift—but if he does not win, he will get nothing. The point is that he will have a financial interest in the outcome of a case.

As I have said, some lawyers will compromise their clients by accepting too low a sum of damages in order to get their cash and, as the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) pointed out, the bonus as soon as possible. What work has the Department conducted on the effectiveness of conditional fee agreements? It is clear that litigants can often secure conditional fee agreements if the facts are simple and the likelihood of success is more than 90 per cent. certain. That will apply to many personal-injury cases, for instance, but what about other cases?

Is the Minister satisfied that no cartel is working in respect of "after event" insurance for defendants' costs? Is she satisfied that there is open competition in this market? What is her Department's policy on moving to a contingency fee system? As the hon. Member for Hendon will know, I have always believed that conditional fees will be the precursor of contingency fees. While I do not approve of contingency fees, I

believe that there is great pressure on the Minister and her Department to introduce the system. Under the prevailing system in America, the lawyer signs up the client—ambulance-chasing, as the hon. Member for Stone described it—and receives a 40 per cent. cut of the damages, or nothing at all. I want to know what pressure there is on the Minister, and whether she and the Lord Chancellor are prepared to resist it.

The Minister is right: there is a link, which I consider to be compelling and dramatic, between social exclusion and deprivation and unpaid legal need. Far from finding a solution to the problem, if anything, the Government have aggravated it.

3.51 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I should first declare an interest as a solicitor and a partner in a law firm, although I am not taking any cases at the moment. I think that it is impossible to work effectively as a lawyer while also representing one's constituents.

My firm specialises in trade union work, primarily personal injury work, about which I shall say more shortly. I want to concentrate on trade union schemes, which have not featured largely in the debate so far but which I think important when we are considering the question of social exclusion and access to justice. We have heard today about people with immigration and asylum problems, housing problems and consumer problems, but one of the biggest legal issues that can face a person is the loss of a job—or serious injury, which can itself result in the loss of a job.

Trade union schemes support their members' employment rights and personal injury claims—nowadays not just as a result of accidents in the workplace, but as a result of accidents on the roads and in wider contexts. They also provide cover for the families of trade union members, and support former trade union members who, 10, 20 or 30 years later, may suffer from serious diseases resulting from their jobs. Trade unions also operate many advice schemes. They still represent tens of thousands of people every year; they recover millions of pounds in compensation, and provide an extremely valuable part of our legal aid and assistance network.

Before going into the details, I want to respond to some points made by Opposition Front Benchers. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) spoke of a compulsory legal expenses insurance scheme. That is one of the daftest ideas I have ever heard. Who will pay the premium?

Several years ago, as part of a case with which I was dealing, I tried to assess the equivalent purchase cost of a trade union legal aid scheme. This was in 1994 or 1995. In those prices, it cost about £120 a year just to provide the legal expenses insurance that trade unions already provide. As I have said, I am concerned about who pays. We are talking about people who are on welfare benefits, who cannot afford to provide insurance for their cars—if they have them—for the contents of their homes, or even for the homes themselves. If the choice were between insuring a television and insuring legal expenses, I think I know which people would choose; but in fact they cannot afford either.

There are Human Rights Act implications here. What happens if someone does not buy one of the hon. Gentleman's compulsory legal expenses insurance policies? What if they nevertheless require legal services? How is the victim of domestic violence of whom we heard earlier, or the person facing eviction, to obtain a fair hearing? Such people will have no right of access at all, which must be a breach of the Human Rights Act and of the right to a fair trial.

Mr. Cash: If the hon. Gentleman had heard me correctly, he would know that I said that the Law Society had presented a proposal that included the possibility of a compulsory insurance scheme. I did not say that I endorsed it. I did say that certain matters were affected by the present crisis, which must be addressed somehow. The real crisis results from the Government's failure to provide the money that is necessary to allow access to justice for those whom the hon. Gentleman is obviously keen to protect.

Mr. Dismore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for clarifying his position, but it does not defeat my basic point: I think that it is a rather daft idea. There are a number of ways of providing legal assistance, one or two of which I shall mention shortly.

As for the tirade on conditional fee agreements delivered by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), he is thinking of the old-style CFAs. Under that system, the uplift for success was taken out of the client's damages at the end of the case. Since the Access to Justice Act 1999, it has been recovered as part of the costs from the insurance company. There is therefore no loss to the client—whereas, under a conditional fee arrangement, there would be a loss, American-style, of a third or more of the damages.

Contrary to what the newspapers would have us believe, damages in this country are exceptionally low. Contingency fees have been debated for many years, and have always been dismissed for the same reason: the level of damages simply would not sustain any sensible conditional fee arrangement. If a contingency fee were proposed I would oppose it, because it would give rise to conflicts of interest that do not arise under a CFA scheme.

Mr. Burnett: If, as is the case under a conditional fee agreement, the arrangement is "no win, no fee", is not a conflict of interests inherent in such a system?

Mr. Dismore: I do not think that there will be a serious problem if the agreement is drawn up properly. As I said earlier, I practised as a trade union lawyer for 20 years or more. Trade union schemes are not dissimilar, in that they create theoretical but not really practical conflicts of interest. Trade unions will never be a bottomless pit of money. If a client's case were patently useless, the trade union would ultimately decide not to fund it. In such circumstances, the lawyer is pig in the middle, but in practice such problems can always be overcome sensibly. The hon. Gentleman is making a mountain out of a molehill.

As I have said, trade unions provide a general, comprehensive and cheap form of legal insurance, and should be encouraged rather than discouraged. They can now operate schemes such as the new collective CFA—or CCFA. They can either self-insure or

[Mr. Dismore]

purchase "after the event" insurance policies to cover the cost of their legal aid schemes. Those enable unions to recover the insurance premium equivalent of the CFA premium that is recoverable under an ordinary CFA arrangement, and level the playing field in relation to non-union-backed cases—the ordinary private cases that constitute the bread and butter of many lawyers' work.

However, a number of practical problems have arisen with CCFA schemes. Trade unions—this is, in fact, a general problem with CFAs—cannot say to a client, "No win, no fee. You need not worry about it; the union will pick up the bill." Now, in theory, lawyers must under CFA arrangements give an enormous screed of information about their cost liabilities. In practice, those will never arise, because the trade unions indemnify the trade union member. The exercise is pointless, but it makes the trade union member question whether he is being supported by his union. He wonders why he is being given all the information, which merely confuses him. I do not see why we have to ask trade unions and their lawyers to go through such a complicated system. Trade unions should be able to tell their members that they are supported by the scheme and that there is nothing more for them to worry about.

I have a sample letter from one of the law firms that practises in trade union work similar to mine. It runs to two pages of closely typed legal advice. As the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon said, one might need a lawyer to help interpret it. It makes people unnecessarily suspicious. The problem is compounded by one of the many cases that have come out of the satellite litigation around CFAs: the Sarwar case, which requires a trawl of a client's "before the event" insurance policies to see whether there is anything else that should take precedence over the trade union scheme. That is extremely bureaucratic and time-consuming, and undermines the credibility of the trade union scheme because the member thinks that the union is trying to wriggle out of its obligations under the union rule book to provide the scheme.

Union firms have so far not found any "before the event" insurance policies that are better than the trade union scheme, yet having signed up the trade union client, they nevertheless run the risk, when the case is over, of the insurance company challenging the agreement and arguing that there was a "before the event" insurance policy which should have been adopted, rather than the trade union scheme. The union firm is risking a challenge if it turns out that the "before the event" insurance policy was suitable.

If there were such a suitable policy, the trade union firm would have to hand over the case to the "before the event" insurers. That is usually referred to a firm that is not so specialised in personal injury, the aspect that we are discussing, or in the particular industry or trade. When I practised, I specialised in particular industries, as many firms do. One gains a great deal of specialist knowledge that is not generally available to lawyers. The lawyers who work on "before the event" insurance policies are often less aggressive in their assessment and will turn down what are otherwise good cases.

The question of independence of advice arises. That is illustrated by a letter sent to one of the trade union firms from Industrial Claims Assessors, which seems to be a composite of a claims assessor, a legal services broker and an insurer. Under the heading "Funding CFAs", the letter states:

"We are able to offer case-by-case funding which covers the premium for"—

I assume that means "before"—

"and after the event. Llegal"—

which is spelled wrongly—

"expenses insurance policy and all disbursements connected to a case policy protects the client from third party costs and any damages in the event the claim is lost."

The letter continues:

"While accepting the attractiveness of the 'No win no fee' arrangements to the general public, when passing on new claims to our panel solicitors, we prefer to think 'viability and success.'

You see, we share a common interest in only selecting good cases, as you naturally want a high success rate. We want to limit our exposure by paying on the insurance policy, if a claim should fail.

Our marketing name is under ICA, leads are obtained through a mixture of TV, Advertising, direct mail, canvassing and internet activities all potential clients are interviewed in their homes with every detail being scrutinised and confirmed.

Only those that show good potential are passed to you for initial assessment."

That is what goes on between claims assessors. The trend is worrying, not just because of the claims assessors' practices in sifting out and cherry-picking cases, but in their general approach to CFA work and insurance policies. I question whether that is the right way to go, compared with the trade union scheme, under which quality control is exercised and disbursements are properly funded—unlike the claims assessors' arrangements—and the unions are prepared to take on difficult cases and expect their lawyers to run test cases, which would never see the light of day under the other arrangements.

Mr. Cash: As I have a number of constituents who have been affected by emphysema and who have been involved in a class action that has reached vastly complex dimensions, I should be interested to know whether the trade unions have been fully engaged in that, and whether the difficulties facing my constituents are a result of the case not being handled properly in the first place.

Mr. Dismore: I am not sure which case the hon. Gentleman is referring to. If he is referring to some of the miners' compensation cases, I can tell him that a scheme has been devised to handle the vast number of those as effectively as possible. My understanding is that the biggest single problem is producing the medical evidence needed to support the claims, because there are insufficient doctors who specialise in such work. It must be borne in mind that the number of doctors who are prepared to do medico-legal work is relatively limited, and those doctors have to find the time to conduct their normal medical practice and produce the medical force. I know of the frustration experienced by many of those undertaking such claims. It involves not only those involved in emphysema claims—I saw it in the huge scheme involving industrial deafness claims. It is

frustrating to get the medical evidence needed to support a claim, but it is difficult to devise a practical way round that, because the medical evidence must be available in order for the scheme to pay out.

Ms Winterton: Perhaps I could be of assistance, as I have some knowledge of the matter from my constituency. Another problem is getting proof of employment history, particularly for older workers.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend is correct. The additional problem in some of the asbestos cases—which I think she may have in mind, rather than the miners' cases, but perhaps she was referring to both—is that the client may have had a dozen different employers. Employment history is often extremely difficult to track down.

We need a legislative solution to the practical problems surrounding collective conditional fee agreements. People are being worried unnecessarily, they are being required to do work unnecessarily, and they are being required to produce documents unnecessarily, when all the trade union wants is to be able to say to its member, "We are supporting you. It will not cost you anything." I do not see why we need a great screed of paperwork, which confuses people so much.

There is an additional problem in relation to CCFAs, which I think arises from a drafting error in section 30 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 relating to self-insurance. That is one way in which the CCFAs operate. The self-insurance premium, which is recoverable from the defendant, can be recovered only as far as it covers the cost of insuring against lost legal costs and lawyers costs, not as far as it covers lost disbursements. That is an anomaly compared with ordinary CFAs and militates against CCFAs and self-insurance. In the long run, self-insurance will clearly be cheaper because it does not entail the same pressures as commercial policies. It therefore produces lower premiums and ought to be encouraged, but the existing system discourages it and creates an unlevel playing field between CCFAs and CFAs, and between self-insured CCFAs and insured CCFAs. We should look into that. I am convinced that there must be a drafting error, rather than a deliberate policy.

There are some general points relating to CFAs, other than those raised by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon. They concern the attitude of the insurers, who have made the system grind to a halt. The bureaucracy involved in signing a CFA is, as the hon. Gentleman said, extremely complicated. One sometimes needs a 30-page document, which inevitably makes the client ask, "Why, if you tell me it's no win, no fee, do I have to go through 30 pages of closely typed document to come to that conclusion?" It makes clients think that there is a catch, although there is none, but nobody trusts lawyers.

There is also a lack of understanding among members of the judiciary about how conditional fees are supposed to work. The concept underlying the conditional fee is that it is supposed to be swings and roundabouts for the lawyers. In return for taking on the more difficult cases, which they may sometimes lose, the success fee in the winning cases balances out the loss. What the judges seem to be doing is taking each case on its merits and not looking at the overall way in which the CFA system is supposed to work. I understand why the judges do that: they are concerned about doing justice in the individual case before them, but the problem is that if the system is to work overall, it must be in the context of the swings and roundabouts, which allow the success fee from the winning case to be transferred to help fund the loser.

Mr. Burnett: I do not want to hinder the hon. Gentleman too much. Is he convinced that the cases that are more marginal—60 per cent. merits, say—are catered for under conditional fee agreements?

Mr. Dismore: They certainly are in trade union schemes. I am not so sure that they are more generally. I think that the reason is the one that I have just identified. To work out the uplift involves quite a scientific formula. I remember that when CFAs first came in, long before the Access to Justice Act 1999, I went on my initial training course to learn how they worked. By then I had been in practice for getting on for 20 years. I was with other lawyers of similar experience, and we all came up with different answers, so it is quite a complicated system to develop.

The hon. Gentleman has a point, and the way to resolve it is for the judiciary to take a broader view of the success fee when looking at its assessment, to try to reflect that swings and roundabouts argument. If a lawyer thinks that he will get a reasonable return on a really good case, such as a road accident, which is usually relatively straightforward, he might be prepared to look at the less easy cases as the quid pro quo.

Mr. Burnett: I should like to know what would motivate the lawyer to do that. Why does he not just keep collecting the 95 per cent. merits cases and not bother about the more marginal ones?

Mr. Dismore: That is because in the more marginal cases the success fee is higher, and therefore, potentially, the profits to be made in return for the risk of taking on the case and losing are higher. That goes back to our earlier argument about contingency fees. It is easy to illustrate the point by talking about contingency fees, though not in the context of CFAs. For example, in America one sees horse-trading between different lawyers bidding for a particular case. They will say, "I will want a 20 per cent. contingency fee"—or 30 per cent. or 40 per cent., depending on how serious the case is. They are assessing how much risk they are prepared to take if there is a chance of a higher return. That assessment in terms of the success fee works for CFAs as well, but part of the problem is that the judges are not allowing the system to develop as it should.

Mr. Cash: The hon. Gentleman is somewhat critical of the proposal—I think in principle, perhaps—of insurance to cover legal expenses. He may be interested to know that my parents have just been involved in a rather difficult case. My father was knocked over by a car. They got into one of the no-fee arrangements, but they had been advised that they could also take out insurance in case they lost. Does that have any bearing on what the hon. Gentleman mentioned by way of criticism of the proposal of insurance schemes?

Mr. Dismore: No, it does not. I think that the hon. Gentleman needs to understand a little more about how

[Mr. Dismore]

CFAs work. The whole point about the CFA is that one can insure against loss, but what one is insuring against are the costs of losing the case—the costs incurred by the insurer in defending the case and one's disbursements. One is not insuring against one's solicitor's or barrister's costs. They are written off by the lawyer concerned.

Mr. Burnett: I do not want to carry on this matter for much longer, but there is absolutely no guarantee that the more sure-fire case will be less lucrative than the more marginal case. I will let it rest there.

Mr. Dismore: I simply disagree. The law firms that specialise in personal injury work do not adopt that attitude. It may be found on the margins, with firms that do not deal much with that sort of work, and with some of the firms of the "Sue, Grabbit and Run" type whose advertisements one sees, which will cherry-pick—but reputable specialist personal injury firms do not do that. They will take the more difficult cases and look at those difficult risk assessments.

We could get away from all this by a relatively simple stroke: abolishing the indemnity principle, which underpins the basic concept of costs in the legal system. That is the heart of the problem. If we abolished the indemnity principle, much of the great rigmarole, the great superstructure that we have had to build to get round it for a CFA, would become unnecessary and lawyers could quite easily simply say, "No win, no fee".

The way in which the indemnity principle works at present is against CFAs, because if by a lucky chance the insurer can find the slightest technical defect in the funding agreement between a claimant solicitor and his client, the insurer will not have to pay any costs in the case which he has just lost, even though the client is delighted with the settlement and has made no complaint about the way the case was handled. That absurd rule—the indemnity principle—means that insurers and their solicitors often make great efforts at the end of the case, going on fishing expeditions to find funding defects instead of paying the costs and moving on to the next case.

The malign effect of the indemnity principle and its ability to sustain satellite-costs litigation are all but bringing the world of personal injury crashing to bankruptcy. Many of the specialist law firms are in severe difficulties. There have been substantial job losses in all the major firms. That obviously could have an impact on access to justice for injured people.

This is not lawyers' special pleading, because—picking up the point made by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon—if there are fewer lawyers doing such work, that inevitably means less access to justice. The lawyers who are being driven out by this long-standing satellite litigation are the specialists who do the work more cheaply and more effectively than the generalists. They are the ones who are feeling the pinch.

This satellite costs litigation is a poison in the system which has destroyed relationships between personal injury lawyers and insurers and their solicitors, driven the judiciary to distraction and confused clients. Above all, it is having a catastrophic effect on access to justice by preventing the injured and bereaved from getting their damages, and preventing their lawyers from being paid a reasonable fee for their work. Even the Law Society standard CFA is under attack by the insurers.

The situation amounts to a fundamental assault on the ability of personal injury lawyers to act for their clients and obtain their damages. The Access to Justice Act abolished legal aid for personal injury and amended the system of CFAs. It was expected then that it would take a year or so for things to settle down. I was on the Committee that considered the Bill, as was the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon. He may remember some of the exchanges on the matter at the time. We are now three years on, and things could not be worse.

The frustration of claimant lawyers is that they have been shouting about this for over three years, asking for something to be done to sort it out. Their pleas have not been taken seriously by the Government or by the judiciary. There has been a distinct lack of action to try to sort out this serious problem, which is not only having the effect that I have described, but is dramatically affecting cash flows in law firms. The insurers know it, and they are using it as a tactic to try to break the specialist law firms, which they know are their biggest enemies in representing the victims of road accidents, accidents at work and occupational disease. Something has to be done to put these things right, and it has to be retrospective—to try to put right some of the wrongs that happened as a result of the Access to Justice Act. The easiest way to do that is to abolish the indemnity principle, and to do so retrospectively.

I should like briefly to mention three other matters, not to do with CFAs but vital to access to justice for accident victims. The first is the small claims limit. I have heard a rumour on the grapevine that that limit is to be raised to £5,000 in personal injury claims. I would strongly resist that. Most trade union schemes represent injured people with claims rather less than that, and it would effectively destroy those schemes. Compensation is not as high as people think. The vast majority of personal injury victims would have no access to justice as a result. It would be a retrograde step. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can assure me that that is simply a rumour with no foundation, and that there is no intention of raising the small claims limit for personal injury claims.

There has also been some discussion of no-fault compensation, in the context of the review by the Department for Work and Pensions of employers' liability. Again, I counsel my hon. Friend to resist any temptation to introduce it. A reduction in compensation would inevitably follow. The problem with no-fault schemes is that they have been tried in many places around the world, and every single one has failed to provide adequate justice and adequate compensation. Fault-based schemes increase compensation and provide justice, whereas no-fault compensation schemes generally fail to do so.

I also want to mention legal aid for inquests. The fact that it is not generally available is a major flaw in our system. It is not possible to have a CFA for representation at an inquest if there is no claim. Many people feel hard done by if they are unable to have the death of their loved one properly investigated through the asking of proper questions. A constituent of mine who attended my surgery only last Saturday told me

about the case of her daughter, who died while receiving treatment for mental illness. She may have committed suicide, which is a matter for the inquest to determine, and a whole series of questions arose in respect of her medical treatment. Owing to the inadequacies of our damages system, and because the person in question was a child, it simply was not worth making a claim, but the family feel a real sense of injustice at not being able to have proper representation at the inquest unless they pay for it themselves. To do so would probably cost them several thousand pounds.

I want to finish by discussing proportionate costs—an issue which raises the question of rich man's justice. According to the concept of proportionate costs, one is in effect paid more for pursuing cases involving rich people, rather than poor people, because their loss-of-earnings claims are higher. It also creates a disincentive for rehabilitation, the importance of which has been mentioned. The role of the personal injury lawyer goes beyond just compensation; it includes looking at the client in the round, to see what can possibly be done to help them to get back to work through rehabilitation. However, the principle of proportionate costs can actually exert downward pressure on damages, and, therefore, on the likelihood of rehabilitation being at the forefront of the lawyer's mind, which gives rise to several problems.

I have probably spoken for far too long, primarily because of the many interventions that I have taken. Some serious problems arise in respect of trade union legal schemes. Those problems have to be addressed quickly if we are to maintain that vital part of our legal advice and assistance structure, which provides great back-up to the various other structures. If nothing is done soon, real difficulties will arise and the structure could implode.

4.21 pm

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) for initiating this debate. This is a very important subject that gets far too little exposure in the House, and today is a good opportunity to address various aspects of it. It was put on the political agenda last year when the document that my hon. Friend showed us, "Legal and Advice Services—a Pathway out of Social Exclusion", was published by the Department and by the Law Centres Federation. I commend her for taking the initiative in this regard.

Studies on unmet legal need such as that by Professor Hazel Genn demonstrate clearly that deprivation is associated with a failure to seek advice and assistance. Although those studies do not provide a clear indication that law can overcome deprivation, there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to show that law and lawyers can assist. For example, they can assist those who are entitled to compensation, and who would otherwise experience deprivation. They can assist those who have lost their job, or whose housing is threatened and who would otherwise be deprived. They can even help groups of deprived people such as social welfare recipients by taking test cases, so that they are entitled to a higher level of benefit.

On the general point, there are qualifications: law is not always an answer to deprivation. An old aphorism that emerged from the literature of the 1970s points out that if people have a problem with housing repair, it is sometimes better to give them a ladder than a lawyer. Although that cannot be taken literally, in some cases law is not necessarily going to provide an answer. Also, there is the question of the other priorities on the agenda, such as health, housing, crime, and so on. So the argument for publicly funded legal services has always to be made.

I want to deal with a number of specific issues, including private lawyers who provide publicly funded legal assistance, which the hon. Members for Stone (Mr. Cash) and for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) concentrated on. They mentioned recruitment problems and the reduction in the number of private solicitors who provide assistance under the community legal service, and my hon. Friend the Minister will doubtless want to respond to those points. It is undoubtedly true, as the legal aid practitioners group has pointed out, that because of remuneration problems legal aid does not hold the same attraction for young lawyers that it perhaps did in the 1970s and 1980s.

Of course, the reduction in the number of solicitors is partly the result of the growth in alternative means of providing legal assistance. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) spoke about conditional fee agreements, which are not publicly funded. However, it is true that certain issues need to be addressed. The move away from the old legal aid system through the Community Legal Service certainly constitutes an advance. Under the old system, the concentration was very much on criminal, matrimonial and personal injury work, to the detriment of other areas, such as debt and social welfare. The introduction of the community legal service enables us to address areas that used not to receive the attention that they deserved.

As was said, the Community Legal Service has a number of advantages over the old system. First, it has brought in new providers. The citizens advice bureau in Dudley has a contract to provide advice on debt. Over-indebtedness is a major problem that many people in this country face, particularly poorer people. Such people are now getting advice that they used not to get from solicitors under the old legal aid system.

The second innovation is partnership working. In my area, private lawyers now work with the citizens advice bureau, the local authority and the local benefits shop, which receives local government funding. Under the leadership of its director, Gaynor Phelps, the benefits shop provides a great deal of very useful advice to people on welfare benefits. A partnership approach is very valuable, and as has been mentioned, most of the country is now covered by such partnerships.

In my area, the strategic plan produced by the Dudley community legal service partnership has mapped the provision of legal advice. That has proved very valuable, because it has exposed the fact that big gaps remain in the extent to which legal advice and help are available in Dudley. For example, in part because Dudley lacks the advantage of a law centre, we have a real gap in respect of employment law, for which there are no specific legal assistance suppliers. Some provision is made in respect of housing, but it is clearly insufficient. It is true that the local CAB provides advice on debt—a subject that I have mentioned—but it is operating at near full capacity. Such mapping has been very useful in exposing

[Ross Cranston]

gaps, but the next step is to work out how they will be covered in future. I shall return to that issue in a moment, when I mention money.

As I said, partnership working has proved valuable, but there is the question of the quality of advice, which my hon. Friend the Minister raised. Contracting and quality marking have proved extremely valuable, but as she said in her opening remarks, we need to look at the effectiveness of the work done: the relationship between the quality of the advice given and the outcome for the client. I know that the Legal Services Commission is doing work on that. My hon. Friend the Minister may have to write to me, but I should be very interested in the initial findings of that inquiry.

Incidentally, I commend the research that the commission has done in this area, and others. I should like to pay tribute to Steve Orchard, who is retiring as head of the commission. Over many years, he has been Mr. Legal Aid in this country and he has driven the agenda forward. He may not have always won universal plaudits, but he has been a fine public servant.

The Community Legal Service has been innovative in a third way, in that it has sought new ways of working. Mention has been made of Shelter, which has unrivalled knowledge and experience in the area of housing. However, it now also provides housing advice under contract. In the west midlands, it provides telephone advice on housing matters, a valuable innovation.

I was surprised to learn that the partnership innovation budget has given rise to 76 projects. A number of projects around the country, such as housing possession and court duty solicitor schemes, did not exist before the community legal service was introduced. Also, the "Just Ask" website provides a lot of factual advice. I am not sure that people who are deprived or who live in deprived communities would necessarily have access to the service, but I am sure that people in a position to offer advice will be able to benefit from the site.

I return to the question of money. For the purposes of the debate, hon. Members received briefings from organisations such as the Legal Action Group, which has enormous knowledge. Those of us with an interest in the matter are always pleased to see the arrival every month of the group's publication *Legal Action*. It contains detailed advice on areas of law relevant to the deprived. Shelter also provided briefing, as did the Advice Services Alliance.

The hon. Member for Stone touched on the cost of immigration work, which has risen considerably. The outside bodies that I have mentioned are rightly worried about whether the increasing amount of money going to immigration and crime will mean that there will be less going to other important areas, such as housing and debt advice, welfare advice and so on. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will say something about that.

Another of the Community Legal Service's innovations is the formalisation of back-up services. That has been especially valuable in giving front-line agencies, such as law centres or lawyers in private practice who provide publicly funded legal services, specialist advice on certain matters. That specialist advice is being provided by organisations, such as Shelter, and a couple of law centres provide expert advice on particular areas. There is even a set of chambers providing expert advice. That is a useful development and it harks back to what happened in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, when the neighbourhood legal services movement had back-up centres around the country, to which they could turn for expert advice on certain matters.

Law centres provide assistance under the community legal service, but they are also funded separately. I have been associated with law centres in an indirect way for many years. I was in one in Coventry in the 1970s—I turned up every week to provide assistance—and I wrote quite a bit about them in the 1980s. One advantage of law centres is that, in addition to looking at complaints from individual clients, they can look at group problems and approach matters in a more systemic way. A valid point that has been put to me is that the contract funding by the Legal Services Commission does not necessarily recognise that group work. However, that group work is vital when it comes to test cases involving, say, helping a group of tenants in an area or assisting a deprived community to overcome social exclusion problems. As I understand it, one of the difficulties now faced by law centres is that, because the commission funds individual clients, it cannot also fund group work, which has to rely on other sources. Again, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will say something about that.

Mr. Drew: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I agree that we need to recognise that when there is a collection of individual cases, they should be put together so that a change can be effected in the law or in regulations. The snag is that relying on state funding—whether it be from central Government or local government—could mean that a conflict of interest could arise. That would not happen with individual cases because, presumably, the individual's benefit is what is being pursued. However, a collectivised case could give rise to a dilemma about how far it should be pursued, as sometimes the piper calls the tune. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is problem?

Ross Cranston: I do, and law centres in the past have suffered. Some have even suffered fatally because they have taken on their own local authorities, which funded them. However, a little-mentioned aspect of democracy is the way in which the Government often fund agencies that take them on. Many equal opportunities cases taken to the European Court of Justice have been funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission. That is an example of how the Government fund cases taken against them. If it has not done things right, a local authority may need to be big enough to say that a law centre has a valid point and is entitled to take it on in court.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon mentioned conditional fee agreements. I was going to say something about them, but he has dealt with them so exhaustively that I am not sure that I need add anything. However, there are problems that need to be set out. I support CFAs. I believe that, if legal help can be funded in ways other than by public moneys, then it is better to use those moneys in other areas—on debt, housing and so on—which the legal aid system did not deal with

properly in the past. That is the rationale behind CFAs, which are used, among other things, to fund personal injury work.

There have been difficulties, notably in connection with a number of Court of Appeal cases on uplift and with cases involving before-the-event insurance. As has been noted, another problem has been the approach adopted by insurance companies, which have tried to undermine particular contracts. Another problem is the satellite litigation to which CFAs have given rise. I should be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister would give the Department's assessment of CFAs. The Department has published a research paper by Professor Fenn on the impact of conditional fees on the selection and handling of cases. Unfortunately, the research was rather dated as it dealt with the situation before the implementation of the Access to Justice Act 1999, but the matter must be kept under constant review. My hon. Friend has raised some serious points about the effectiveness of CFAs in personal injury cases, both for road accidents and persons injured at work.

I commend lawyers in private practice who provide legal advice and assistance in pro bono work. Even some of the large City law firms provide considerable sums for funding pro bono work in deprived communities, which is to be commended.

My hon. Friend mentioned small claims and referred to the special provisions for personal injury cases. I want to draw attention to the importance of small claims courts for persons in deprived communities. Over the years, several studies have been made of the effectiveness of such courts. Professor John Baldwin at Birmingham has carried out much of that work. His most recent assessment is that the general increase in the jurisdiction to £5,000 has worked well. The district judges continue to adopt an investigatory approach and people continue to bring cases.

Problems remain with the enforcement of orders issued by district judges in the small claims jurisdiction. We need constantly to monitor the effectiveness of an important avenue for bringing cases, especially now that the jurisdiction limit is £5,000.

Other institutional arrangements are important in providing redress. The proliferation of ombudsmen helps people with particular problems. I am most familiar with the banking and financial services ombudsman, who has provided a free avenue to help people with problems in that sector.

The Lord Chancellor's Department is an important Whitehall department, which has now come out of the shadows. It is only too easy to have a go at the Lord Chancellor—as hon. Members did during the debate—but under his direction, with the assistance of my hon. Friend and other Ministers, the Department is now at the heart of Government. As demonstrated by this debate, it is doing important work in addressing the social justice agenda on which Labour was elected in 1997.

4.43 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to take part in the debate and I congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on securing it. As I am not a lawyer, I shall speak only as a constituency MP and shall rely on anecdotal evidence. That may take the debate in a slightly different direction, but I hope that it will serve some purpose.

Like my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston), I do not have a law centre in my area. My experience is drawn entirely from dealing with the community legal service and with the Stroud citizens advice bureau, under the leadership of Caroline Pymm, Lindsay Waddington, Ann Horner and Chris Lindegaard. I am indebted to them not only for all their work in the community but also for their advice to me. They regularly bring to my notice some of the problems that they face. MPs should be aware of the enormous amount of casework that such people undertake. We never cease to be amazed at the complexity of some of the cases with which we have to deal, but regular contact with my local CAB has shown me that the amount and range of work carried out and the degree of expertise involved should never be underestimated. CAB workers are under tremendous pressure and we cannot allow the problem to grow, because if it does, quality will suffer.

My CAB covers a semi-rural area and dispenses a wide range of legal advice. The problems, in order of salience, are debt, which accounts for about 40 per cent. of inquiries, employment, housing, welfare and benefits. Some of those issues overlap, which adds to the complexity.

Many people have to seek advice at some time, especially during life-changing experiences, such as divorce, the loss of a job, family illness or bereavement. The number of people seeking advice increases constantly, but as my hon. Friend correctly pointed out, many people leave it too late, which can add to the problem. For example, people often ask for help with financial problems only when the problems are acute. It is then difficult to help them. It is hard to advise people if they are in denial, do not understand the complexity of the situation or have avoided it for far too long.

I am extremely grateful to my friend, Marie Jennings, who has taught me much about consumer advice. We often underestimate the level of financial inadequacy that exists—indeed it affects us all. A number of debates have been held on that subject and I do not want to cover the same ground. However, it is important to acknowledge that people's inability to understand their pension entitlement or the extent to which they have not contributed to sickness cover and so on can come crashing in on them when they hit a life-changing experience and believe that they have a nest egg on which to draw. When they look at the small print, they realise that their predicament is excluded or that the provision is inadequate to deal with what they need.

I am a great fan of the Community Legal Service. The people who work for it are far more proactive and take the lead to make a partnership work. It should be congratulated on that. I have had several meetings with Pamela Judge in my constituency to try to establish both a local and a countywide partnership to deal with the subjects that have been highlighted.

It is good that we are trying to match area concerns with legal and wider advice that needs to be made available. Examining a raft of different issues and selecting those that have specific relevance to the area that one represents and the people who live there is a good process.

[Mr. David Drew]

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) alluded to some difficulties. It is fair to acknowledge that the whole range of issues cannot be covered. That means that people feel some points have been downgraded. In a rural area, people who want advice must travel because it will not go to them. We must consider that and ways in which to fill in some of the gaps.

Like other hon. Members, I have always appreciated the benefits of free legal advice, even for as short a time as half an hour. Not much can be covered in that time, given the complexity of some subjects. Nevertheless, free legal advice is important and we must not denigrate that service.

I do not know whether my area is unusual, but the work of local solicitors is often taken for granted. They give up their time, not only in formal, individual advice sessions with their clients, but in a range of other activities. They are important in their community and they try to act for its benefit and represent it in many different ways. Many lawyers are interested in the political scene, but I refer specifically to the community activities in which they engage. We should pay tribute to them for that.

However, we must acknowledge that in some respects the legal service is patchy and we must try to improve that. I gave some examples in a couple of interventions. I hope that we shall try to overcome some of the inadequacies and make it clear that we want a first-rate service. If people need legal or other forms of advice, it must be good, accurate and accessible. We should never compromise on those three points.

I want to highlight a few matters briefly. I have taken a close interest in mental health issues. We need to acknowledge that the law needs reform on many subjects, but on none more than mental health. The Government rightly understand that, although I am not sure whether they have devised the right reforms. My local citizens advice bureau, the CLS and I have had detailed discussions about the way in which the benefits system does not help to deal with people who have mental health problems. The advice that they need should also be improved. For example, we need better advice on cases in which people have not received their benefits or have had them removed. People who suffer from mental illness are vulnerable and better advice is, therefore, especially important. The resources should also be more than proportionate.

I have dealt with people who are or have been sectioned, or who have been threatened with sectioning. At a time when they need access to the law, they rely on the community psychiatric nurse, who is the person responsible for recommending that they should be sectioned. Yet that person is often responsible for ensuring that they receive fair advice. More often than not, that puts people in a difficult position. We must also consider who constitutes a friend of someone who suffers from mental illness. A friend or a carer may need to be brought in.

Last but not least, for many months if not years, I have had arguments with psychiatrists about medication. It is crucial that people who have been sectioned and are subject to mental health legislation receive legal advice in the place where they are resident. That does not always happen.

Employment issues are becoming more complicated. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) spoke about that from a lawyer's point of view. We must also consider it from the client's point of view. The Government, to their credit, have introduced many reforms, but we must acknowledge that complexity is increasing because the nature of work is becoming more complicated. We must, therefore, ensure that people who give advice are up to date and able to deal with complexity or able to recommend others who can tackle it.

I have come across several examples of older people who have not been well advised because they are in vulnerable positions, for example, living in nursing or residential homes, or about to enter such a home. Such issues constitute a legal minefield and again, there is a need for access to the appropriate legal and wider advice.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North spoke about renewing neighbourhoods. People in neighbourhoods have a range of individual problems and bringing them together is a problem. Would it be better to invest resources in collective advice provision instead of trying to deal with individuals? We must strike a balance. As my hon. and learned Friend said, the Government have been brave to move towards dealing with problems in a wider way rather than on an individual basis. However, we must understand that that does not mean that individual problems go away. The Government must get the balance right. I am sure that they are moving in the right direction. Much remains to be done, but the debate has given us a useful opportunity to raise many matters.

Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on leading the debate so well and giving us a chance to discuss important issues.

4.58 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton: We have had a full debate. It is obvious that several experts are present, and clear points have been made. I shall try to answer as many as possible, but if hon. Members want further clarification, I hope that they will come back to me. As I have said, this has been a very wide-ranging debate. I certainly welcome the support that hon. Members have given not only in taking part in the debate in the first place, but on the point that I have been trying to get across: there is a link between the poor provision of legal and advice services and social exclusion, and it is something that we must get right.

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) made a point about patchy provision. We need to recognise that partnerships in different areas of the country are in various stages of development, so there are bound to be different levels of provision. We have to ensure that all partnerships end up with a high quality service. He mentioned confidentiality, and there is obviously a balance. For example, when the Legal Services Commission awards contracts, it should be able to say how many people have benefited from the service that is being funded, but that does not necessarily have to compromise confidentiality.

On the point about asylum claims, there are concerns about the quality of work being carried out by some immigration and asylum suppliers. Many of those concerns relate to the London area. Of course, the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner regulates the type of advice being given, and the Legal Services Commission has taken a number of measures to identify and address poor quality work. The specialist quality mark, regular audits, accreditation to specialist panels, and the tightened merits test have been introduced, but we are aware of the problems and we will take measures to ensure that the quality reaches the standards that we expect.

The hon. Members for Stone and for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) mentioned problems with the recruitment and retention of lawyers doing publicly funded work, and we take very seriously the concerns that have been expressed about those potential problems, especially in relation to family law. We recognise that the profession has made a number of representations about remuneration levels, bureaucracy and auditing processes. We constantly monitor the supply base monthly, and there is no widespread problem at the moment in providing adequate coverage in England and Wales.

The Criminal Defence Service had 10 fewer officers, out of 2,900, at the end of the year than at the beginning. There was a net gain in six months of the year and a net loss in the other six. On the civil side, it is true to say that there has been a 5 per cent. reduction in the number of solicitors' officers to 4,681. However, the number of not-for-profit officers doing civil work has increased by 12.8 per cent., but in no way are we complacent about the situation. We take on board the points that have been made, and we constantly monitor the situation and are in dialogue with the professions about it.

Mr. Burnett: I am pleased that the hon. Lady is monitoring the issue, but she must understand that the vast bulk of legal aid work is done by private practitioners. I point out to her again that paragraph 2.7 of the 2001–02 annual report of the Legal Services Commission—her commission—states:

> "We are picking up intelligence through our regional offices that up to 50 per cent. of firms are seriously considering stopping or significantly reducing publicly funded work."

I could read more from that paragraph, but I do not think you would let me, Mr. Benton. It is not good enough that the hon. Lady is considering the issue; we want to know what she is doing about it.

Ms Winterton: I have told the hon. Gentleman the figures, and I have said that there are concerns about them. We certainly accept the need to look to the long term, as he has suggested. We have made about £1.5 million available to encourage prospective practitioners to undertake publicly funded work, by providing support for training contracts and grants for tuition fees. Those grants have been awarded already, but let me repeat that we are taking the concerns seriously. We are constantly considering any new evidence that becomes available, and I can give the hon. Gentleman an undertaking that we will continue to do so and to receive from Members of Parliament any evidence that they may have about the situation in their constituencies.

Mr. Cash: Will the Minister be good enough to tell me whether she or the Lord Chancellor, in his eminent position, has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer? I gather from what the hon. Lady says that the bottom line is that this is not a matter of principle; it is just that the money is not being made available for legal aid. Will she give me an assurance that arrangements will be made to have a discussion with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and to give us a proper report on what takes place?

Ms Winterton: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that of course we would not look at the problem in isolation. He can rest assured that we have very clear lines of communication throughout the Government.

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon referred to conditional fee agreements in an interesting exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who has some expert knowledge of that issue. We have commissioned an in-depth study of the take-up of those agreements and after-the-event insurance. The study will examine exactly what has happened since April 2001, when the changes were introduced, and the impact that the new regime has on legal services. The report is expected to be submitted to the Lord Chancellor in the summer of 2004, and it will certainly take on board a lot of the points that the hon. Gentleman has made. The figures show that a large number of people who previously could not get justice for the problems that they faced—perhaps because they were just outside the legal aid limits—have been able to gain access to justice through conditional fee agreements.

Mr. Burnett: I hope that the hon. Lady will make the point that those of us who were not enamoured of conditional fee agreements certainly proposed an alternative, a contingency legal aid fund, which was dismissed by the Lord Chancellor. That proposal came from Liberal and Conservative Members, as well as the Bar Council, and we thought it a very satisfactory solution to the problem.

Ms Winterton: There is nothing to stop the Bar Council proposing ideas for a private contingency legal aid fund if that is what it wishes to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon talked about the value work being carried out by the trade union movement, and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) also mentioned before-the-event insurance. I am very aware from my own trade union contacts that there have been difficulties in relation to that. My right hon. Friend Baroness Scotland has certainly considered the points that have been made, especially by the TUC and trade union solicitors. I think that it would be best for me to write to the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon, especially on the recent changes and how they may affect things.

Mr. Burnett: Will the Minister circulate copies of the letters to me and the hon. Member for Stone?

Ms Winterton: Of course.

[Ms Winterton]

I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon that there are no plans to increase the small claims limit for personal injury cases to £5,000.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend mentioned the CFAs, and I look forward to her letter with interest. Can she also ensure that she covers the indemnity principle, which is the root cause of the problems? I am not sure whether she can say anything about that now, but perhaps she can include it in the letter.

Ms Winterton: I will certainly write to my hon. Friend about that.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North drew attention to the fact that his local citizens advice bureau advises on debt on his area. A number of hon. Members referred to the problems that that causes. He also said that the strategic plan had shown up gaps in housing and employment provision. Perhaps it would be a good idea to ask the regional Legal Services Commission representatives to meet him to discuss ways in which his local partnership could access other funds in the area and to determine whether any assistance could be given to plug those gaps. That initiative might be useful.

On law centres, the LSC funds multiparty actions at the representation level. Group work is not funded, but some of the successful cases at that level have an impact beyond their immediate circumstances, so law centres can take up the cases to which my hon. and learned Friend referred. He also said that an increase in immigration and criminal work might squeeze civil expenditure on debt and housing. We always monitor publicly funded legal service expenditure to ensure that we are prioritising and targeting the areas of greatest need. There will be pressures when a limit is placed on resources, but those are constantly under review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) also mentioned debt in his area. In addition, he said that local solicitors and mental health services need to be involved. Such debates are important because they help to increase awareness of the issues. He might like to consider what happened in Brighton and Hove where partnership initiative funding was accessed specifically to target the sort of people he mentioned because a gap had been spotted in the provision of advice for people with mental health problems. The same is true of debt problems and, as I said, Gravesham borough council worked on a scheme to address some of those difficulties. We need to emphasise the fact that we are using the partnership innovation budget to determine best practice. It is a task for all of us to decide how that best practice is spread across the country, and the debate is an important stepping stone towards achieving that.

Members of Parliament have a great role to play in developing partnerships in their areas. It was apparent in Rochdale that the interest of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Mrs. Fitzsimons) in launching the partnership and co-ordinating much of the work had been invaluable in getting the project off the ground. I am glad that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) has joined us from the main Chamber. Her involvement in a domestic violence project was also invaluable. The message is that Members of Parliament do not need to be legal experts—although, heaven knows, we are slightly outnumbered by legal experts this afternoon—to be facilitators or to assist partnerships with their work. I hope that hon. Members will join me in encouraging other Members to get involved. We are trying to recognise such work by awarding beacon council status to councils such as Barnsley. However, there is much we can do to get involved and to help to establish a valuable service for our constituents.

I conclude with one simple message. It has been a good debate, and we are all agreed that legal and advice services can help to prevent social exclusion. I hope that Members of Parliament will give them their full support not only in Parliament, but in their constituencies where they can play a part in getting them off the ground and in giving them all the support that they can.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes past Five o'clock.

Written Ministerial Statements

Monday 3 February 2003

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

E-Government

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): As part of the Government's £675 million Local e-Government programme, established to help local authorities e-enable their service delivery by 2005, grant of up to £75 million has been earmarked for 2002–03 and 2003–04 to support a number of national projects. These projects will develop e-products and standards, such as the use of digital TV and on-line school admissions, and disseminate shared learning to other authorities.

I am today laying before the House a Special Grant report containing powers for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to pay some £38.4 million of grant to support the development, running and sharing of good practice from the first 12 of these national projects, which will build upon the work done by the 25 e-Government Pathfinders already supported by the Local e-Government Programme.

They also build on 108 local authority led projects funded under the Invest to save Budget. The Pathfinder projects have already helped to drive down the cost of key enabling technologies and will enable other local authorities across the country to utilise products that are both proven and tailored to meet the needs of local government.

Local Government Finance Settlement 2003–04

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I am today laying before the House the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2003–04. This report establishes the amounts of revenue support grant (RSG) and non-domestic rates (NDR) to be paid to local authorities in 2003–04 and the basis of their distribution. A draft of this report was issued for consultation on 5 December 2002. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister received a total of 385 written representations within the consultation deadlines from the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government, from local authorities, local authority groups and hon. Members, and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister met with 55 delegations to discuss the proposals.

Having considered the views of the local authority associations and others who have commented on my initial proposals, I have decided to confirm my proposals in most respects. I will make one substantive change to my original proposals on grant distribution methodology. I have decided that the Isle of Wight should receive the same area cost adjustment as Hampshire. I have accepted the argument that, on balance, the New Earnings Survey sample size for the Isle of Wight is such that their labour costs cannot be estimated with the same degree of precision as other, more populous, areas. The Isle of Wight sample size is no larger than other unitary, metropolitan or London boroughs that we have combined together in order to avoid small samples. By making the change I believe we are treating all authorities more consistently.

In addition, as usual, the final figures published today reflect the more accurate date and resource totals that have become available since we published our proposals and also appropriate date corrections to reflect errors discovered by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or notified to us by local authorities.

This year's settlement provides a good increase in money for local authorities. We are confirming that for the first time every local authority will receive at least an above inflation grant increase with most getting substantially more. This should allow councils to improve services while setting reasonable council tax increases. The Government have increased money for local councils by 25 per cent. in real terms since 1997.

I shall be sending copies of this report and supporting material on the settlement to all authorities, together with tables showing each authority's Formula Spending shares and its entitlement to RSG and NDR. I have placed copies of the report in the Journal Office; and copies of the report, tables and the other supporting material in the Vote Office and the Library.

I am also laying before the House the Local Government finance Report (England) 2001–2002; Amending Report 2003, which I also published for consultation on 5 December, and which I have decided not to alter. In addition, the Government are publishing today our response to the report of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee: Local Government Finance Formula Grant Distribution.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Fire Authority

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Desmond Browne): Stage One of the Quinquennial Review of the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland has been completed and made available in the House of Commons Library and on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's website.

The purpose of Stage One was to establish whether there was a continuing need for the functions provided by the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland, and if so, to consider a range of options for delivering those functions.

The views of a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups, including some from outside Northern Ireland, were considered. These included the Fire Brigades Union, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, the Scottish Executive and the Department of Environment and Local Government in Dublin. Other options for delivering the functions, such as privatisation, contracting out/market testing, merger with

another public body or reallocation of services to another public body, were examined. The review concluded that there was a continuing need for the functions provided by the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland and that these should continue to be provided by the fire authority as a non departmental public body. With specific reference to privatisation and merger, it was considered that the former could not meet the requirement for public accountability and, although the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service provided the best opportunity for the latter, it was considered that at present there was too great a diversity of issues facing each organisation to allow for a successful merger.

Stage Two of the review, which will begin shortly, will examine how the authority operates and relates to the fire brigade and the Department and make recommendations on how the delivery of its functions might be improved. I will inform the House of the outcome.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Strategic National Guidance

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): The Strategic National Guidance on the Decontamination of People exposed to Chemical, Biological, Radiological or Nuclear Substances or Material, for use by the emergency services and other responders, has today been placed on the Home Office website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk) and United Kingdom Resilience website (www.resilience.info). The guidance may be downloaded from those sites and I am also placing a copy in the Library.

The guidance will be updated periodically and these updates will be available on the Home Office and United Kingdom Resilience websites.

Police Authorities Grant

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I have today placed in the Library a copy of the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2003–04 (HC 270). The Report sets out my determination for 2003–04 of the aggregate amount of grants that I propose to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996, and the amount to be paid to each police authority and to the Greater London Authority for the Metropolitan Police Authority.

Allocations for each police authority for financial years 2002–03 and 2003–04 are set out in the table.

Police Authority	*2002–2003 Allocation* [1,4] *£m*	*2003–2004 Allocation* [1] *£m*	*% Change*
English Shire forces			
Avon & Somerset	152.4	157.1	3.1%
Bedfordshire	57.5	60.1	4.6%
Cambridgeshire	67.7	71.1	5.0%
Cheshire	99.0	103.9	4.9%
Cleveland	80.1	84.1	5.0%
Cumbria	55.8	57.7	3.4%
Derbyshire	95.0	97.9	3.1%
Devon & Cornwall	156.7	161.5	3.0%
Dorset	59.7	61.6	3.0%
Durham	77.8	81.5	4.9%
Essex	151.3	155.9	3.0%
Gloucestershire	55.3	57.0	3.0%
Hampshire	179.0	184.5	3.1%
Hertfordshire[4]	98.6	101.5	3.0%
Humberside	106.0	110.9	4.6%
Kent	171.6	176.8	3.0%
Lancashire	168.8	177.1	4.9%
Leicestershire	94.5	98.8	4.5%
Lincolnshire	57.0	58.7	3.0%
Norfolk	76.7	79.6	3.7%
North Yorkshire	68.3	70.4	3.0%
Northamptonshire	59.3	62.2	5.0%
Nottinghamshire	118.5	123.6	4.3%
Staffordshire	102.7	105.8	3.0%
Suffolk	62.0	63.9	3.1%
Surrey[4]	82.9	85.4	3.0%
Sussex	148.6	153.1	3.0%
Thames Valley	199.8	205.9	3.0%
Warwickshire	46.8	48.2	3.0%
West Mercia	101.3	104.4	3.0%
Wiltshire	56.8	58.7	3.2%
English Metropolitan forces			
Greater Manchester	362.8	380.8	4.9%
Merseyside	229.1	240.5	5.0%
Northumbria	204.2	214.3	5.0%
South Yorkshire	164.2	172.3	5.0%
West Midlands	368.3	386.5	4.9%
West Yorkshire	275.8	289.4	4.9%
London forces			
GLA-all functions[5]	1926.8	2022.1	4.9%
City of London[2]	29.8	32.5	9.1%
English Total	6668.8	6957.2	4.3%
Welsh forces			
Dyfed-Powys[3]	47.9	49.3	3.0%
Gwent[3]	66.7	69.6	4.3%
North Wales[3]	70.2	73.4	4.5%
South Wales[3]	158.3	163.0	3.0%
Welsh Total	343.0	355.2	3.6%
TOTAL	7011.8	7312.4	4.3%

Notes

1. Rounded to the nearest £100,000. Grant as calculated under the Local Government Finance Report (England) and Local Government Finance Report (Wales). This includes the Metropolitan Police special payment, and the effects of floors and ceilings.

2. Figures for the City are Police grant only.

3. Figures for Welsh authorities for 2002–2003 are reduced due to the appropriate amount of the £266,000 council tax penalty to the Treasury.

4. The figures above do not include the special payments for transitional costs associated with changes to the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police District from 1 April 2000.

5. The overall increase for GLA is 4.9 per cent. This includes provision for Metropolitan Police and other funded services.

6. "Floor" and "ceiling" increases of 3 per cent. and 4.9 per cent. respectively have been applied. There are minor variations arising from inclusion of capital charges.

TRANSPORT

Strategic Rail Authority

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): I am today laying before Parliament a minute in respect of a proposed comfort letter from my Department to the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA).

A statement of the Secretary of State's intentions in relation to funding the SRA is needed to enable the SRA to obtain a strong public credit rating. This in turn is needed to enable Network Rail to obtain a strong credit rating so that it can raise finance efficiently. Network Rail's rating is dependent on the SRA's rating, in view of the financial arrangements between them, which were minuted to Parliament on 27 June 2002.

The comfort letter summarises the status of the SRA, the Secretary of State's role in funding the SRA, and the implications for the SRA's ability to meet its financial obligations. It does not create any new or binding obligations.

TREASURY

Landfill Tax Credit Scheme

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Healey): The Government announced in the 2002 Pre-Budget Report that they would be reforming the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme (LTCS) from 1 April 2003. Approximately two/thirds of the funding currently going through the scheme, under objects C and CC, will be allocated to additional public spending on sustainable waste management. The Government are responsible for this spending within England while the Devolved Administrations have responsibility for spending within their countries.

THE LTCS SUCCESSOR SCHEME IN THE UK

The Government will continue to make available approximately a third of the funding that is currently going through the landfill tax credit scheme, around £47 million per year, for spending on community environmental non-category C or CC projects through a successor tax credit scheme.

ONGOING WASTE PROJECTS

Contributions by landfill site operators under the existing tax credit scheme can continue to be made to waste projects until 31 March 2003. This funding can continue to be allocated and spent by environmental bodies from 1 April 2003 until either the projects are complete or the funding is spent.

Initial advice issued by HM Customs and Excise on 20 December 2002 sets this out in more detail. (This advice is available at http://www.hmce.gov.uk/business/othertaxes/ltcs-info-note.pdf).

Contributions made on or after 1 April 2003 will no longer be able to be allocated to waste management or recycling projects.

The Government wish to ensure a smooth transition to the new spending programme with the minimum disruption for existing waste and recycling projects.

In England, the Government will therefore provide for a transitional period of funding for ongoing projects beyond 31 March 2003, provided they meet all the eligibility criteria set out below, and subject to any constraints resulting from EU state aid rules. The responsibility for this funding arrangement will lie with DEFRA. The Devolved Administrations are making their own arrangements for spending of the resources released from the reform of the LTCS.

In implementing this transitional funding arrangement, the Government are putting in place a straightforward process for making decisions on funding to ensure minimum delay and uncertainty for ongoing projects. By establishing this transitional funding period the Government are providing a reasonable period for projects to manage the consequences of the decision announced in the Pre-Budget Report.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR TRANSITIONAL FUNDING

Projects will need to meet all of the criteria below in order to be eligible for transitional funding.

- Eligible projects must fall into objects C or CC (covering research, development, education or information about sustainable waste management or research, development, education or information about market development for recycled waste) of the LTCS.
- Projects must be registered with the LTCS regulator, Entrust.
- Project operators must have a written agreement to receive LTCS funding for work currently being carried out on the project from either a Distributive Environmental Body (DEB) or landfill operator on 3 February 2003.
- Projects must have a shortfall in funding during 2003–04 beyond that which has been committed through the written agreement with a DEB or landfill operator.
- The project operator must have been expecting to have received further funding through landfill tax credits in the period 2003–04 in order to continue or complete the project within that period, as set out in the project's plans.
- Projects must be based in England.

During the period of transitional funding, project operators will need to:

- show how projects are performing against the project's objectives;
- ensure that any best practice learnt through projects is disseminated; and
- show how projects are aiding reduction of tonnages of waste to landfill, where this is an appropriate measure.

PERIOD OF FUNDING

This transitional arrangement will be limited to one year, from 1 April 2003 to 31 March 2004. Eligible projects will be considered for funding to cover ongoing commitments during 2003–04 for which they would otherwise have expected to have received funding from landfill operators or DEBs through the LTCS. Projects continuing thereafter will need to secure alternative sources of funding.

The Government will confirm their plans for the rest of the funding which will be reallocated to public spending from 2003–04 and beyond as soon as they are able to do so, including the extent to which prospective waste or recycling projects that contribute significantly to the Government's sustainable waste management strategy may be considered for support.

CONTACTS AND PROCESS FOR DETERMINING APPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL FUNDING

Administration of the transitional funding application process will be carried out by Entrust on behalf of DEFRA. Project operators wishing to be considered for transitional funding for ongoing projects beyond 31 March 2003 should contact Entrust.

Early applications would be welcome and all applications for funding should be made to Entrust by 31 March 2003. An application form for this purpose will be available from the Entrust web site (www.entrust.org.uk) shortly. Decisions on the provision of transitional funding to projects will be made as rapidly as possible.

These arrangements will only apply to projects based in England.

Enquiries should be addressed to:

LTCS Transition Helpline: 0161 972 0203

Fax: 0161 972 0055

email: transition@entrust.org.uk

web: www.entrust.org.uk

Post: Transition Fund, ENTRUST, Acre House, 2 Town Square, Sale, M33 7WZ

THE CONTINUING TAX CREDIT SCHEME

Landfill site operators are able to claim a credit worth 90 per cent. of any qualifying contribution to the landfill tax credit scheme. This is currently subject to a maximum credit of 20 per cent. of their annual landfill tax liability. From 1 April this year that figure will be revised from 20 per cent. to 6.5 per cent. This will cap the value of the scheme that will make funding available to local environmental projects at approximately £47 million, in line with the announcement made in the Pre-Budget Report 2002, ensuring that the current level of funding for these types of project is maintained. The funding available for these types of projects will be kept broadly constant in real terms and the percentage figure for the maximum proportion of landfill tax liability which landfill operators may allocate to projects will be subject to review in future years accordingly.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Licensing Bill

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): Following further consideration and consultation with faith groups, the Government has tabled an amendment to the Licensing Bill that would exempt secular entertainment provided in places of public religious worship and the provision of entertainment facilities in such places from the need to obtain a licence under the Bill when it is enacted. Music for the purposes of or incidental to a religious service or meeting is already exempt.

The exemption reflects the current position outside Greater London. Within Greater London, the provision of secular entertainment at places of public worship has for many years been licensable. The amendment the Government has tabled will add further to the deregulatory measures already contained in the Bill.

The Government also wish to make plain its intention to exempt church halls, chapel halls or other similar buildings occupied in connection with a place of public religious worship, and village halls, parish or community halls or other similar buildings from the fees associated with the provision of entertainment or entertainment facilities under the licensing regime.

Use of such premises to put on entertainment will still require a licence as such provision can and does give rise to issues of nuisance, public safety and crime and disorder. However, the Bill provides for a streamlined and straightforward licensing scheme with minimum bureaucracy. In addition, the guidance to be issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, under the Bill will make it clear that conditions attached to any licences for such premises must be proportionate to the risks involved, which are likely to be minimal in most cases.

Where a premises licence authorises the sale of alcohol in premises of this nature, however, the normal licence fee will be payable. This is entirely in line with existing arrangements. In addition, those wishing to use village, church and parish halls, and other community buildings will all be able to take advantage of the simple and easy notification procedure that the Bill provides for temporary events.

The precise details of the fee structure will be the subject of consultation with interested parties.

The Government hopes that religious institutions, music societies and other community groups will derive great benefit from the exemptions and that the initiative will further strengthen our drive to increase the diversity of cultural experience available to people and communities throughout England and Wales. Furthermore, the exemptions will bolster the measures already contained in the Bill that are designed to foster live music by opening up even further the opportunities for musicians to perform.

Written Ministerial Statements

Tuesday 4 February 2003

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Planning Inspectorate Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has launched a review of the Planning Inspectorate (PINS), which was established as an Executive Agency in April 1992. The Review will be undertaken jointly by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Welsh Assembly Government.

The Review is taking place in the light of the Government's July 2002 Agency Policy Review, which recommended that the central programme of quinquennial reviews (QQR) be replaced with a more flexible cycle of end-to-end reviews, focusing on the effectiveness of business processes involved in achieving specific outcomes. The PINS Review will form an important part of the business planning process, and will help to inform future spending and investment decisions. In particular, its conclusions will feed into discussions on the 2004 spending review round.

The Review will build on the conclusions of Stage One of the QQR of PINS, which reported in October 2000 and recommended that PINS should remain as an Agency. It will focus on the speed and efficiency of the decision-making process on planning appeals and other disputes; its alignment with key Government objectives, including that of a faster, fairer and more flexible planning system; and the links between the policy-making and delivery functions. The Agency's customers and other stakeholders will be consulted.

TRANSPORT

London Underground

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): In my written statement of 4 December 2002 I said that, in circumstances where the Mayor of London and Transport for London were threatening legal action in respect of the Public Private Partnership (PPP), I did not consider that transfer of London Underground Limited to Transport for London envisaged by the Greater London Authority Act 1999 could take place.

Following discussion the Mayor and Transport for London have now agreed to withdraw their appeal lodged on 27 January with the European Courts to the European Commission's 2 October 2002 State Aid decision, and not to pursue any further action or make further complaint to the European Commission in respect of state aid or to issue any further legal challenge to the PPP. The Government has confirmed the position it set out last December, namely that it would consider the grant provided to TfL in the event of unforeseen and unplanned expenditure. Accordingly, the Government, Transport for London and the Mayor have agreed to work together to secure the transfer of the Underground to TfL concurrently with, or as soon as possible after the completion of the PPP. When it is finalised later today, copies of the relevant correspondence will be placed in the Library.

I intend to continue with proposed amendments to the Greater London Authority Act 1999 as set out in the Railways and Transport Safety Bill, currently before the House. These amendments will ensure that the operation of London Underground's contracts is not affected when they are transferred from one body to another.

Transfer of London Underground to Transport for London will only take place ahead of amendments being made to the Greater London Authority Act with the agreement of the PPP consortia and lenders. In the meantime all parties will work together to achieve an orderly transfer of the Underground to the benefit of London.

Written Ministerial Statements

Wednesday 5 February 2003

SOLICITOR GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate

The Solicitor-General (Ms Harriet Harman): The Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Annual Report has today been published and laid before Parliament. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the Houses.

DEFENCE

Missile Defence

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): On 17 December I informed the House of the receipt of a request from the United States Government to upgrade the early warning radar at Fylingdales for missile defence purposes.

The Government has encouraged Parliamentary and public discussion of the issues involved. On 17 October, I informed the House of current work in the US on missile defence and, on 9 December, published a discussion paper, inviting interested parties to contribute their views. We have received a large number of responses both from individuals and organisations, and we have considered all contributions carefully. I have visited North Yorkshire to explain what the upgrade would involve and to hear at first hand the views of local people. We have engaged in initial discussions with the planning authorities. In an oral statement on 15 January, I informed the House of the Government's preliminary conclusion that it was in the UK's interest to agree to the US request. I gave evidence to the Defence Select Committee on the same day and addressed points raised by hon. Members in the defence debate on 22 January. I welcome the Select Committee's conclusion, in their report published on 29 January, that the UK should agree to the upgrade.

In the course of these discussions we have been able to clarify that: the upgrade essentially comprises computer hardware and software modification, and involves no new development or change to the external appearance or power output of the radar; the radar will continue to fulfil its long-established ballistic missile early warning system (BMEWS) role; it will continue to be operated and staffed by the Royal Air Force, and we will continue to enjoy full access to its data; and the upgrade does not of itself commit the UK Government to any greater participation in the US missile defence programme. It does, however, keep open the prospect of acquiring missile defence capabilities for the UK, should we desire such protection at some point in the future. We will continue discussions with the local planning authorities on the detail of the upgrade work.

I am now satisfied that we have been able to take fully into account the views of all interested parties in coming to a decision. I am therefore today replying to the United States Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, conveying the Government's agreement to the US request. We are separately negotiating a technical memorandum of understanding to give British industry the best possible opportunities to win work on the US programme.

Watchkeeper Programme

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Watchkeeper project is progressing well and we expect shortly to make an announcement on which of the four bidders will be selected to go through to the next phase of the competition.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Council of the European Union (Forthcoming Business)

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Denis MacShane): Following is the forthcoming business of the European Union:

FEBRUARY

5—Brussels—Meeting of the Presidium
6–7—Brussels—Convention Plenary
10–11—Brussels—Agriculture & Fisheries Council
13—Brussels—Meeting of the Presidium
17—Brussels—EUROGROUP (evening)
18—Brussels—ECOFIN
20—Brussels—Education Youth & Culture Council (to be confirmed)
22—Thessaloniki—Energy Council (Ministerial Informal)
24–25—Brussels—General Affairs & External Relations Council
24–25—Brussels—Agriculture & Fisheries Council
26—Brussels—Meeting of the Presidium
27–28—Brussels—Convention Plenary
27–28—Brussels—Justice & Home Affairs Council
28—Brussels—Employment, Social Policy, Health & Consumer Affairs Council

Date	*Location*	*Event*
MARCH		
1–2	Athens	Informal Education
3	Brussels	Competitiveness Council
4	Brussels	Environment Council
6	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
6	Luxembourg	Employment, Social Policy, Health & Consumer Affairs Council
6	Luxembourg	EUROGROUP (evening)
7	Luxembourg	ECOFIN
7	Luxembourg	Transport, Telecom & Energy Council
13	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
14–15	Athens	(Informal Defence Meeting)
17–18	Brussels	Convention Plenary
17–18	Luxembourg	Agriculture & Fisheries Council.
18–19	Luxembourg	General Affairs & External Relations Council
21	Brussels	EUROPEAN COUNCIL
27	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
27–28	Luxembourg	Transport, Telecom & Energy Council)

Date	*Location*	*Event*
27–28	Athens	EU-Rio Group, EU-MERCOSUR
28–29	Veria	Informal Justice & Home Affairs (Veria)
31	Brussels	Agriculture & Fisheries Council (to be confirmed)
APRIL		
2	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
3–4	Brussels	Convention Plenary
4	Brussels	Justice & Home Affairs
4–6	Hania (Crete)	Informal ECOFIN (Ministerial)
5	Lisbon	Europe—Africa Summit
10	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
14–15	Luxembourg	General Affairs & External Relations
14	Brussels	Agriculture & Fisheries
16	Athens	Signature of the Accession Treaty
17	Athens	European Conference
23	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
24–25	Brussels	Convention Plenary
MAY		
2–4	Olympia	Gymnich (Informal Foreign Ministers)
3–4	Athens	Informal Environment (Ministerial Informal)
5–6	Brussels	Education, Youth & Culture Council (To be confirmed)
8	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
10–13	Corfu	Agriculture (Ministerial Informal)
12–13	Brussels	Competitiveness
12	Brussels	EUROGROUP
13	Brussels	ECOFIN
14	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
14	Brussels	Transport, Telecom & Energy Council
15–16	Brussels	Convention Plenary
16	Brussels	EU–ACP Ministerial
16–17	Halkidiki	Informal Regional Policy (Ministerial)
16–18	Cruise off Greece	Informal Transport & Merchant Marine (Ministerial)
17	Brussels	EU–W. Balkans (Zagreb Process)
19	Brussels	General Affairs & External Relations (+ Defence)
20	Brussels	General Affairs & External Relations
22	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
24	Thessaloniki	Informal Culture (Ministerial)
26–27	Brussels	Agriculture & Fisheries Council
26–27	Crete	EUROMED Conference (Mid Term Ministerial)
27	Brussels	Environment Council
28	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
30–31	Brussels	Convention Plenary
31	St. Petersburg	EU–Russia Summit
JUNE		
2	Brussels	EUROGROUP
12–13	Alexandroupoli	Development Co-operation (Ministerial Informal)
2–3	Brussels	Transport, Telecom & Energy Council
3	Brussels	ECOFIN
4	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
5–6	Brussels	Convention Plenary
5–6	Brussels	Justice & Home Affairs Council
5–6	Brussels	Employment, Social Policy, Health & Consumer Affairs Council
6	Rhodes	Public Administration (Ministerial Informal)
11	Brussels	Meeting of the Presidium
11–12	Brussels	Agriculture & Fisheries Council
12–13	Brussels	Convention Plenary
17–18	Luxembourg	General Affairs & External Relations
20	Halkidiki	EUROPEAN COUNCIL
21	Halkidiki	Zagreb II Summit
22	Brussels	General Affairs & External Relations
24	Brussels	Employment, Social Policy, Health & Consumer Affairs Council
JULY		
2–3	Rome	Research (Ministerial Informal)
4–5	Naples	Transport Infrastructure (Ministerial Informal)
6	Brussels	Trade (Ministerial Informal)
10	Varese	Informal Council/Troika
11–12	Varese	Informal Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs
15–16	Brussels	ECOFIN
11–12	Varese	Informal Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs
15–16	Brussels	ECOFIN
17–18	Treviso	EU Employment Committee (Informal)
18–20	Montecatini	Energy & Environment (Ministerial Informal)
22–23	Brussels	Agriculture & Fisheries Council
22	Brussels	General Affairs & External Relations
24–25	Milan	European Conference on Discrimination
25–26	Verona	Education (Ministerial Informal)
AUGUST	No Meetings Planned	

NORTHERN IRELAND

Tourism Ireland Ltd.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Ian Pearson): Tourism Ireland Ltd.'s annual report and accounts 2001 were laid before Parliament today.

Copies have been placed in the Library.

TREASURY

Stakeholder Investment Products

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): With the agreement of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions, the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions are today publishing a consultation paper "Proposed Product Specifications for Sandler 'Stakeholder' Products". It takes forward one of the main recommendations of the Sandler review of July 2002. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House. The document is also available on the Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions websites.

TRANSPORT

Train Protection Systems

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): In April of last year my predecessor asked the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) for advice on the report of the rail industry's European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS) programme team on how best to take forward the recommendations from the

public inquiry on train protection systems jointly chaired by Professor Uff and Lord Cullen. I have now received the Commission's advice, in a letter to me of 5 February from the Commission Chair. I have placed a copy in the Library.

The Commission says that the present programme of fitting the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS)

"is already delivering real safety benefits".

The Commission

"accepts that the Uff/Cullen timetable for installing ERTMS is not viable"

and that

"the current state of technology means that at the moment further use of health and safety law to mandate ERTMS is not appropriate".

They endorse Level 2 as the best system for this country, although the Commission's consultants describe Level 2 as still at an early stage of development, and accept that Level 1 will reduce capacity. The Commission recommends that the Strategic Rail Authority take the lead in developing a single national programme for ERTMS development. I have accepted the HSC's advice.

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 6 February 2003

NORTHERN IRELAND

Quigley Review

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): On 7 November last year, Sir George Quigley's report on the review of the Parades Commission and the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 was issued for consultation. The consultation period came to a close at the end of January.

Since then, I have had a number of requests for an extension to the consultation period coming from both sides of the community, including the Orange Order. It has been made clear to me that, due to the complexity of Sir George's report and the radical nature of some of his proposals, many organisations would benefit from some extra time in order to come to a clear view on the report.

There are very important issues at stake. I would not wish to deny anyone sufficient time to consider them fully.

Therefore, I have decided to allow an extended period of public consultation on the report, concluding at the end of April 2003. After that time, I intend to publish any legislation in draft for a further period of public consultation.

The extension will mean that any new arrangements requiring legislation will not be in place until the 2005 marching season.

The report may be downloaded from the NIO website—www.nio.gov.uk.

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Ian Pearson): Copies of the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland's 3rd Annual Report and Accounts 2001–2002 were placed in the Libraries of the House today.

TREASURY

Audit Accountability (Central Government)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): The Government set out their policy on audit and access powers for the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) in their response, published on 13 March 2002 (Cm 5456), to Lord Sharman's report "Audit and Accountability in Central Government". The Government stated their intention to make two orders under the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000 (GRAA). The orders have been laid before Parliament today, following the completion of a consultation process seeking the views of those bodies and individuals affected by the orders. The orders reflect the outcome of the consultation exercise.

The first order provides for the C&AG to become the statutory auditor of those non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) that are currently audited by private firms or where the C&AG is currently appointed by agreement (other than companies). The order includes a schedule listing the bodies affected and sets out the legislation that is being amended and the amendments to be made. The Government accepted Lord Sharman's recommendation that the C&AG would take over the audit responsibility as existing contracts with auditors expire. NDPBs which are also companies and which need to be audited by a Companies Act auditor are not included in this order. Further legislative changes will be needed to remove statutory barriers that currently mean that the C&AG cannot carry out Companies Act audits.

The second order provides the C&AG with statutory access rights, for the purpose of his audit of Government accounts and the accounts of NDPBs, to bodies and individuals in receipt of grant, registered social landlords, train operating companies and bodies contracted or subcontracted to provide goods and/or services to Government and NDPBs, and to Entrust (the Regulator of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme) where the existing non-statutory access will be made statutory under the terms of the Government's response to Lord Sharman's report.

A Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) setting out the impact the orders are expected to have on bodies and individuals potentially affected by them has been deposited today in the Libraries of both Houses. The RIA notes that the impact of the orders is not expected to be significant, with the overall cost of the new arrangements expected to be broadly the same as if the current arrangements had continued. It acknowledges that the new arrangements may not be completely without cost in each individual case. However, the RIA concludes that, in the light of assurances given by the C&AG, the Government are satisfied that on balance the advantages and disadvantages of these arrangements add up to a clear and continuing net gain for Parliament and the public.

It is the Government's further intention that the C&AG should have access on a non-statutory basis for his value for money (vfm) examinations to the same bodies as are designated under the order in respect of his financial audit functions. Access to such bodies would not be for the purpose of conducting a vfm examination of the bodies themselves; the access would be exercised solely in connection with vfm examinations of public sector bodies. The Government will provide this access through conditions on the award of grants, conditions in contracts and other agreements as appropriate.

Cabinet Committees

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I have placed a copy of the current list of Cabinet Committees, their membership and terms of reference in the Library of the House. Details will also be updated on the Cabinet Office website at http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/cabsec/index/cabcom/index.htm.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regional Development Agencies

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): I have published the Regional Development Agencies' reported outputs for the second quarter of 2002–03, which are markedly better than the first quarter's results.

Press releases on the results have been issued regionally. Copies of these and the second quarter results have been placed in the House Library and on the DTI website at www.dti.gsi.gov.uk/rda/info/q2results.htm.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Greater London Authority General Grant Determination 2003–04

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): GLA general grant for 2003–04 has today been determined at £35,958,000, after consultation with the Mayor of London.

GLA general grant is a block grant paid for the purposes of the Authority and its functional bodies.

Written Ministerial Statements

Friday 7 February 2003

DEFENCE

Watchkeeper Project

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review set out the potential for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) significantly to improve operational effectiveness. UAVs will be a key contributor to network enabled capability and their ability to provide persistent surveillance of the battlefield or theatre of operations, without putting aircrew lives at risk has been demonstrated recently by the US in Afghanistan.

The central element of the UK's current plans for acquiring UAVs is the Watchkeeper programme, which will provide UK commanders with accurate, timely and high quality imagery. Watchkeeper will be an advanced system integrating air vehicles, sensor payloads and ground control facilities. It will be joined to the wider command and control network through communication systems such as Bowman, allowing information to be passed quickly, providing commanders with an improved understanding of the battle space and ensuring that military effect can more rapidly be brought to bear.

Four companies were invited to undertake the first stage of the assessment phase and to propose tenders for the second stage. All four submitted strong bids that demonstrated a good understanding of the programme requirements, the technical complexities and the project management requirements. Following detailed consideration of the proposals, on the basis of value for money and demonstration of the potential to deliver the best capability, we have today selected Northrop Grumman ISS International and Thales UK to take forward the remainder of the assessment phase. The Northrop Grumman team includes BAE Systems, Detica Limited, General Dynamics UK Limited, Staysys Limited and Ultra Electronics Limited. Thales (UK)'s team includes Aerosystems International, Elbit Systems Limited and QinetiQ.

Both selected bidders have indicated that they intend to complete the bulk of work in the UK, although it is too early at this stage to be precise regarding the full extent of the industrial benefits to the UK. These will be explored further in the remainder of the assessment phase, which will culminate by mid-2004 in the selection of a single successful contractor for the demonstration and manufacture phase. As stated in the SDK New Chapter, we remain committed to accelerating the Watchkeeper programme and an initial capability is planned for early 2006.

The Watchkeeper programme will be complemented by our plans to establish in 2003, a Joint Service UAV Experimentation Programme (JUEP). The JUEP will examine the potential of UAVs beyond the bounds of the Watchkeeper programme by enabling personnel of all three services to gain experience of exploiting different UAV systems with different payloads and configurations in a range of conditions.

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The 2003 Report of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body has been published today. Copies of the Report are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I wish to express my thanks to the Chairman and members of the Review Body for their clear and wide-ranging Report.

The AFPRB has recommended an increase in basic military salary of 3.2 per cent. for the majority of personnel and 3.7 per cent. for certain Privates and Lance Corporals and their equivalents (those on the lower pay range). The AFPRB has also recommended increases in the rates of Additional Pay (eg Flying Pay, Submarine Pay and Diving Pay) and in Accommodation Charges. The AFPRB has also targeted Longer Separated Service Allowance (LSSA) and Longer Service at Sea Bonus (LSSB) which are designed to compensate for separation and endorsed MOD's proposal to reduce the Longer Separated Service Allowance qualifying period from 18 to 12 months. The AFPRB has also endorsed the MOD's proposals for Financial Retention Incentives from 1 April for certain Submariners (£25,000), Royal Signals personnel (£2,500, £5,000 or £10,000 dependent on trade) and RAF Airmen Aircrew (£20,000) and a £5,000 "Golden Hello" for Submariners to help address manning issues in these trades.

The additional cost to the Defence Budget will be £266M. This will be met within existing Departmental expenditure limits.

The AFPRB's recommendations are to be accepted in full, with implementation effective from 1 April 2003 with the exception of the changes to LSSA and LSSB, which will be implemented with effect from 1 March 2003.

PRIME MINISTER

Senior Salaries

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): The 2003 report of the Review Body on Senior Salaries, which makes recommendations about the pay of the senior civil service, senior military personnel and the judiciary, is being published today. Copies are in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I am grateful to the Chairman and members of the Review Body for their work. The main recommendations of the Review Body are:

an increase from 1 April 2003 of 2.25 per cent. to the pay ranges for each of the three senior civil service pay bands below Permanent Secretary; a range of base pay awards from 0 to 9 per cent. based on performance; a minimum bonus payment of 3 per cent. or £2,500, whichever is the higher, for those making the greatest contribution; and an uplift to the Permanent Secretaries pay ranges resulting in a new range of £118,750 to £251,500;

an across the board settlement of 2.75 per cent. for the judiciary in addition to 4.4 per cent. which they will receive as the second and final stage of their 2002 award. The Lord Chief Justice will receive a further £10,000 in addition to this to redress slippage which has occurred over recent years between his post (as the senior full-time serving judge) and that of the Cabinet Secretary (as Head of the Civil Service);

an increase from 1 April 2003 of 2.25 per cent. in the value of all points on the incremental pay scales for senior military officers.

The Government has decided to accept these recommendations. Their cost will be met within existing Departmental Expenditure Limits.

Pay increases for Members of Parliament and Ministers are linked automatically to the increase in pay bands for the senior civil service. Their pay entitlement will therefore increase from 1 April 2003 by 2.25 per cent.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Teachers' Pay

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): The twelfth report of the School Teachers' Review Body is being published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House of Lords and at www.teachernet.gov.uk/Management/pay and performance. I am grateful to the Chair and members of the Review Body for their ongoing dedication to the important work of modernising and increasing the flexibility of school teachers' pay arrangements.

In making their recommendations, the Review Body were required to have regard to the matters set out in the remit letter of 1 August 2002. Copy attached at Annex A.

The STRB's recommendations and my response are below:

GENERAL PAY LEVELS

The STRB have said the following:

We recommend the following changes to teachers' salary levels in 2003–04:

an increase of 2.9 per cent. in the values of

the main pay scale and upper pay scale for qualified teachers;

the pay spine for the leadership group;

the pay spine for Advanced Skills Teachers; and

the pay scale for unqualified teachers.

The recommendation above does not apply to teachers in the inner London pay area, whose pay scales are dealt with separately.

We also recommend that the values of the additional allowances for special needs, recruitment and retention, and management should be increased by 2.9 per cent.

I propose to accept all these recommendations in full. The 2.9 per cent. increase would be paid in full in April 2003 without staging.

DIFFERENTIATED PAY AND INCENTIVES

The STRB have said the following:

London

We recommend that the existing pay spine and the inner London allowance be replaced by a new inner London pay spine for qualified teachers, with a starting rate of £21,522 [and] a move to £34,002 after crossing the threshold, and in excess of £40,000 at the top of the scale for teachers also in receipt of a management allowance. (At Annex A)

We also recommend that the existing leadership group spine and the inner London allowance be replaced by a new inner London pay spine for the leadership group in inner London schools. (At Annex B)

We recommend that the pay spine for ASTs in inner London be dealt with in the same way. (At Annex C)

We are aware that problems exist in other parts of London and elsewhere and will cover these matters when we report in January 2004. In the meantime, we recommend that both the outer London allowance and the fringe allowance be increased by 10 per cent.

I propose to accept these recommendations in full. The new pay scales and the 10 per cent. increase in London Allowance will not be staged and will be paid in full from April 2003.

We are serious about raising standards in London schools. This pay award provides significant pay rises for all London teachers. Last year we identified the problem that there are too few senior, experienced teachers in inner London. I am delighted that the Review Body has supported us in targeting its pay proposals on this group. Because of this targeting, I am also accepting that point 2 of the upper pay scale should be increased to £1,670, because of the potentially beneficial effects in terms of recruitment and retention. But I remain concerned about aspects of the upper pay scale, as I indicate further below.

The creation of the first ever pay scales for inner London is another bold and far-sighted move by the Review Body, which will help recruitment and retention at all levels of the teaching profession. It also marks a prudent first step in the direction of a more localised approach to pay.

I also welcome the increased pay for inner London school leaders. Effective school leaders are vital to raising standards in our schools. The Review Body has recognised the need to incentivise recruitment and retention of them for our inner London schools, many of which are facing very challenging circumstances.

Most London schools will be able to afford this set of recommendations from the increases to the Education Formula Spending Share. Some of the costs in any case fall wholly or mainly to my Department, for example the threshold payment increases. For a small number of local authorities, however, I will be making a special grant available where I determine that genuine affordability issues arise because of higher paybill pressures than in other parts of the country. Based on the data used in the Local Government Finance settlement, the list of those authorities is at annex D.

I will be providing the STRB with further evidence on the position in outer and "fringe" London, including affordability issues, in time for their further report in January 2004.

Shortages of mathematics and science teachers

The STRB have said the following:

We believe that the many recruitment incentives recently introduced should be allowed to bed in with a proper assessment made of their effect. We do not think that the shortage of mathematics and science teachers should be singled out for further special treatment at this stage. More could be done to market and package the existing incentives and we think that it is for Government and the TTA to take the lead on this. I propose to accept this recommendation. I welcome the suggestion about promoting the existing pay flexibilities further and will be considering this in further detail.

LINKING PAY PROGRESSION AND PERFORMANCE

Progress/on on the upper pay scale The STRB have said the following:

We have taken the consistent view that the key criterion for progression should be "continued substantial and sustained performance and contribution to the school as a teacher". No new, substantial evidence has been produced to cause us to change our view. Drawing on the evidence, we have identified four main barriers to the smooth operation of the system for progression on the upper pay scale. To tackle these we recommend that:

decisions by schools on progression on the upper pay scale: are based on the criterion of substantial and sustained performance and contribution in the context of continuous improvement in the school; are informed by the performance management system in the school; and take account of the fact that the rate of progression will vary between individuals;

the Department considers how the head's core role as a manager in judging, distinguishing and rewarding the contribution of individual teachers can be stated explicitly and that the Department discusses with the NCSL how the College can best help strengthen the confidence and capability of the heads and other managers in this area;

that some thought be given to how schools might be supported in making their systems robust, simple and fit for purpose;

the Department ensures that adequate funding for progression is sustained in the future.

I welcome many of the points made by the STRB, including their reiteration of the point that rates of progression should vary between individuals—a point that too many schools have failed to embrace. As with my predecessors, it is also my view that movement up the scale should be on a "progressively more challenging" basis. I shall return to these issues, and the non-statutory suggestions made by the STRB for smoothing the operation of the upper pay scale, in a further wide-ranging consultation later this year.

CHANGES TO THE PAY SYSTEM IN RESPECT OF PROPOSALS IN "INVESTMENT FOR REFORM"

The STRB have said the following:

We need to know more about federations before we recommend changes to the pay system. We think there is sufficient flexibility in the system at present to deal with matters as they arise. Decisions on salary levels should be made locally by LEAs or other relevant bodies. We will return to this issue in our next report when it is likely to be clearer how federations are developing.

I propose to accept the STRB's decision not to make a recommendation in respect of federations at this stage and their view that existing pay flexibilities for leaders of federations and advanced schools should be sufficient for the present.

The suggestion that the Leadership Incentive Grant might be used to pay recruitment and retention incentives [for school leaders] appears to support the objectives set for it. We think, however, that it is for schools themselves to consider, taking account of their own particular circumstances, how the grant should best be used.

I agree with this comment. We are setting parameters for this grant that eligible schools must use it within the principles being set out in guidance—to accelerate improvement, strengthen leadership and stimulate collaboration. We recommend that the pay model of special schools be adopted as a guide for the headteacher of Children's Centres and Integrated Early Years' Centres in appropriate circumstances.

I propose to accept this recommendation, which applies only in cases where these centres are schools and where the headteacher is in charge of the whole establishment.

OTHER ISSUES

The STRB have said the following:

Although we agree that a multi-year pay award for teachers would have advantages for stability and forward planning, we consider it would be premature to make recommendations at this stage for a basic pay rise for teachers beyond the year 2003–04. At present it is our intention to make recommendations in January 2004 on pay and conditions which stretch beyond a single year, in the context of our consideration of the longer-term issues.

I understand this comment but I find it disappointing. For the reasons set out in our written evidence last September, I saw a three year award as potentially very valuable in supporting headteachers when they make the strategic spending decisions needed to deliver on the ground our recent National Agreement on workforce reform. Nonetheless, I look forward to seeing the Review Body's recommendations next January. These will cover the years 2004–05 and 2005–06.

We recommend that the Department considers, in consultation with the interested parties, whether any changes are needed to the terms and conditions of unattached teachers and provides us with written evidence for our next review.

I accept that there are conflicting views on the question of unattached teachers. In the light of the STRB's further comments, I have invited all consultees to comment on the principles now, and request them to pass their detailed views to the Department on the points raised in the report about unattached teachers by mid-July 2003. I propose to summarise these views as evidence for the STRB's next review, as recommended.

To deal with the lack of a central core of basic information that covers the spectrum of the school workforce and can be used for strategic planning and development, we recommend that the Department takes the lead in securing the development and provision of an

adequate and ongoing intelligence system on the teaching profession, which includes regular, published up-to-date information.

The STRB has noted in its report the work which is already in hand in this area. In consultation with its partners, the Department is working on a specification of data items to cover the whole of the school workforce. This infrastructure will require the maintenance of core data items to be transferred to the Department electronically on a scheduled basis. I propose to consider the STRB's further comments in detail, taking into account the information which is already available, and the developments in hand, and respond, as requested, in evidence in the autumn. In the meantime I would welcome comments now from consultees on the recommendation in principle, and by mid-July on the detailed points which the STRB raises.

It is for the parties to consider and discuss arrangements for payment [of the General Teaching Councils' fee allowance]. We remain clear that arrangements should ensure that all teachers receive the full cost of the fee.

I propose to accept this recommendation and to require LEAs and governing bodies to continue to make arrangements for payment of a separate sum once a year to all teachers, to cover the cost of the fee. In the light of STRB's comments in their Eleventh Report, this sum will remain at £33.

NEXT STEPS

I am now initiating consultation with the employer organisations, the teacher associations and other interested parties as required under section 2(1) of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act 1991, before I make provision by order for teachers' pay and conditions in 2003–04. I have asked for responses to this consultation letter by Friday 7 March.

PROPOSED TEACHERS' PAY SCALES AND ALLOWANCES FROM 1 APRIL 2003

ANNEX A

Classroom teachers	*Proposed Main £*	*Inner London £*
M1	18,105	21,522
M2	19,536	22,977
M3	21,108	24,573
M4	22,734	26,226
M5	24,525	28,041
M6	26,460	30,000
U1	28,668	34,002
U2	29,730	35,673
U3	30,831	36,774
U4	31,968	37,911
U5	33,150	39,093

Unqualified teachers	*Proposed Main £*	*Inner London £*
1	13,266	16,683
2	13,860	17,277
3	14,439	17,856
4	15,039	18,456
5	15,645	19,062
6	16,227	19,644
7	16,824	20,241
8	18,216	21,633
9	19,794	23,211
10	20,979	24,396

Allowances	*Proposed Main £*	*Inner London £*
MA1	1,638	1,638
MA2	3,312	3,312
MA3	5,688	5,688
MA4	7,833	7,833
MA5	10,572	10,572
R&R 1	1,002	1,002
R&R 2	1,971	1,971
R&R 3	2,985	2,985
R&R 4	4,158	4,158
R&R 5	5,415	5,415
SEN 1	1,674	1,674
SEN 2	3,312	3,312
London:		
Outer	2,247	Separate scale
Fringe	870	Separate scale

ANNEX B

Leadership group	*Proposed Main £*	*Inner London £*
L1	31,416	37,359
L2	32,205	38,148
L3	33,009	38,952
L4	33,834	39,777
L5	34,677	40,620
L6	35,544	41,487
L7	36,507	42,450
L8	37,344	43,287
L9	38,277	44,220
L10	39,261	45,204
L11	40,278	46,221
L12	41,208	47,151
L13	42,240	48,183
L14	43,290	49,233
L15	44,367	50,310
L16	45,549	51,492
L17	46,599	52,542
L18	47,769	53,712
L19	48,951	54,894
L20	50,166	56,109
L21	51,408	57,351
L22	52,683	58,626
L23	53,988	59,931
L24	55,329	61,272
L25	56,700	62,643
L26	58,107	64,050
L27	59,544	65,487
L28	61,020	66,963
L29	62,535	68,478
L30	64,089	70,032
L31	65,676	71,619
L32	67,308	73,251
L33	68,979	74,922
L34	70,686	76,629
L35	72,444	78,387
L36	74,235	80,178
L37	76,083	82,026
L38	77,964	83,907
L39	79,863	85,806
L40	81,861	87,804
L41	83,904	89,847
L42	86,004	91,947
L43	88,155	94,098

ANNEX C

ASTs	*Proposed Main £*	*Inner London £*
1	29,757	35,700
2	30,288	36,231
3	30,822	36,765
4	31,347	37,290
5	31,878	37,821
6	32,415	38,358
7	32,949	38,892
8	33,480	39,423
9	34,008	39,951
10	34,536	40,479
11	35,070	41,013
12	35,781	41,724
13	36,489	42,432
14	37,194	43,137
15	37,902	43,845
16	38,613	44,556
17	39,321	45,264
18	40,032	45,975
19	40,740	46,683
20	41,448	47,391
21	42,156	48,099
22	43,038	48,981
23	43,929	49,872
24	44,811	50,754
25	45,699	51,642
26	46,581	52,524
27	47,469	53,412

ANNEX D

London boroughs likely to qualify for grant funding to meet the cost of the 2003 teachers' pay settlement.

Inner

Camden
Hammersmith and Fulham
Kensington and Chelsea
Lambeth
Barking and Dagenham
Haringey

Outer

Bexley
Bromley
Croydon
Enfield
Havering
Redbridge
Richmond upon Thames
Sutton
Waltham Forest

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

London Study

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have asked the Strategy Unit to look at the long-term issues facing London and its role as the UK's capital and as a world city.

The Unit will work with the Government Office for London, who are preparing the Government's contribution to the Examination in Public of the Mayor's London Plan, due to begin in March. The Plan, which is concerned first and foremost with spatial development, recognises the need for Central Government and locally elected bodies to co-operate in ensuring London's success. Further Strategy Unit work will focus in particular on the role of central Government and the delivery of Government priorities in the long term. This will require close working with the full range of institutions that contribute to London's success—including Government Departments, the Greater London Authority and other interested parties. Many of the issues are likely to cut across Departmental boundaries.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who is responsible for the response to the London Plan, will also lead the Strategy Unit work, which will aim to complete in Summer this year. I will take day-to-day responsibility for the project.

A document setting out the scope of the study is available on the Strategy Unit website www.strategy.gov.uk.

Planning and Access for Disabled People

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): The Government is fully committed to an inclusive society in which nobody is disadvantaged. An important part of delivering this commitment is breaking down unnecessary physical barriers and exclusions imposed on disabled people by poor design of buildings and places. We want the needs of disabled people properly considered as an integral part of the development control process.

We will shortly be publishing a Good Practice Guide in furtherance of a recommendation by the Disability Rights Task Force (DRTF) that Central Government should offer guidance to local authorities, developers, planners and others involved in the development control process on how to tackle the issue of access for disabled people through the planning system in a more consistent way.

The guide will reflect the Government's commitment to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and demonstrate its support for the European Year of Disabled People by encouraging local authorities and developers to consider disabled access to the built environment when formulating development plans. Emphasis will be placed on early and effective consultation between those involved in the development control process and disability organisations. It will also explain the respective roles of the planning system, Building Regulations and the DDA.

I hope that this guide will raise awareness of the issues, and of good practice in creating environments which disabled people can use with dignity and confidence.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Control

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): The Government are fully committed to maintaining effective immigration control and ensuring that access to the asylum process is restricted to those who are in need of protection as demonstrated by the series of fundamental reforms to the immigration, asylum and nationality system over the past 12 months.

Intelligence has shown that an increasing number of people who have been accepted as refugees elsewhere in the world are coming to the United Kingdom and making asylum applications in false identities. This undermines the integrity of the asylum process, places an unacceptable burden on the system and diverts valuable resources from those in genuine need. This abuse of the system is made easier as under the provisions of the Council of Europe Agreement on the Abolition of Visas for Refugees, the holders of refugee travel documents issued by some 21 countries may travel to the United Kingdom without a visa. I have therefore decided to suspend the operation of that agreement. This will mean that from 00.01 hours on Tuesday 11 February all holders of refugee travel documents will require a visa before coming to the United Kingdom.

This measure will bring the holders of refugee documents issued by the 21 countries into line with those who hold refugee documents issued by all other countries. This change will not prevent refugees who are settled in other countries and who genuinely wish to visit the United Kingdom from doing so. They will simply be required to obtain a visa before coming here. What it will do is act as a deterrent to those whose sole purpose in coming to the United Kingdom is to abuse our asylum system.

Asylum Applications

The Minister for Citizenship and Immigration (Beverley Hughes): In July 2000 we announced that we would not be recording postal claims for asylum from persons living in any of the London Boroughs and that they would be required to attend for screening before their claim was recorded and processed. Postal applications have also not been accepted in other parts of the country in cases where alternative arrangements have been established. Postal claims have, however, continued to be made from some parts of the country: in 2001–02 they accounted for 7 per cent. of all asylum claims, and so far in 2002–03 they have accounted for 8.9 per cent.

As from 8 February anyone wishing to make an asylum claim will need to do so in person, and postal applications for asylum will no longer be accepted. We expect individuals to make their claim at a port of entry, where they will be screened and any request for support will be considered. Where a person in-country writes in by post their purported claim will not be recorded. They will instead be advised to apply in person at Croydon or Liverpool. In the very exceptional case where a person is genuinely unable to attend one of these sites, alternative arrangements will be made to ensure that person can be screened and their claim processed.

This change is part of our ongoing strategy to tighten up management of the asylum system.

Written Ministerial Statements

Monday 10 February 2003

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Office (Security)

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Jane Kennedy): An audit of security procedures in the Northern Ireland Office has been carried out by a team from the Security Service. I expect to see their report very soon. There are no plans to publish the report, since it has always been considered self-defeating to make public details of security measures.

TREASURY

Financial Services Authority

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The Treasury is advertising this week for a new Chairman of the FSA to succeed Sir Howard Davies.

The Chairman of the FSA is a critical appointment. The Treasury will be looking for an exceptional individual to lead the FSA in delivering its statutory objectives and a strong, fair and effective regulatory system in the UK.

As the single financial services regulator in the UK, the scope and responsibilities of the FSA are considerable. The work of the FSA will increase significantly when it takes on responsibility for mortgages and general insurance conduct of business regulation in 2004–05. In light of this, it has been decided that the Chairman should be supported by a separate Chief Executive.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Secondary Education Policy

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): I am publishing a document today that sets out the Government's agenda for secondary education and responds to the discussions that Education Ministers had with over 2000 secondary school headteachers who attended a series of conferences before Christmas. Copies of the document will be placed in the Library later today.

Our strategy is built around the collaborative system of specialist schools which I extended as an offer to all schools when speaking in the House on 28 November last year. Increasingly groups of specialist schools will be able to provide co-ordinated partnerships across their local areas, sharing the resources and expertise of their various specialisms.

I am designating today a further 217 schools in the specialist schools programme, the highest ever number, and within the policy document on secondary education I am including information on a number of developments that respond to the autumn conferences:

> There will be two new specialisms in the specialist school programme: music and humanities. The latter will enable schools to select three subjects for their specialist focus built around one of English, history or geography.
>
> We will also introduce the option of a rural focus within appropriate specialisms.
>
> Special schools will be given a new opportunity to use their expertise in helping mainstream schools to tackle special needs issues.
>
> Headteachers at the conferences liked the collaborative messages in the criteria and specification for the 'Advanced' schools programme but did not like the suggestion in the title that there would be a new hierarchy of schools. We have decided that schools successful in their applications to join this programme will not be called 'Advanced' schools. The programme will be renamed the Leading Edge Programme and to emphasise its collaborative nature, the schools themselves will not acquire a new title.

Our strategy document stresses the central importance of a clear focus on teaching and learning. This is indeed central to the specialist schools programme. We want our policies to energise all of the profession and we want to see better opportunities for teachers to build on their natural enthusiasm for their chosen curriculum subjects. Building on schools' impressive achievements in recent years, we will be seeking to increase the autonomy of school leaders as we trust the professionalism of the workforce to deliver on our ambitious programme for a step change in the standards achieved by secondary education.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Library Services

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): I am pleased to announce that the Government's new strategic framework for the public library service—*"Framework for the Future"*—has been published today and copies of the document have been placed in the Libraries of both houses.

The starting point for the strategy is how best to meet the needs of library users and encourage new users. "*Framework for the Future*" outlines a range of initiatives designed to promote reading and learning for everyone—giving special attention to those who have literacy problems. It aims to bring access to the digital communications revolution to all and to help communities work together more effectively through better sharing of community information and by creating opportunities for different groups to work together. The new strategy will encourage libraries to build on existing strengths and ensure they position themselves at the heart of the communities they serve.

Public libraries are a valuable infrastructure, which have the potential to help local authorities deliver across a range of local services. The best libraries are doing so already. By clarifying key priorities and highlighting best practice, "*Framework for the Future*" provides a

focus for future work across the sector. It provides a basis for authorities to prioritise and plan services to meet the needs of citizens—while being flexible enough to respond to local differences.

The launch of the policy document marks the beginning of the next stage in developing the strategy. We will be working closely with the Advisory Council on Libraries, Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries and leaders in local government, libraries and education to deliver the strategy.

The document will also be available on the DCMS website at http://www.culture.gov.uk/heritage/pl_framework.html

Television Licence

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): on 21 February 2000, the Government announced its conclusions on the recommendations of the independent review panel on the future funding of the BBC. In addition to a range of measures designed to improve BBC efficiency and accountability, the Government introduced a new funding formula providing for changes in the licence fee of RPI plus 1.5 per cent. for each year from 2000–01 to 2006–07. This formula will enable the BBC to provide a strong and distinctive schedule of high quality programmes and remain at the forefront of broadcasting technology.

Application of the RPI figure of 1.7 per cent. for the year to September 2003, plus 1.5 per cent., to the current unrounded licence fees produces new rounded totals of £116.00 for a colour licence and £38.50 for a black and white licence. The necessary regulations to bring these fees into force will be laid before the House in due course. These changes will come into effect from 1 April 2003.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Planning Delivery Grant

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): In July the Deputy Prime Minister announced that we would be making an additional £350m available to local authorities over the period 2003–06 to improve the delivery of planning services. We have now decided the basis on which we will distribute this new Planning Delivery Grant in 2003–04 and will be informing recipients of their allocations.

The grant is being paid out of additional resources from Spending Review 2002. The aim of the grant is to improve the planning system to ensure the effective delivery of our objectives for sustainable communities which we set out in the document "Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future". It is specifically targeted towards meeting the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Public Service Agreements 5 and 6. PSA 5 aims to achieve a better balance between housing availability and demand. PSA 6 requires all authorities to have local development frameworks in place (in accordance with agreed Local Development Schemes) and to meet the Best Value development control targets by the end of 2006–07.

The amount of grant distributed in 2003–04 is £50 million. It will be paid to local planning authorities, regional planning bodies and the Greater London Authority. The grant is a performance reward grant, and rewards local authorities both for improvement towards and achievement of Best Value development control targets in the period June 2001 to June 2002. Those meeting the development control handling targets both at the start and the end of the year are rewarded separately for consistently high performance. No authority will receive an allocation of less than £75,000 in 2003–04 so that every authority has additional resources to help drive improvement in performance towards the targets. The grant allocations are enhanced for those local authorities within the high housing demand and growth areas identified in the document "Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future".

Regional Planning Bodies were notified in December of their share of the £6 million of existing funding which will, from 2003–04, be paid directly to them. They will also receive a share of the new Planning Delivery Grant for their work on new regional spatial strategies (due to replace regional planning guidance under the Bill) and their review of existing regional planning guidance to take account of the growth area proposals. The Greater London Authority receives grant to assist their related review of elements of the London Plan.

County Councils will not receive direct resources from the grant. The counties' planning functions are being changed under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill currently before Parliament. Subject to Royal Assent, County Councils will cease to have a duty to prepare structure plans but their resources will not be reduced accordingly. Therefore, while in some cases counties may need to continue with structure plan preparation over the next year and possibly beyond, given the transitional period set out in the Bill, as this function winds down they will be able to take advantage of freed up resources. It will be important that these freed up resources, and the expertise available in county councils, are retained and used to deliver other county planning responsibilities and to undertake their function as statutory consultees in the preparation of regional spatial strategies and local development frameworks. Counties can be engaged to conduct work related to regional spatial strategies on an agency basis.

The criteria for grant allocations have been designed to drive up performance in the delivery of planning functions, both in respect of development control and plan making. Authorities should be aware that they will need to continue to secure improvements in performance in order to receive money in further years. Grant allocations are not ring-fenced and authorities have complete discretion in the way they spend this money. Areas that authorities may consider concentrating on include: contributing to the preparation of regional planning guidance and the future regional spatial strategies; completing current reviews of existing development plans and preparing for the new system of local development frameworks; better resourcing of IT systems; assistance from consultants; outsourcing of certain planning services; increasing staffing levels; training for staff and councillors; supporting mediation services; encouraging a more

diverse planning workforce; bursaries for employees to gain planning qualifications and more use of technical staff.

The amounts payable are shown in the tables.

Letters to all Leaders of local and county planning authorities; Chief Executives of the regional planning bodies; and the Mayor of London have been laid in the libries of the House. They set out the details of each recipient's grant.

We will lay a Special Grant Report shortly.

Table 1: Total Planning Delivery Grant (£) for 2003–04

	£
Adur	138,189
Allerdale	151,179
Alnwick	75,000
Amber Valley	75,000
Arun	137,500
Ashfield	181,650
Ashford	163,816
Aylesbury Vale	203,206
Babergh	75,000
Barking and Dagenham	150,758
Barnet	458,095
Barnsley	75,000
Barrow-in-Furness	75,000
Basildon	208,346
Basingstoke and Deane	203,463
Bassetlaw	75,000
Bath & North East Somerset UA	133,008
Bedford	203,206
Berwick-upon-Tweed	75,000
Bexley	236,793
Birmingham	75,000
Blaby	75,000
Blackburn with Darwen UA	75,000
Blackpool UA	75,000
Blyth Valley	75,000
Bolsover	75,000
Bolton	75,000
Boston	75,000
Bournemouth UA	157,781
Bracknell Forest UA	121,875
Bradford	75,000
Braintree	275,158
Breckland	88,297
Brent	283,364
Brentwood	108,480
Bridgnorth	75,000
Brighton & Hove UA	121,875
Bristol UA	189,258
Broadland	75,000
Broads Authority	75,000
Bromley	241,106
Bromsgrove	189,943
Broxbourne	101,316
Broxtowe	75,000
Burnley	75,000
Bury	125,400
Calderdale	75,000
Cambridge	101,316
Camden	223,407
Cannock Chase	75,000
Canterbury	200,070
Caradon	75,000
Carlisle	75,000
Carrick	97,304
Castle Morpeth	75,000
Castle Point	158,757
Charnwood	94,248
Chelmsford	137,500

Table 1: Total Planning Delivery Grant (£) for 2003–04

	£
Cheltenham	75,000
Cherwell	278,812
Chester	75,000
Chesterfield	75,000
Chester-le-Street	75,000
Chichester	336,900
Chiltern	249,282
Chorley	75,000
Christchurch	75,814
City of London	75,000
Colchester	137,500
Congleton	75,000
Copeland	129,735
Corby	115,100
Cotswold	232,085
Coventry	75,000
Craven	100,555
Crawley	109,091
Crewe and Nantwich	75,000
Croydon	219,955
Dacorum	229,265
Darlington UA	89,770
Dartford	148,191
Dartmoor NP	75,000
Daventry	101,316
Derby UA	134,206
Derbyshire Dales	75,000
Derwentside	75,000
Doncaster	111,189
Dover	109,091
Dudley	207,414
Durham	83,569
Ealing	121,875
Easington	75,000
East Cambridgeshire	126,617
East Devon	75,000
East Dorset	75,000
East Hampshire	272,875
East Hertfordshire	163,542
East Lindsey	75,000
East Northamptonshire	107,684
East Riding of Yorkshire UA	213,853
East Staffordshire	75,000
Eastbourne	109,091
Eastleigh	173,009
Eden	207,267
Ellesmere Port and Neston	75,000
Elmbridge	254,351
Enfield	186,316
Epping Forest	199,600
Epsom and Ewell	75,000
Erewash	82,836
Exeter	100,000
Exmoor NP	75,000
Fareham	132,211
Fenland	113,199
Forest Heath	75,000
Forest of Dean	75,000
Fylde	75,000
Gateshead	201,962
Gedling	75,000
Gloucester	75,000
Gosport	75,000
Gravesham	124,878
Great Yarmouth	75,000
Greenwich	200,000
Guildford	75,000
Hackney	121,875
Halton UA	160,000
Hambleton	147,416
Hammersmith and Fulham	157,020
Harborough	214,061
Haringey	255,952

Table 1: Total Planning Delivery Grant (£) for 2003–04

	£
Harlow	181,028
Harrogate	75,000
Harrow	251,783
Hart	109,091
Hartlepool UA	150,460
Hastings	146,840
Havant	75,000
Havering	171,591
Herefordshire UA	326,145
Hertsmere	75,000
High Peak	75,000
Hillingdon	320,040
Hinckley and Bosworth	75,000
Horsham	177,256
Hounslow	404,246
Huntingdonshire	141,866
Hyndburn	97,980
Ipswich	75,000
Isle of Wight UA	166,588
Isles of Scilly	101,965
Islington	237,532
Kennet	75,000
Kensington and Chelsea	178,865
Kerrier	75,000
Kettering	136,309
King's Lynn and West Norfolk	75,000
Kingston upon Thames	195,300
Kingston-upon-Hull UA	109,981
Kirklees	75,000
Knowsley	165,505
Lake District NP	75,000
Lambeth	330,617
Lancaster	75,000
Leeds	75,000
Leicester UA	119,296
Lewes	75,000
Lewisham	184,375
Lichfield	111,461
Lincoln	104,952
Liverpool	250,982
Luton UA	203,267
Macclesfield	288,603
Maidstone	280,076
Maldon	75,000
Malvern Hills	75,000
Manchester	251,537
Mansfield	85,963
Medway UA	264,462
Melton	138,634
Mendip	75,000
Merton	195,450
Mid Bedfordshire	187,855
Mid Devon	140,627
Mid Suffolk	75,000
Mid Sussex	132,681
Middlesborough UA	158,038
Milton Keynes UA	348,120
Mole Valley	75,000
New Forest	109,091
Newark and Sherwood	77,253
Newcastle upon Tyne	75,000
Newcastle-under-Lyme	164,755
Newham	201,503
North Cornwall	106,149
North Devon	148,241
North Dorset	138,788
North East Derbyshire	112,340
North East Lincolnshire UA	75,000
North Hertfordshire	148,191
North Kesteven	75,000
North Lincolnshire UA	99,889
North Norfolk	75,000
North Shropshire	75,000

Table 1: Total Planning Delivery Grant (£) for 2003–04

	£
North Somerset UA	75,000
North Tyneside	75,000
North Warwickshire	75,313
North West Leicestershire	75,000
North Wiltshire	123,305
North Yorkshire Moors NP	75,000
Northampton	169,285
Northumberland NP	75,000
Norwich	75,000
Nottingham UA	75,000
Nuneaton and Bedworth	75,000
Oadby and Wigston	75,000
Oldham	75,000
Oswestry	75,000
Oxford	174,294
Peak NP	75,000
Pendle	75,000
Penwith	75,000
Peterborough UA	77,843
Plymouth UA	75,000
Poole UA	182,279
Portsmouth UA	137,500
Preston	122,151
Purbeck	75,000
Reading UA	203,648
Redbridge	197,789
Redcar and Cleveland UA	75,000
Redditch	75,000
Reigate and Banstead	109,091
Restormel	191,936
Ribble Valley	75,000
Richmondshire	87,304
Richmond-upon-Thames	299,968
Rochdale	115,401
Rochford	156,036
Rossendale	75,000
Rother	75,000
Rotherham	188,698
Rugby	75,000
Runnymede	139,569
Rushcliffe	75,000
Rushmoor	85,695
Rutland UA	99,039
Ryedale	75,000
Salford	75,000
Salisbury	109,688
Sandwell	75,000
Scarborough	75,000
Sedgefield	103,484
Sedgemoor	75,000
Sefton	286,592
Selby	101,549
Sevenoaks	108,508
Sheffield	75,000
Shepway	109,091
Shrewsbury and Atcham	75,000
Slough UA	166,681
Solihull	75,000
South Bedfordshire	135,407
South Bucks	75,000
South Cambridgeshire	116,667
South Derbyshire	75,000
South Gloucestershire UA	153,702
South Hampshire	75,000
South Holland	75,000
South Kesteven	112,488
South Lakeland	75,000
South Norfolk	75,000
South Northamptonshire	186,876
South Oxfordshire	137,500
South Ribble	75,000
South Shropshire	115,864
South Somerset	140,728

Table 1: Total Planning Delivery Grant (£) for 2003–04

	£
South Staffordshire	75,000
South Tyneside	85,254
Southampton UA	124,029
Southend on Sea UA	116,667
Southwark	225,790
Spelthorne	75,926
St Albans	109,091
St Edmundsbury	79,076
St Helens	75,000
Stafford	165,858
Staffordshire Moorlands	75,000
Stevenage	75,000
Stockport	294,100
Stockton-on-Tees UA	75,000
Stoke on Trent UA	99,461
Stratford-on-Avon	118,587
Stroud	75,000
Suffolk Coastal	75,000
Sunderland	110,170
Surrey Heath	167,324
Sutton	109,091
Swale	179,167
Swindon UA	75,000
Tameside	75,000
Tamworth	100,000
Tandridge	266,668
Taunton Deane	75,000
Teesdale	75,000
Teignbridge	156,222
Telford and Wrekin UA	75,000
Tendring	253,159
Test Valley	295,525
Tewkesbury	125,675
Thanet	118,945
Three Rivers	106,503
Thurrock UA	179,167
Tonbridge and Malling	109,091
Torbay UA	75,000
Torridge	75,000
Tower Hamlets	224,039
Trafford	238,831
Tunbridge Wells	75,000
Tynedale	75,000
Uttlesford	246,201
Vale of White Horse	128,821
Vale Royal	225,115
Wakefield	75,000
Walsall	100,199
Waltham Forest	109,091
Wandsworth	246,513
Wansbeck	75,000
Warrington UA	75,000
Warwick	75,000
Watford	75,000
Waveney	75,000
Waverley	75,000
Wealden	192,964
Wear Valley	75,000
Wellingborough	108,383
Welwyn Hatfield	75,000
West Berkshire UA	268,281
West Devon	77,159
West Dorset	75,000
West Lancashire	75,000
West Lindsey	75,000
West Oxfordshire	121,875
West Somerset	75,000
West Wiltshire	75,000
Westminster	474,679
Weymouth and Portland	75,000
Wigan	210,441
Winchester	297,062
Windsor and Maidenhead UA	227,499
Wirral	267,697
Woking	166,989
Wokingham UA	170,019
Wolverhampton	120,263
Worcester	75,000
Worthing	219,977
Wychavon	254,927
Wycombe	109,091
Wyre	108,801
Wyre Forest	108,105
York UA	75,000
Yorkshire Dales NP	75,000

Table 2: Planning Delivery Grant for Regional Planning Bodies and the GLA for 2003–04

	£
East Midlands Region Local Government Association	365,000
East of England Local Government Conference	516,000
Greater London Authority	75,000
Regional Assembly for the North East	263,000
North West Regional Assembly	369,000
South East Regional Assembly	581,000
South West Regional Assembly	324,000
West Midlands Local Government Association	332,000
Regional Assembly for Yorkshire and the Humber	325,000

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Personnel Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): We are publishing today the new Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy (AFOPS) main document.

The AFOPS provides a clear sense of direction for Armed Forces personnel policies. It does so by providing a framework of five strategic themes and some 28 personnel strategic guidelines. These cover the full spectrum of the Service personnel policy agenda. The main document also highlights the challenges we will face in attracting and retaining our people for the future.

AFOPS is intended to deliver real and tangible effect. The new main document looks at the achievements of the past two or so years relating to Service personnel, and further lays out the actions which will be taken forward in the most critical areas during the next two years.

I have placed copies of the Document in the Library of the House.

Armed Services (Training)

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): I announced on 17 October 2002 that I had commissioned an appraisal of the initial training of recruits across the Armed Services, and I undertook to publish findings. This appraisal was conducted by two

senior officers from outside the personnel area and reported to Ministers. The leader of the study was given a wide ranging remit and freedom to pursue the study.

Overall, the appraisal concluded that the Department can have considerable confidence in the initial training system. It is administered and staffed by professional men and women with a strong sense of duty and purpose, who have proved consistently successful in providing highly effective training for 23,000 recruits a year. Two areas were judged to need addressing. First, the Department as a responsible employer needs to continue to ensure that its young people are managed proficiently, treated fairly and given appropriate levels of professional and personal support. Second, the Department requires more rigorous assurance mechanisms, to provide regular monitoring, to expose risk and to promote best practice. The appraisal concluded that an assurance authority should be established outside the single-service chains of command. Some of these proposals will require extra investment.

I am today placing in the Library of the House a copy of the appraisal, together with a departmental action plan responding to all of the recommendations and, where action is not already in hand or planned, assigning responsibility for examining the recommendation and taking it forward. The report is also available on the website: www.MOD.UK.

Written Ministerial Statements

Tuesday 11 February 2003

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Climate Change

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): Today my Department is publishing the report "The Impacts of Climate Change: Implications for Defra". The report is one of the most thorough studies ever carried out on the consequences of climate change for the policies and operations of a UK Government Department. It provides a basis for action that will help Defra avoid risks and reduce the costs associated with climate change. The report is also a significant step forward in the interdepartmental process to examine the implications of climate change across Government Departments which was announced in both Houses on 25 April 2002.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Future of Royal Parks

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): I announced on 20 July 2001 that it was our intention to establish the Royal Parks Agency as a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). The review of the Royal Parks Agency, which recommended change of status for the Parks, did not take into account the issue of reclaiming VAT in its assessment. Following the announcement of change of status, there were discussions with HM Customs & Excise it has been confirmed that the Royal Parks would lose their entitlement to reclaim VAT on building and maintenance work if they became a NDPB. This would result in a loss of approximately £3 million a year income which the Parks are unable to absorb. The decision has therefore been made that the Parks should remain an Agency of the Department.

My aim is still to modernise the Agency and a programme of change to improve the efficiency and management of the Parks is being taken forward. This includes:

a new and strengthened Ministerial Advisory Board. The Board will provide the Agency with strategic direction and advice to Ministers on the Agency's broad direction and performance against targets.

appointment of two non-executive Directors to the Royal Parks Management Board, one of whom will be drawn from the Advisory Board.

supporting the setting up of the "Royal Parks Foundation" a charitable trust to raise funds for the Parks.

secondment of a member of the Senior Civil Service from my Department to the Royal Parks to strengthen the Parks' corporate and business management.

a new Funding Agreement which ties the Royal Parks more closely to delivering the Department's core agenda.

application to the Royal Parks of all the recommendations in the Report "Better Government Services: Executive Agencies in the 21st Century".

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Arms Control and Disarmament (Inspections) Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Mike O'Brien): On 3 February 2003 the Foreign Secretary signed the following statement in relation to the Arms Control and Disarmament (Inspections) Bill:

> "In my view the provisions of the Arms Control and Disarmament (Inspections) Bill are compatible with Convention rights".

HOME DEPARTMENT

Non-Human Primate Research

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): The Government have today published a report by the Chief Inspector of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate, following his review of aspects of three animal research projects being conducted at Cambridge university. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library and are being put onto the Home Office website http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk./

The Home Office licensed the three projects under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. They comprise studies relevant to various human neurological disorders, such as amnesia, psychoses, stroke-related conditions, dementia, and Parkinson's and Huntington's diseases. These studies involve subjecting marmosets to surgical and other procedures, including behavioural and cognitive testing.

The research has been the subject of a campaign report and video produced last year by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV), in which a number of detailed allegations are made based on the testimony of, and material gathered by, an undercover sympathiser. These allegations call into question the severity limits and bands assigned to the projects, challenge other aspects of the licensing decisions, raise compliance issues and record concerns about the standards of care given to the marmosets.

In the light of the BUAV material, I asked the Chief Inspector for a report on the assignment of the severity limits and bands concerned, and for his advice on the licensing decisions and on compliance with the licence authorities.

The Chief Inspector's review has been thorough, and his detailed report addresses all the key issues. In it he refers to the official published material about severity limits (relating to individual authorised procedures) and severity bands (relating to entire projects). He concludes that the severity limits and bands for these projects, none of which are classed as higher than "moderate", have been correctly assigned in accordance with the

published criteria. In reaching this view he has taken account of all relevant factors. These include the degree and duration of suffering likely to be experienced by the marmosets as a result of the procedures, the use of analgesics and special post-operative care, and the controls in place to ensure appropriate action if the severity limits seem unexpectedly likely to be breached.

The BUAV claim that there is a widespread misallocation of severity limits and bands in non-human primate research, so that the true amount of laboratory animal suffering is being concealed. In view of this, the Chief Inspector has also examined 37 other licensed academic projects where primates are used in procedures placed in all the different severity categories. He found the limits and bands had been correctly assigned in all cases.

In reviewing the licensing decisions for the Cambridge projects, the Chief Inspector points out that the lead researchers concerned have long experience in this type of neurological research, their work has been peer-reviewed by funding bodies and their findings have been published as they have emerged. Consideration of two of the licence applications involved specialist members of the Inspectorate in addition to the local inspector, and in all cases account was taken of all the detailed information on the application forms, as well as of material from other sources. The Chief Inspector is satisfied that the decisions were correct and properly taken with due regard to all the criteria set out in section 5 of the 1986 Act.

The Chief Inspector considers that the marmoset facility at Cambridge university meets, and in some respects exceeds, the standards of housing and care set out in the relevant Home Office Codes of Practice, and that some examples are to be found there of best practice. He considers that there is a culture of care within the establishment, and that the marmoset colony is generally healthy. This is borne out by veterinary records and previous inspection reports, well as by the Chief Inspector's own observations.

The Government are grateful to the Chief Inspector for having produced a comprehensive and balanced report. We accept his main findings and conclusions. In particular we are satisfied that the Cambridge university marmoset projects have been properly licensed and assigned the correct severity limits and bands. We are also satisfied that the projects, the value and importance of which must be recognised, are well run, and that the marmosets are generally well looked after. No evidence has been found to support any of the BUAV's main contentions.

The Chief Inspector has additionally made some recommendations on matters arising from his review. There are three addressed to the Government. The first is that there should be a forum of those who breed and use marmosets for scientific purposes, so that contemporary best practice can be shared in a structured way. The second is that consideration should be given in the next review of the published annual procedures statistics to a possible remedy for a technical problem encountered in capturing the data relating to all the uses made of some laboratory animals. The third is that further consideration should be given as to whether the severity limit and band labels should continue to be used.

These are constructive recommendations, and we fully accept them. I have asked the Inspectorate to set up the proposed forum for licensed breeders and users of marmosets. The point about the statistics will be considered in due course as part of a wider review of the annual published statistics. I have asked for the question of future use of the terminology of severity limits and bands to be considered as part of the review currently being undertaken by the Animal Procedures Committee of the cost benefit assessment required under section 5 of the 1986 Act.

A few technical infringements were discovered during the Chief Inspector's review, on which appropriate action has been taken. These do not detract either from the Chief Inspector's main findings or our acceptance of them. Nothing seriously untoward has been discovered about the licensing and running of these projects at Cambridge University, and on those aspects there are no grounds for significant concern or further action.

Accommodation Centre Sites

The Minister for Citizenship and Immigration (Beverley Hughes): I am announcing today that we are considering applying for planning approval to develop an accommodation centre for asylum seekers at HMS Daedalus, Gosport, Hampshire.

Because the need to establish the accommodation centres trial is urgent, the Government are committed as a matter of policy to developing accommodation centres for 750 asylum seekers each at DSDC Bicester and the former RAF Newton. For the trial to be effective it is necessary to have a policy commitment to these two sites and we will therefore continue vigorously to make our case to the planning inquiries established to consider our proposals.

We previously announced our intention to trial a smaller model of accommodation centre for up to 400 single men only. We consider the site at HMS Daedalus to be suitable for this model, and to that extent, it is a key element of the policy to trial accommodation centres.

As before, if we decide to proceed, we will comply with the planning process with this new site and I hope that we will make considerable progress in the consultation process with the local community and councils.

After detailed consideration, we have decided not to pursue the sites at Sully hospital, South Glamorgan; AirWest, Edinburgh; and RAF Hemswell, Lincolnshire for the purposes of the trial. No planning notifications will therefore be submitted for these sites.

Site searching continues and we are looking in particular for an alternative site in Scotland to replace AirWest, Edinburgh. When a potential site has been identified we will consult Scottish Ministers in line with section 40 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

CABINET OFFICE

Public Administration Select Committee (Government Response)

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): The Government have today published its response to the eighth report of the Public Administration Select Committee. The Government is grateful to the Select Committee for its constructive report on media handling at the former Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

The Government have accepted the Committee's central recommendation that there should be a

"radical external review of government communications".

I am pleased that Bob Phillis, Chief Executive of the Guardian Media Group plc, has agreed to be the Chairman of the review group. The members of the group are Colin Browne, the Maitland Consultancy, David Hill, Good Relations Political Communications; John Hipwood, Wolverhampton Express and Star, Rupert Howell, recently of Chime Communications plc; Howell James, Brown Lloyd James Ltd; Sian Jarvis, Department of Health; Sue Jenkins, GIGS; Tom Kelly/ Godric Smith, 10 Downing Street; Charles Reiss, Evening Standard; Richard Tait, recently ITN; and Nicholas Timmins, Financial Times.

The terms of reference are:

"In the light of the Eighth report of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, to conduct a radical review of government communications. This will include the examination of different models for organising and managing the government's communication effort, the effectiveness of the current model based on the Government Information and Communication Service, and the roles played by other civil servants including those special advisers who have a responsibility for communications."

The Government's response also deals with the other recommendations made by the Select Committee. Copies of the response have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Targeting Fraud Advertising Campaign

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): The results of the evaluation of the September 2001 - March 2002 bursts of the advertising campaign on Targeting Fraud have today been placed in the Library.

Written Ministerial Statements

Wednesday 12 February 2003

HEALTH

Haemophilia (Recombinant Clotting Factors)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): I am pleased to announce today that the Government have invested an extra £88 million over the next three years to provide recombinant clotting factors for haemophilia patients in England. Haemophilia patients up to age 21 are already receiving these products. The extra funding will extend the availability of recombinant clotting factors to adult patients.

Over the next few months the Government will work with key stakeholders, including the Haemophilia Society, clinicians and primary care trusts, to design a programme for rolling out access to recombinant products to older age groups. This roll out will take time to achieve because of the large volume of product involved. However, by March 2006 the vast majority of haemophilia patients should be receiving recombinant clotting factors.

We have taken a number of steps to make clotting factors used to treat people with haemophilia as safe as possible. We hope this extra £88 million will ultimately give all haemophilia patients access to synthetic treatments, where these are recommended by clinicians.

HOME OFFICE

Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): Lord Carlile of Berriew QC has completed the report on the operation of part IV of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which will be laid before the House today.

I am grateful to Lord Carlile for his detailed work and am pleased to note that he is satisfied that I have certified persons only in appropriate cases and that I have exercised my independent judgment in each case having given due regard to advice from officials.

The report follows the decision of the Court of Appeal in October last year, which unanimously upheld the need for these detention powers. The court held that the powers are not discriminatory and comply with the European convention on human rights.

I welcome Lord Carlile's recommendations, which I will be considering in detail over the next few weeks. In relation to the recommendation for the detainees to be held in a separate facility within the Prison Service, I have agreed to this in principle, subject to further detailed feasibility work.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Public Rights of Way

The Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life (Alun Michael): I am pleased to announce the commencement of the provisions contained in schedule 6 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which will enable the diversion, or closure of a right of way where it is necessary to prevent crime, or to protect pupils or staff from violence or other risks to their health and safety.

These new powers come into effect today.

The school powers will be available immediately throughout England, but as prescribed by the legislation, local highway authorities will only be able to divert or close rights of way for the purposes of crime prevention within areas that are designated by the Secretary of State.

We recognise that most rights of way do not cause or facilitate crime, and we do not intend to use the provisions as a means of restricting routes, which are important to the majority of law-abiding people who use them. These new provisions are limited to rights of way where crime is a real problem; particularly back alleys, which can facilitate crimes such as robbery, burglary, arson and drug dealing.

Particular problems have been identified and raised by MPs and councillors in relation to some housing estates. Also, there are many locations where the pattern of use has changed, and the alleys have fallen into disuse and abuse.

Where the new powers are used, the diversion or closure of a right of way should significantly reduce the opportunity for offences and increase the security of local residents. The powers should be particularly helpful in areas which are the subject of comprehensive neighbourhood renewal initiatives, such as the New Deal for Communities programme, are in place and high levels of crime are undermining attempts to address wider problems within the neighbourhood.

Guidance will be issued to all local authorities in England tomorrow setting out how they can apply for designation and how we think the different interests can be balanced.

The guidance was prepared as a result of a wide ranging public consultation exercise last year including all local authorities and police authorities in England, the Local Government Association, the Association of Chief and Police Officers and a range of organisations with an interest in rights of way. The guidance was widely welcomed. Following the consultation, the main changes that we have made to the process are:

The area for designation will normally be defined by streets and other local geographical features, and not by wards as originally suggested;

The period for preparation of submissions for the first phase or designations should be 12 weeks, and not 10 weeks;

The designation order should be in place for three years, instead of two years.

Local highway authorities will normally take the lead, working with crime and disorder reduction partnerships, police authorities, local residents and user

groups to formulate a submission to the Secretary of State seeking the inclusion or an area, or areas, in a designation order. In county areas, the district authority or the local crime and disorder reduction partnership may be able to make a submission if the county is unwilling to do so.

There will be a phased approach to designating areas. The first designation order(s) will be prepared on the basis of submissions received 12 weeks after the guidance is sent out. Submissions received by this date will be considered with a view to identifying the areas where the need for these new powers is an immediate priority.

The Secretary of State proposes to review the first designation order not less than 3 years from the order being made. This review will provide an opportunity for us to assess the operation of the provisions, taking stock of any lessons learned. It will also ensure that proper account is taken of changing crime patterns. It is envisaged that the review of the designation order may result in amendment to, or revocation of, that order. This period will, in the majority of cases, provide reasonable opportunity for highway authorities to make the special extinguishment and diversion orders they consider necessary. If there is a need for any given area to continue to be included in the designation order after the 3-year period, it is anticipated the relevant highway authority will need to make a further submission to the Secretary of State.

Areas for which submissions have been made, but are not included in the first designation order, will be considered for inclusion in a follow up order, in conjunction with any submissions received after the 12-week period. The date of the follow up order will be determined by an assessment of the nature and level of responses received. The follow up order will be subject to a similar review process. Applications received after this will be considered as and when they are received.

There are still a number of procedural matters to be set out by statutory instrument to provide clarity in the administration of the crime prevention and school security provisions, mainly setting out the process which local highway authorities should follow in making a diversion or closure orders using the new provisions. This statutory instrument will be laid before Parliament shortly.

We are also commencing the new section 29 of the Highways Act 1980 at the same time as these Schedule 6 provisions. Councils are already required to have due regard to the needs of agriculture and forestry in the exercise of certain functions relating to the creation, stopping up and diversion of rights of way. New section 29 extends the definition of "agriculture" to include the breeding or keeping of horses and introduces an additional duty to have regard to the desirability of nature conservation.

The more detailed regulatory requirements of the rest of Schedule 6 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, including the school proprietors (or governing bodies') right to apply for orders, will be the subject of consultation at a later date.

Copies of the following documents will be placed in the Library of the House; they will also be available online at: http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/cl/publicrow.htm

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Commencement No. 3) Order 2003/272 (C. 16) was made by the Minister of State for Rural Affairs on the 11th February 2003.

Guidance for Local Highway Authorities: on crime prevention on public rights of way—designation of areas.

Analysis of Responses to: Crime prevention on rights of way public consultation paper on the designation of areas and other procedural matters.

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 13 February 2003

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Licensing Bill

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): As part of its consideration of the Licensing Bill, the House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform recommended that a mechanism be devised to enable Parliament to debate the Guidance which it is intended would be issued to licensing authorities under Clause 177 of the Licensing Bill. The Guidance is a crucial mechanism for enabling the Government to promote consistency and best practice and to respond to developments which may arise from time to time in connection with the sale of alcohol or the provision of regulated entertainment and late night refreshment. The Bill is scheduled to begin its Report Stage in the House of Lords on 24 February.

At Committee Stage in the House of Lords, the Government undertook to provide an opportunity for an early draft of the Guidance to be available in time for the Bill's Report Stage in the House of Lords. To meet our undertaking, I am today publishing a rough draft of the Guidance, which has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. This has involved advancing the timetable for producing the draft Guidance considerably and the production of a rough draft in quicker time than we would have preferred.

I wish to make it clear that the draft's current form is subject to change and further development following continuing consultation with stakeholders and other Government Departments and agencies; to take account of any further undertakings given by Ministers during the Bill's forthcoming Parliamentary stages; and of course, to reflect any amendments made to the Bill itself. There will also be a further opportunity for each House to debate the Guidance when it is in its completed form later this year.

The text of the Guidance document can also be found at: http://www.culture.gov.uk/new_responsibilities/guidance_section177_licensing.pdf

TREASURY

2001 Census

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): A report on the 2001 Census Key Statistics for Local Authorities for England and Wales is being laid before Parliament today. Copies are available in the Libraries of both Houses and are accessible on the National Statistics website.

The report will provide a compact and self-contained reference, providing key results covering a wide range of Census topics. Figures for local authority areas, presented generally as percentage distributions, can be readily compared with those for other areas and with the national averages.

The report comprises a set of 24 tables covering all 376 local authority districts in England and Wales, the 11 National Parks, the 40 shire and metropolitan counties, and the 9 Government Office Regions as well as comparable national figures for the UK, England and Wales, England, and Wales as appropriate.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

The Solicitor-General (Ms Harriet Harman): The Crown Prosecution Service Targets Delivery Report 2002–03 to 2005–06 has today been published and laid before Parliament. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Entitlement Cards and Identity Fraud

The Minister for Citizenship and Immigration (Beverley Hughes): The Information Commissioner has today published his response to the Government's consultation paper on Entitlement Cards and Identity Fraud and copies have been placed in the Library.

We particularly welcome and value the detailed and thorough response from the Information Commissioner which we will be studying carefully.

Police Performance Monitors

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): Next week I shall be publishing the first police performance monitors for individual forces in England and Wales. The monitors are intended to enable the performance of each force, over a series of indicators, to be compared with similar forces.

The publication of these monitors is the first stage in publishing accessible information on police performance. They will evolve to reflect the Policing Performance Assessment Framework (PPAF) currently under development. This is intended to capture the breadth and scope of police activity. The development of PPAF has the support of the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities.

The initial monitors omit some key areas of activity such as serious crime and some violent crime and so provide a limited basis on which to compare the overall performance of forces. Nonetheless, they represent a significant improvement in the accessibility of police performance data. They will enable the public to

compare the performance of their force with that of those forces most similar to it. The monitors cannot, however, be used to construct national league tables.

Home Office Targets Delivery

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): The Home Office Targets Delivery Report has been published today by Command of Her Majesty. Copies of the Report are available in the Vote Office and in the Library. The Report is also available online at http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm57/5754/5754.htm

The Report contains the Service Delivery Agreement for Spending Review 2002 (SR2002), which shows how the Home Office will deliver its new Public Service Agreement targets. The Report also reports the latest performance against the old, SR2000 targets, updating the description of performance which was provided in the Home Office Annual Report 2001–02.

Successful outcomes include a 27 per cent. fall in crime, as reported in the British Crime Survey, continued delivery of the pledge to deal swiftly with persistent young offenders, and achievement of interim targets for rapidity in considering initial claims for asylum. The Report highlights ways in which the Department will build upon these successes in order to underpin the prosperity of our country and the cohesiveness of our communities.

DEFENCE

Modified Sting Ray Lightweight Torpedo

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): A £441 million contract has been placed with BAE Systems Electronics Ltd, Underwater Systems Division, for the manufacture of the modified Sting Ray lightweight torpedo, which will enhance the capability provided by the existing weapon system. The in-service variant of Sting Ray has been the main antisubmarine weapon carried by our surface ships and aircraft since 1983. Whilst it continues to meet its design aims, the threat of a new generation of more advanced submarines, operating in both deep and coastal waters with ever more sophisticated counter-measures, requires an enhanced capability.

The modified Sting Ray torpedo will make best use of advancing technologies, and will significantly enhance the capability and maintainability of the weapon system. It will combine the essential attributes of high speed and manoeuvrability, deep diving, low radiated noise, advance computer based intelligence and high warhead lethality. It will provide the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force with the world's most advanced lightweight torpedo from its planned in service date of 2006.

The award of this contract to BAE Systems is excellent news for both our Armed Forces and the defence industry. It will sustain approximately 300 jobs across the UK. This is the culmination of work conducted by both the MOD and Industry, and is a good example of the principles of Smart Acquisition being put into practice to give our Armed Forces the equipment they need at an affordable price.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Cayman Islands: Constitutional Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Mike O'Brien): We invited representatives of both Government and Opposition parties in the Cayman Islands to informal talks in Lancaster House on 9–11 December to discuss the report of the Cayman Islands Constitutional Review Commission and associated documents. At the conclusion of that meeting, we undertook to prepare a revised draft Constitution for further public consultation and discussion in the Cayman Islands. This has now been done and papers forwarded to the Governor.

Copies of the proposed draft Constitution and related draft Orders in Council together with the text of the Governor's press release have been placed in the Library of the House.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police Oversight Commission

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): Under section 67(5) of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, the office of the Police Oversight Commissioner ceases to exist on 31 May 2003, unless before that date an order is made extending the period.

After discussion with the current Commissioner, Mr Tom Constantine, I am today announcing that I will bring forward an order to extend the period to 31 May 2005. I take this opportunity to pay sincere tribute to the tremendous commitment of Mr Tom Constantine, as the Oversight Commissioner, and his team. They have undoubtedly made a major contribution to the development of policing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Constantine has kindly agreed to extend his original three-year commitment until December 2003. Mr Constantine highlighted his continuing belief in the importance of the Northern Ireland policing reform to the peace process, and his willingness to continue the independent oversight reporting of progress to ensure a successful transition. However, after a 43-year career in law enforcement and a three-and-a-half year commitment to Northern Ireland, his family commitments will then take priority. I am delighted to announce that Mr Al Hutchinson, who is the present Chief of Staff for the Office of the Oversight Commissioner, will succeed Mr Constantine at that point.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Emergency Fire Cover

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): Intensive talks between the Fire Service employers and the Fire Brigades Union started on 12 February. The talks are expected to last for four weeks. The FBU announced on 4 February that its Executive Council has decided unanimously not to set any further strike dates at this stage.

In the light of these developments, I am pleased to announce that the Armed Forces personnel deployed on firefighting duties have been stood down for this period of intensive negotiations. At the end of negotiating period, military personnel will be put back on stand-by to provide emergency fire cover if necessary.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 3 February 2003

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Clergy Pensions

29. **Mr. Jack**: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the future pensions provision for clergy. [94819]

Mr. Bell: Last November the General Synod agreed a package of proposals relating to clergy stipends and pensions. These proposals had been put together in the light of six-month consultation with dioceses following publication in 2001 of a detailed review of clergy remuneration. The consultation resulted in overwhelming support for a continuation of a "defined benefits" pension scheme.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Electoral Data

Norman Baker: To ask the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission if he will make a statement on the methods by which the decision of an elector who has cast a vote can subsequently be identified. [94810]

Mr. Viggers: On this occasion, I have asked to reply as the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed is attending the funeral of Richard Wainright, our former Parliamentary colleague.

Ballot papers and counterfoils carry the same serial number, and the voter number is written on the counterfoil by the polling station clerk. Matching may be carried out in cases where allegations of fraud are made, but this is only done when ordered by an Election Court.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Olympic Games

12. **Huw Irranca-Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what evaluation she has made of the impact of a UK Olympic bid on sport. [94802]

Tessa Jowell: I have evaluated the sporting impact of a bid to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in terms of facilities, elite success and participation.

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what her Department's latest estimate is of the likely cost of a successful London Olympic bid; what her Department's assessment is of the likely cost to the Government of a successful London bid; what impact she estimates a successful bid would have on the funding of sport in the other English regions; and if her Department will carry out an assessment of the benefits of funding a successful bid against other options which promote sport throughout all regions. [88733]

Tessa Jowell: The Government's estimate of the likely cost of staging the Olympic Games is £4.67 billion in forecast outturn prices. Taking account of likely revenues the games might require a public subsidy of £2.6 billion. These estimates are based on the figures provided by Arup Consultants in their report on the cost and benefits of a London 2012 Olympics, the outcome of consultations with key stakeholders, Government Departments and those who would be responsible for delivery of the games, and an assessment of the uncertainty and risk associated with hosting the games. The cost of mounting a bid is estimated at £17 million in forecast outturn prices.

We are also currently considering with the Mayor of London how the games would be funded if a decision is taken in favour of a bid.

This work is part of Government's continuing consideration of whether to support a bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games in London. Within this context I am determined that were Government to support a London bid then grassroots sport, especially in the regions, should not suffer from any diversion of resources.

Public Libraries

13. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many public libraries have been put online. [94803]

Mr. Caborn: The £100 million lottery funded people's network programme has enabled 4,085 libraries in the UK to be connected to the internet, including all the libraries in the London Borough of Brent. This represents 99 per cent. of libraries in England, 95 per cent. in Scotland and 100 per cent. in Wales and Northern Ireland. Only 39 English and 30 Scottish libraries have still to be connected, and we expect all but two of these to be online by summer 2003. This is a very significant achievement.

BBC Charter

14. **Mr. Streeter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she last met the Chairman of the BBC to discuss the provisions of the BBC Charter relating to TV advertising. [94804]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets the Chairman of the BBC to discuss a range of issues. However, there has been no discussion of this particular issue.

Concessionary Television Licence (Sheltered Housing)

15. **Mr. Burstow**: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she will introduce regulations to amend the concessionary TV licence scheme for sheltered housing. [94805]

Dr. Howells: We hope to be able to bring forward amending regulations before the end of the current financial year, to introduce preserved rights to the Accommodation for Residential Care concession in cases where the social mix or the level of warden provision change.

Press Complaints Commission

16. **Mr. Soley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has had with the Press Complaints Commission on standards in the press. [94806]

Dr. Howells: I have not met the Press Complaints Commission recently but my Department continues to monitor closely the effectiveness of the newspaper industry's self regulatory system. I would have no hesitation in suggesting improvement as and when appropriate.

Lottery Funding (West Chelmsford)

17. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money was made available to good causes in the West Chelmsford constituency for the latest available period. [94807]

Mr. Caborn: According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the National Lottery awards database, £15,682,836 of Lottery funding has been awarded to West Chelmsford by 31 December 2002.

Performance Licensing (Village Halls and Churches)

18. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on her policy on the licensing of performances in *(a)* village halls and *(b)* churches. [94808]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a statement to the House earlier today setting out the conclusions of our consideration of the provision of entertainment and entertainment facilities in places of religious worship and village halls under the Licensing Bill. The Government have now tabled an amendment to the Bill that would exempt secular entertainment provided in places of public religious worship and the provision of entertainment facilities in such places from the need to obtain a licence under the Bill when it is enacted. Music for the purposes of or incidental to a religious service or meeting will remain exempt.

We have also made clear our intention to exempt church halls, chapel halls or other similar buildings occupied in connection with a place of public religious worship, and village halls, parish or community halls or other similar buildings from the fees associated with the provision of entertainment facilities under the licensing regime.

Coronation Anniversary

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has for a national celebration of the 50th anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen's Coronation; and what discussions she has had with Buckingham Palace about a celebration. [94205]

Tessa Jowell: It was agreed with Buckingham Palace that the 50th anniversary of the Queen's accession to the throne would be celebrated during 2002 and that the focal point of the celebrations would be the "Jubilee weekend" in June. The details were announced by the Prime Minister on 23 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W, and 22 June 2001, *Official Report*, columns 7–8W.

Any events to mark the 50th anniversary of Coronation will be arranged as part of the Queen's normal programme of engagements by Buckingham Palace rather than in co-ordination with my officials in the Golden Jubilee Office who were solely concerned with the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Queen's accession last year.

Local Arts Strategies

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the measures her Department takes to assist the development of local arts strategies. [94791]

Mr. Caborn: As part of the Government's package of freedoms and flexibilities for local government, local cultural strategies are to be included within local authorities' community strategies.

Renewable Energy (Northern Ireland)

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money the national lottery has given to renewable energy projects in Northern Ireland in each of the last four years. [95001]

Mr. Caborn: In January this year one project in Northern Ireland, the Fermanagh Business Initiative-Biomass for Sustainable Development, received £105,520 from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) under the small-scale biomass heating schemes strand of NOF's transforming communities initiative. No applications have been received from Northern Ireland for the large-scale (£33 million) strand. The deadline for applications for funding for offshore wind projects is July 2003.

There has been no previous lottery funding for renewable energy, either from the New Opportunities Fund or other distributors. There are, therefore, no figures for previous years.

CABINET OFFICE

Delivery Unit

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many people have been employed by the Delivery Unit in each year since its inception; [94328]

(2) what the cost has been of the relocation of the Delivery Unit to the Treasury; [94329]

(3) how many staff from his Department worked for the Delivery Unit in each year since the Unit's inception. [94330]

Mr. Alexander: The Delivery Unit remains part of the Cabinet Office. There were 19 full-time equivalent staff on 1 January 2002 and 34 on 1 January 2003. It will be relocating to the Treasury building in Horse Guards Road.

Gateway Review

Mr. Allan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many information technology projects have been through the Office of Government Commerce Gateway Review process. [94311]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

The gateway process categorises projects as "IT-enabled business change" where the business benefits are dependant upon IT. More significantly, such a categorisation requires projects to demonstrate real changes to the way the client organisation works, its skills, organisation structure and its business process re-engineering. 179 such procurement projects have been reviewed by the Gateway process teams.

Local Councillors (Ethical Framework)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many town, parish and community councillors have resigned or retired citing the effect of the new ethical framework; how many have refused to sign their code of conduct; and if he will make a statement. [94872]

Mr. Leslie: There is no requirement for local authority members to inform us of resignations, for whatever reason, or refusals to sign the code of conduct. However, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Standards Board for England together have been informed of 95 resignations by Parish Councillors who were unwilling to accept the code of conduct, out of an estimated total of some 70,000 parish and town councillors across England.

Ombudsmen Staff

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many *(a)* full time and *(b)* part time staff have (i) left and (ii) been recruited to the (A) Office of the Health Service Ombudsman, (B) Office of the Legal Service Ombudsman and (C) Office of the Financial Ombudsman Service in each year since 1990. [92787]

Mr. Alexander: The Health Service Ombudsman, the Legal Services Ombudsman, and the Financial Ombudsman Service all operate independently of Government under powers set out in their respective governing statutes, including powers to appoint staff. Aggregate information about staffing is published in the annual reports of the Ombudsman concerned. Copies of annual reports are available in the Libraries of the House. Information about staffing at the level of detail requested should be obtained directly from the relevant Ombudsman's office.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH

Alcoholic Beverages

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the estimated value is of central Government's stock of alcoholic beverages; how many bottles of *(a)* wine, *(b)* beer, *(c)* spirits and *(d)* other alcoholic beverages are held in the Government reserves for entertainment and other purposes; and if he will make a statement. [92222]

Mr. Rammell: The Government Wine Cellar is administered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and managed by Government Hospitality on behalf of all Government Departments. The cellar contains a mixture of fine wines, beverage wines and spirits and liqueurs. Stock levels vary but generally the cellar contains approximately 37,000 bottles, the majority of which are wine. The value of the stock is subjective and bears no relation to the purchase cost. Fine wines are bought young and then stored until ready for use, enabling wines of good age and excellent value to be used by the Government for its hospitality needs. The current value of the stock is estimated to be in the region of £1.5 million.

Croatia

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the Government has had in the past three months with *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* European partners on Croatia's progress towards membership of the European Union. [95342]

Mr. MacShane: The UK reviews regularly at working level, with both the European Commission and our EU partners, the progress with EU integration of all Western Balkan countries, including Croatia. There has been no specific discussion at Ministerial level of Croatia's progress towards EU membership. Although the issue of Croatia's EU application and the need to comply fully with ICTY obligations have been raised in bi-lateral discussions with EU officials and partner nations.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Croatia's readiness for EU membership, with particular reference to Croatia's co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. [95343]

Mr. MacShane: The Feira European Council in June 2000 gave Croatia, along with the other countries of the Western Balkans, the firm prospect of eventual EU membership if they meet the accession criteria. We understand that Croatia intends to submit an application for membership in the coming weeks. When it does so, the Council will ask the Commission to prepare an Opinion on Croatia's readiness to open accession negotiations. Particular attention will be given to the extent to which Croatia meets the Copenhagen political criteria. These relate to the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. Co-operation with ICTY will be an important issue that the Commission will examine in

this context. The UK, like other member states, will wait for the Commission to issue its Opinion before reaching a judgment.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has received further information from the UN Security Council with respect to the allegations set out in the Panel of Experts Report on the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and if he will make a statement. [95089]

Mr. Rammell: We asked for further information from the UN Expert Panel in November 2002. The Panel was unable to re-start work until it had been granted a new mandate. This was given by UN Security Council Resolution 1457, agreed on 24 January. We will continue to press for an early response.

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has made representations to the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo about the skinning alive of cats to make fur toys. [93579]

Mr. Rammell: The FCO is unaware of the background to this question and has not raised this issue with the Government of the DRC.

Equatorial Guinea

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the opportunities for British business in Equatorial Guinea; and what steps are being taken to ensure that British diplomatic representation reflects that level of opportunity. [92623]

Mr. Rammell: The British Government is aware of the increased opportunities for British business in Equatorial Guinea, in particular in the oil and gas sector. Trade Partners UK has recently appointed a consultant in Equatorial Guinea for six months, to identify opportunities and inform UK industry. We will consider the case for permanent representation depending on the outcome of the consultancy and resources available. The UK is officially represented in Equatorial Guinea through its diplomatic mission in Yaounde, Cameroon.

EU Enlargement

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if those countries due to accede to the EU in 2004 will have the same rights as the current member states at the next IGC; and if he will make a statement. [95341]

Mr. MacShane: In Declaration 23 on the Future of the Union attached to the Treaty of Nice, European leaders agreed that,

"those candidates which have concluded accession negotiations with the Union will be invited to participate in the Conference. Those candidate States which have not concluded their accession negotiations will be invited as observers."

We strongly believe that the EU should not agree a new Treaty at the next IGC without the full involvement of those countries due to accede in 2004.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy statement on Revitalising Health and Safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards. [89493]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The FCO's Departmental Report for 2002–03 summarises where the FCO currently stands regarding health and safety in its UK offices and outlines targets for implementing a standard health and safety management system in its overseas posts.

Israel

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to Israel to ensure that goods produced in Israeli settlements are not imported to the EU under the preference terms of the EU-Israel Association Agreement; what assessment he has made of the level of cooperation shown by Israel in responding to these representations; and what the results of these representations have been. [94742]

Mr. MacShane: At the EU-Israel Association Council meeting on 21 October 2002, the UK joined with other Member States in stressing the importance of the correct application of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and welcomed an offer by Israel to make proposals on the issue of goods from settlements in the Occupied Territories. We continue to raise this issue in bilateral contacts with Israel.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations Her Majesty's Government has made to the French Government and to President Chirac regarding Robert Mugabe's possible visit to a Franco-African summit in Paris; and if he will make a statement; [94905]

(2) what the policy is of Her Majesty's Government with regard to the attendance by Robert Mugabe at a Franco-African summit in Paris to be held on the 19th February; and if he will make a statement. [94906]

Mr. Straw: We would not invite Robert Mugabe to an equivalent Summit in the UK. But the France/Africa Summit lakes place in Paris on 20–21 February, two days after the current EU sanctions on Zimbabwe are due to expire. Our priority is to ensure a rollover of those sanctions. The rollover requires the unanimous agreement of all 15 EU member Slates. This has not yet been achieved, but is the subject of intensive discussions, most recently at the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 27 January and at a meeting of Permanent Representatives to the EU on 30 January.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions have taken place with members of the Commonwealth over the situation in Zimbabwe. [93382]

Mr. Rammell: We are in regular contact with fellow members of the Commonwealth and with the Commonwealth Secretariat about the situation in Zimbabwe. The Minister for Africa, my noble Friend Baroness Amos, discussed Zimbabwe with a number of Commonwealth Ministers at the EU/Southern African Development Community meeting in Maputo from 7 to 8 November 2002, and the Africa/Europe Ministerial in Ouagadougou on 28 November 2002. Baroness Amos also raises Zimbabwe regularly in her bilateral contacts with Commonwealth Partners.

Saudi Arabia

Dr. Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the Government have received official documentation on the charges, evidence, transcript of the trial and sentence of Sandy Mitchell, Les Walker, James Lee and James Cottel detained in Saudi Arabia. [93702]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The details of individual consular cases are confidential. The British men detained in Saudi Arabia have legal representation and discuss their cases with their lawyers. We are in close contact with the men's lawyers and we keep the families informed of developments in the case. It has been the wish of the men themselves, and the majority of the families, that we do not discuss the cases in detail in public.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his Department's latest evaluation is of the stability of Sierra Leone; and what progress has been made since British intervention. [93615]

Mr. Rammell: We have made a significant political and military investment in restoring peace to Sierra Leone. Good progress has been made since peace was declared a year ago. Over 50,000 combatants were disarmed and almost 39,000 have undergone reintegration. Peaceful and credible elections were held in May 2002. UNAMSIL, the UN peacekeeping mission, began a gradual withdrawal in November 2002. The UK continues to play a major role in post-conflict rebuilding. We have helped to re-equip, assist and advise the Sierra Leone Police (SLP). Through the International Military and Advisory Training Team (IMATT) the UK leads the training and reform of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF). In November 2002, we confirmed a 10-year programme of support to reform in Sierra Leone.

However, the situation is still fragile and much remains to be done to secure a sustainable peace. Recent events in Sierra Leone, including a raid on a military barracks in Freetown, are of concern. The RSLAF, supported by UNAMSIL and the SLP, responded well to the incident and the SLP have made a sizeable number of arrests. Regional instability, especially the continuing conflicts in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire, remains a threat to peace in Sierra Leone. We are actively involved in international efforts to resolve these conflicts.

Strategic Exports Report

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the next Annual Report on Strategic Exports will be published. [93144]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A precise date for publication of the 2002 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls has not yet been determined. However, the Government expect to publish the report before the end of July 2003.

Terrorism

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the basis was for his assertion in his statement on terrorism on 21 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 176, that the nerve gas found recently in the United Kingdom could not have been produced by terrorists alone. [93896]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was, of course, referring to the recent discovery of ricin in Wood Green. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary wrote recently to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) to clarify that and placed a copy of his letter in the Library.

North Africa

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the effect on the UK of terrorism in North Africa and the measures he is taking to combat this. [94247]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have been working closely with our European partners and North African countries to take effective action against individuals who represent a threat to national security.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Business Improvement Districts

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what discussions his Department has had with representatives of small businesses on the creation of business improvement districts. [94400]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible for policy on Business Improvement Districts which was first set the in our White Paper "Strong Local Leadership—Quality Public Services" in December 2001. The legislation to introduce Business Improvement Districts is contained in the Local Government Bill.

We published on 21 January draft guidance on Business Improvement Districts, which is available on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister website. This draft guidance is intended to give advice to those wishing to set up a Business Improvement District as well as acting as an introduction to the draft legislation. It was drafted with the close involvement of business and local government organisations. The Federation of Private Business, the Small Business Bureau and DTI's Small Business Service were closely involved in this

process. Details of those organisations who contributed to the draft guidance are given at the front of that document.

The publication of the draft guidance provides a further opportunity for small business groups and other interested parties to comment on the development of this innovative policy at an early stage. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister intends to consult formally on the draft guidance in the spring.

Climate Change

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the *(a)* schemes and *(b)* bodies to which his Department contributes funding that are concerned with climate change. [90420]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned last year an internal study of the implications of climate change on its policies and funded schemes and bodies. This study forms part of a cross-Government process to examine the consequences of climate change across a range of Government Departments. A report of the study is expected to be produced during summer 2003.

Deprivation

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the claim in the recent Greater London Enterprise report, Developing new approaches to the measurement of deprivation, as to the amount of money that London has lost in Neighbourhood Renewal Funding as a result of the changes to deprivation ranking. [94524]

Mrs. Roche: Neighbourhood Renewal Funding is allocated using the Indices of Deprivation 2000 (ID 2000). In moving to a new instrument the Government recognised that some authorities that would have benefited on the old basis for allocations would not have done so under the new one. Transitional arrangements were therefore set up to make allowance for authorities that had been among the most deprived areas on the old index and are not among the most deprived areas on the ID 2000. Four London Authorities are now in receipt of transitional protection.

Green Belt

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to give further protection to the green belt against developers purchasing agricultural land and selling it on in plots without planning permission; and if he will make a statement. [95128]

Mr. McNulty: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 789W.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if his Department will revise the 6 per cent. reduction in the Government's social services formula for the London Borough of Brent. [94633]

Mr. Raynsford: The figures the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published for consultation show Brent's Formula Spending Share for social services for 2003–04 increasing by 5.1 per cent. over the comparable figure for 2002–03. This is above the average for all outer London boroughs. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will publish the Government's final proposals for the 2003–04 local government finance settlement on 3 February, and will then be debated in the House on 5 February. In reaching our conclusions we have very carefully considered all the representations made to us during the consultation period, including those from the London Borough of Brent.

New Developments (Thames Gateway)

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport with regard to planned developments in the Thames Gateway. [94218]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has met the Secretary of State for Transport on a number of occasions to discuss a wide range of issues of common interest.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* executive agencies affiliated to his Department are responsible for providing advice or services in London, indicating in each case the (i) overall budget and (ii) estimated running costs for each year from 1996–97 to 2002–03; [91633]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* executive agencies affiliated to his Department, broken down by region, indicating in each case the (i) overall budget and (ii) estimated running costs in each year from 1996–97 to 2002–03. [91634]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible for sponsoring six executive non-departmental public bodies who either operate solely in, or have headquarters in, London. These are the Audit Commission, English Partnerships, the Housing Corporation, the Standards Board for England, Stonebridge Housing Action Trust and Tower Hamlets Housing Action Trust. In addition, Castle Vale Housing Action Trust operates solely in the West Midlands and Liverpool Housing Action Trust operates solely in the North West.

There are five executive agencies which are the responsibility of Ministers within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre operates solely in London. The Rent Service has their headquarters in London and has a network of offices throughout England. The Fire Service College is based in the South West and the Planning Inspectorate's headquarters are also in this region. The Ordnance Survey's headquarters are in the South East.

All these non-departmental public bodies and agencies publish annual reports and accounts, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Pathfinder Report

Mr. Watts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister who commissioned the Pathways reports; for what reason the Government commissioned the Pathways review; when he expects to publish its findings; how the draft Pathways recommendations differ from the Bain report's findings; and if he will place a copy of the draft Pathways report in the Library. [93418]

Mr. Raynsford: I assume that my hon. friend is referring to the report of the Fire Cover Review Task Group of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC), also known as the Pathfinder report.

The report was commissioned by the Council in order to assess the practical issues that would have to be addressed if risk-based fire cover were introduced, as had been recommended by the Audit Commission in its report In the Line of Fire (1995).

The Pathfinder report was placed in the Library of the House and was also published on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister web site on 23 December 2002.

The report made general recommendations about the implementation of Fire Service Emergency Cover and the way forward, including ways in which some of its numerical findings could be made more accurate. None of the quantitative findings reported in the Pathfinder report were endorsed by the Fire Cover Review Task Group. They recommended that the calculations which these findings were based on should be improved in various ways to make them more reliable. Bearing this in mind the Pathfinder recommendations are not at variance with those of Sir George Bain's Independent Review of the Fire Service.

The Fire Cover Review Task Group's report suggests that substantial improvements in Fire Service efficiency and effectiveness are achievable, especially if greater attention is given to fire prevention. Sir George Bain's report endorsed these findings.

Pensioners (Free Travel)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make resources available for local authorities to introduce free travel for pensioners on public transport. [94870]

Mr. Jamieson: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to my reply of 23 January 2003 to the hon. Member for Romford (Mr. Rosindell) *Official Report*, columns 508–09W.

School Uniforms (Clothing Grants)

Ian Lucas: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which local authorities pay a clothing grant to low-income families to assist in the purchase of school uniform. [94784]

Mr. Miliband: I have been asked to reply.

The Department for Education and Skills does not collect data on the number of local authorities that currently provide clothing grants to assist in the purchase of school uniform.

South West Region

Mr. Flook: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many people are employed by the *(a)* South West Regional Development Agency, *(b)* Government Office for South West and *(c)* South West Regional Assembly. [92181]

Mr. Leslie: There are currently 214 staff in the South West Regional Development Agency, 327 in the Government Office for the South West and 50 in the South West Regional Assembly.

Mr. Flook: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what has been the annual budget of the *(a)* South West Regional Development Agency, *(b)* Government Office for South West and *(c)* South West Regional Assembly since their inception. [92182]

Mr. Leslie: The annual budgets, since inception, are tabled:

South West Regional Development Agency:

£ million

Year	*Budget*
1999–2000	62
2000–01	93
2001–02	114
2002–03	[1]119

[1] Estimate

Government office for the south West:

Year	*Budget*
1996–97	7,138,000
1997–98	6,896,241
1998–99	7,006,070
1999–2000	7,864,940
2000–01	8,711,897
2001–02	10,755,110
2002–03	11,854,390

The information for 94–95 (first year of the GO) or 95–96 is not available. The figure for 02–03 is the current figure and may change.

South West Regional Assembly:

Year	*Budget*
2000–01	567,574
2001–02	1,056,378
2002–03	1,534,910

PRIME MINISTER

Downing Street

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister how much has been allocated in *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* 2003–04 for (i) improvements to and (ii) maintenance of Downing Street. [95026]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Refurbishment and maintenance across numbers 10, 11 and 12 Downing Street is part of a continuing programme of work. The buildings are maintained to

standards appropriate to their listed status in consultation with English Heritage and other experts as appropriate. The buildings also fulfil an important representational role.

For the financial year 2002–03, the Cabinet Office Resource Account is still at the estimate stage and will require final adjustments and audit after the end of the financial year. Estimates for the financial year 2003–04 have not yet been agreed.

Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how much money has been lost by his Departments and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft in each year since 1996–97. [92425]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 31 January 2003, *Official Report*.

Higher Education

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with the Secretary of State for Wales and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on higher education funding in advance of the announcement on 22 January 2003. [95228]

The Prime Minister: I have regular meetings with ministerial colleagues and others on a wide range of subjects, and will continue to do so. As with previous Governments, it is not my practice to provide details of confidential discussions, under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Human Rights Act

Paul Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister what recent assessment he has made of the effects of the Human Rights Act 1998; and if he will make a statement. [94706]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor recently delivered a lecture at Durham University containing an assessment of the Act since its introduction. A copy has been placed in the Library today.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received since October 2002 against war with Iraq; and from which organisations and individuals. [93893]

The Prime Minister: To date I have received nearly 30,000 letters and cards about the subject of Iraq. Given the volume of correspondence I receive, over one million letters in the last year covering a broad spectrum of issues, my office records the numbers of letters received on a subject rather than by the view expressed. However, I know that many people have written to me expressing concerns about action against Iraq and I reiterate what I have said that no decision has been made to take military action and military action is not inevitable. My office works hard to ensure that all the letters receive appropriate responses.

Lord Birt

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister whether Lord Birt has completed his work as unpaid strategy adviser. [94965]

The Prime Minister: No.

Minister without Portfolio

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set out the responsibilities of the Minister without Portfolio in respect of *(a)* freedom of information and *(b)* the European Convention on Human Rights. [94769]

The Prime Minister: The Lord Chancellor is the Minister with responsibility for freedom of information and the European Convention on Human Rights. The Minister without Portfolio is a member of the Ministerial Committees on Freedom of Information and the Incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights, both of which the Lord Chancellor chairs.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Prime Minister what the policy of the Government is on responding to requests for meetings from right hon. and honourable Members. [95047]

The Prime Minister: It is for individual Ministers to decide on requests for meetings taking account of the requirements of the Ministerial Code.

Official Business

Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister how many nights in 2002 he spent in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* overseas, on official business; and of those in the UK how many were at (i) Downing Street, (ii) Chequers, (iii) in the Sedgefield constituency and (iv) elsewhere. [95146]

The Prime Minister: This information is not held in the format requested. The majority of my time is spent in Downing Street and I regularly spend time in Chequers and my constituency.

A detailed list of Cabinet Ministers' visits overseas, for the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 was published on 24 July 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1374–75W. A list of Ministers' visits overseas for 2002–2003 will be published as soon as possible after the end of the current financial year.

For details of visits in the UK, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) on 7 November 2002, *Official Report*, columns 441–43W.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in theMinisterial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Overseas Private Visits

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Prime Minister which elements of the costs of private visits made overseas by the Prime Minister are met by *(a)* the Government and *(b)* himself. [94105]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 29 January 2003]*: The only cost that falls to Government in respect of private visits overseas made by me is the cost of essential security and communications staff.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Prime Minister who the suppliers are of his office's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91905]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to her by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 439W.

Special Advisers and Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92420]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 31 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 1056–57W.

The total cost of running the No. 10 press office was as follows:

	£
1996–97	597,240
1997–98	664,197
1998–99	740,793
1999–2000	784,903
2000–01	954,659
2001–02	1,152,436

Information prior to 1996–97 is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The increase reflects the ever increasing media demands with the advent of more outlets, 24 hour news and growth of the internet, for example.

For the number of press officers, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on 22 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 469W, and the answer I gave the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 11W.

Statute of Westminster

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister if he will invite heads of Governments of the appropriate Commonwealth countries to Westminster to review the Statute of Westminster 1931, in relation to the law relating to the Monarchy succession. [94699]

The Prime Minister: No.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 318W, on weapons of mass destruction, when such assistance has been made available; and if he will describe the type of information provided in each case. [95002]

The Prime Minister: I have nothing to add to my previous answer. I do not give information on intelligence matters, under exemption 1*(a)* of Part 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Accommodation

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what studies she has conducted on the relative cost effectiveness of renting versus purchasing accommodation for her Department in countries in which it operates; and if she will make a statement. [95242]

Clare Short: DFID undertakes a full financial and economic evaluation and risk analysis of options for any new overseas office. A full review is also undertaken when existing leases are approaching the end of their term. Following this analysis, we choose the option that offers the best value for money, taking account of the manageability of risks.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will estimate the cancellation cost of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries' debts to the UK. [95270]

Clare Short: The estimated cost of the cancellation of debts by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs) to the UK is £1.9 billion. This represents the cost of cancelling HIPC countries' debts to Export Credit Guarantee Department, which are covered by the UK's 100 per cent. bilateral forgiveness policy. All aid debts have already been cancelled.

Malawi

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the belief in and fear of supernatural phenomena in southern Malawi; what assessment her Department has made of the impact the resulting violence toward strangers could have on the distribution of food aid; what meetings *(a)* she and *(b)* representatives from her Department have had with the aid agencies that (i) are delivering aid to Malawi and (ii) are planning to deliver aid to Malawi; whether this matter was raised in the meetings; and if she will make a statement. [94263]

Clare Short: DFID officials in Lilongwe participate in regular meetings with representatives of all partners involved in the international and local response to Malawi's food crisis. Belief in witchcraft is still widespread in rural Malawi. However, no evidence of violence towards strangers or disruption of food distribution, resulting from belief in—and fear of—supernatural phenomena in Southern Malawi, has been reported or discussed at such meetings.

Plan Pueblo Panama

Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what projects are being

funded in the Plan Puebla Panama by her Department; what support she has given the Plan Puebla Panama within the World Bank; and what protection her Department is seeking for the rights of indigenous people. [95245]

Clare Short: DFID is not directly involved in supporting the plan. Any support from the World Bank to the plan would need to take account of the environmental and social safeguards associated with its lending programme, including the issue of indigenous people's rights.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Solar Energy Programme

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many solar PV roofs had been delivered by the end of December 2002 by the United Kingdom solar programme; and if she will make a statement. [95039]

Mr. Wilson: The total number of roofs installed under Stream 1 of the first phase of the major PV demonstration programme by the end of December 2002 was 37.

Structural Funds

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what effect she expects the redefinition of what constitutes an island by statisticians working for the European Commission to have on the structural funding received by regions in the United Kingdom; and if she will make a statement. [94475]

Alan Johnson: I am unaware of any plans by the European Commission to change their definition of an island. However, any changes to this definition would not affect current Structural Fund programmes, which are fixed until 2006. It is too soon to say whether any changes to the definition would have an effect on the UK after 2006.

Wind Power

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the value of Government spending is on the development of wind power in England and Wales. [95250]

Mr. Wilson: Government expenditure on research and development projects related to wind power in 2001–2 was £2.2 million.

The DTI and the New Opportunities Fund have set up a programme of capital grants towards the setting up of offshore wind farms with a total budget of £74 million. Grants of £20 million from this have so far been announced.

The financial incentive for wind power and other forms of renewable energy provided through the Renewables Obligation is funded by the electricity consumer rather than by Government.

ACARE Strategic Research Agenda

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if the Government will implement the programmes recommended by the Advisory Council for Aeronautical Research in Europe to meet the environmental targets set out in ACARE's Strategic Research Agenda; [95199]

(2) what assessment she has made of the environmental conclusions, targets and programmes set out in the Advisory Council for Aeronautical Research in Europe's Strategic Research Agenda. [95198]

Alan Johnson: The Department has been fully engaged in all aspects of the Advisory Council for Aeronautics Research in Europe's Strategic Research Agenda. The conclusions and targets in the Challenge on Environment are extremely ambitious and demanding and will require major breakthroughs in technology. The DTI has been sponsoring studies in this area as part of the industry's Greener by Design initiative. The targets set for environmental work in the DTI Aeronautics Research Programme are in line with the priorities in the environmental targets in the Strategic Research Agenda and the DTI has programmes underway and in prospect with industry on a range of aerospace environmental technology issues. There are also trans-European programmes on aviation environment issues funded by the European Commission's Framework Programmes with UK participation. Aerospace environmental issues have been recognised fully by the Aerospace Innovation and Growth Team in its Interim Report.

Animal Cloning

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her policy is on the retail sale of products derived from cloned animals. [94986]

Alan Johnson: Products produced from cloned animals would fall within the scope of the EC Novel Foods Regulation (EC 258/97).

The Food Standards Agency is the Competent Authority for this regulation and has policy responsibility for food safety, including GM foods, and reports to Government through Health Ministers.

British Energy

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what she estimates the total extra cost will be for each year from 2003 to 2033 arising from the provisions in the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. [95024]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The Bill is an enabling measure which will help Government secure its objectives whether or not British Energy deliver their restructuring plan. It does not of itself require expenditure to be incurred.

Broadband (Rural Areas)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what initiatives her Department has undertaken to encourage broadband Internet access in rural areas. [94308]

Mr. Timms: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) on 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 589W.

Broadcasting Regulations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason there are different regulations for images accessed *(a)* through a television broadcast and *(b)* through a broadband internet connection. [94931]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* There is no statutory regulator of the internet to which the general law applies. There is greater regulation of television broadcasting because it is a different medium with different characteristics and different audience expectations.

Coal-fired Energy Generation

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what account she has taken in reviewing the Government's long-term energy proposals of the need for coal-fired generation as an effective contribution to UK energy production. [94295]

Mr. Wilson: The Government is currently carrying out a review of future energy policy with a view to issuing a White Paper shortly. The review includes consideration of coal-fired generation and its contribution to UK energy production.

Consumer Affairs Council

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the agenda is for discussion for the next meeting of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council on 28 February. [93400]

Alan Johnson: The meeting of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council scheduled for 28 February 2003, is no longer taking place. The next meeting is on 6 March 2003; the agenda has not been confirmed.

Electricity Industry

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to her answer of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 367W, on the electricity industry, why Modification P95A to the Balancing and Settlement Code was rejected; and if she will make a statement. [94527]

Mr. Wilson: Modification P95A to the Balancing and Settlement Code (BSC) was rejected by the BSC Panel on 16 January 2003. The panel's recommendation has now gone to the authority (Ofgem), who will make a final decision on their implementation on the basis of the BSC Objectives and their wider statutory obligations.

The reasons for the panel's rejection are explained in full in the Final Modification Report: Modification Proposal P95—Transitional Amelioration of Barriers to Licence Exempt Generators' Market Participation, prepared by Elexon on behalf of the BSC Panel, January 2003. This document is publicly available on the Elexon website at http://www.elexon.co.uk/ta/modifications/mods—docs.html.

Correspondence

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Leominster of 12 November 2002, on behalf of Mr. Andrew Stobart, concerning electricity supply security. [95214]

Mr. Wilson: A response was sent to this letter on 25 January 2003.

Mains Gas Network

Matthew Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many homes in mainland Britain cannot have access to the national mains gas network; and what percentage of the population this represents. [94947]

Mr. Wilson: Approximately 4.5 million households in Great Britain, about 20 per cent. of the total, do not have, or take advantage of, a connection to the mains gas network.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of the total expenditure by her Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92470]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

New Nuclear Technologies

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make it her policy to refuse licences for new nuclear technologies. [95027]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* No.

Power Plants (Desulphurisation Technology)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to support flue gas desulphurisation technology in power plants. [94293]

Mr. Wilson: There are currently no plans to support flue gas desulphurisation technology in power plants.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she has taken to encourage coal burn in power plants equipped with sulphur dioxide abatement equipment. [94294]

Mr. Wilson: Sulphur dioxide emissions from coal-fired power generators are controlled through limits placed on the amount which can be released. The Environment Agency encourages generators to construct new flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) equipment by allowing coal-fired generators, building a new FGD plant, an increase in their limit.

These increases are allowed for the two years in which the FGD is under construction. This provides the operator the opportunity to increase the utilisation of his plant in that period.

The agency encourages more intensive use of FGD once constructed. Where a generator takes all practicable steps to ensure that the operating load factor of its FGD units is at least twice the factor for unabated units, the agency will grant an increase in their limit.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when *(a)* the Export Credits Guarantee Department's and *(b)* British Trade International's service delivery agreements for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94115]

Ms Hewitt: The Export Credits Guarantee Department produces a service delivery agreement (SDA) for each year, rather than for the period 2003–06. Its SDA for 2002–03 is currently available on its website and it expects to publish its SDA for 2003–04 in April 2003.

British Trade International's SDA is being finalised and will be published on its website shortly.

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when her Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94117]

Ms Hewitt: We are currently finalising the DTI's service delivery agreement for April 2003 to March 2006. I expect it to be published on the Department's website within the next month.

Steel Production

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate she has made of the level of production of steel in the UK in each year since 1997. [94128]

Alan Johnson: The information requested is as follows.

Crude Steel Production in the United Kingdom

Thousand tonnes

Year	*Crude Steel Production*
1997	18,501
1998	17,315
1999	16,298
2000	15,155
2001	13,543
2002	11,668

Source:
Iron and Steel Statistics Bureau

Wind Energy

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what studies the Government have made into the savings in greenhouse gases in respect of wind energy produced by onshore wind turbines. [94378]

Mr. Wilson: The Government's Inter-departmental Analysts Group, comprising officials from DTI, DEFRA, the former DTLR, Treasury and the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) of the Cabinet Office published in February 2002 the report "Long-Term Reductions in Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the UK". (The report is available at http://www.dti.gov.uk/energy/greenhousegas/index.shtinL). The report assessed the potential carbon savings from onshore wind in 2025 and 2050. The PIU Energy Review (http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2002/energy/report/index.htm) also assessed the potential carbon savings for onshore wind in 2020 and 2050.

We are taking forward the work of the Inter-departmental Analysts Group and the PIU Energy Review, as part of the analysis for the forthcoming Energy White Paper, which will be published shortly.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Departmental Budget

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list her Departmental budget for each year since its creation. [93676]

Alun Michael: The information requested is as follows:

2001–02: £2,959,389,000

2002–03: £2,458,720,000

The figure for 2001–02 was higher than the figure for 2002–03 because of the high level of expenditure on foot and mouth disease.

Farmers (North West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what financial support and assistance she is able to provide to farmers in the North West; and what grants are available for farmers in the North West for diversification. [94862]

Alun Michael: In addition to the support provided by the Common Agricultural Policy production-based subsidies, £1.6 billion has been made available to farmers and the rural community through the 10 schemes which make up the seven year England Rural Development Programme launched in 2000.

A wide range of assistance is available, including financial incentives for managing and enhancing the environment, support for the production of organic and energy crops, and funding skills training for farmers.

Defra actively encourages farmers to widen their business base in order to develop new sources of income. The Rural Enterprise Scheme and Processing and Marketing Grant provides financial assistance for farmers seeking to pursue good quality, sustainable farm diversification projects, in addition to other broader farm-based and rural community activities.

From September 2001 the Department has also offered assistance in the form of free planning consultancy advice to farmers who intend to pursue a viable diversification project through the Rural Enterprise Scheme.

The support provided to farmers in the North West mirrors that provided elsewhere in England.

Flood Defences

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action her Department is taking on producing flood plain maps that take into consideration existing and planned flood defences. [94299]

Mr. Morley: The Department is fully aware that current indicative flood plain maps provided by the Environment Agency do not differentiate between areas that have defences and those that do not, nor between different standards of defence. The first generation of the indicative flood plain maps was designed to influence the planning process and support initiatives to raise awareness of flooding to those living in flood risk areas. The Department is working with the Environment Agency to develop a second generation of these maps that will enable a more realistic representation of actual flood risk, taking full account of the presence and condition of defences, on flood risk maps. This is difficult to achieve on a consistent basis for the whole country but the aim is to publish such maps towards the end of 2003. In subsequent years these maps will be the subject of continuing improvement as the quality of data and techniques of data analysis improve.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who the suppliers are of her Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91908]

Alun Michael: The current suppliers of the Department's paper and paper products are:

Premier Paper
Guilbert
21C
Talkpaper (Modo)
Banner
MG Print
Antalis (Wiggins Teape)
James McNaughton
Robert Home
Howard Smith Papers

Public Service Agreement

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when her Department will publish efficiency targets for each year from 2003 for each business area in the Department, as specified in the technical note to the 2002 Spending Review Public Service Agreement; and if she will make a statement. [94598]

Alun Michael: Over the next three financial years (2003–04, 2004–05, 2005–06) Defra is committed to make efficiency savings of £16/38/85 million pounds. In order to achieve these savings, each Defra division must make, efficiency gains of at least 3 per cent. year on year. The balance of the efficiency savings is expected to accrue from the successful completion of a number of large-scale departmental wide projects.

Rural Payments Agency

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she is taking to resolve the issue of delayed payments from the Rural Payments Agency due to Mr. Peter Taylor of Preesall referred to in a letter from the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre of 15 January. [94641]

Alun Michael: The Rural Payments Agency has investigated Mr. Taylor's case and has confirmed that the bovine subsidy claims which are due for an advance payment have either been paid or are being processed for payment. Also, Mr. Taylor has just been paid under the Arable Area Payments Scheme.

Mr. Taylor's payments under the bovine schemes had initially been delayed due to the need to resolve anomalies discovered while cross checking the details of his claimed animals against information held on the Cattle Tracing System (CTS) database operated by the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS). Following further investigation I am pleased to confirm that these have now been satisfactorily resolved thus allowing payments to be made.

Special Advisers and Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by her Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92460]

Alun Michael: Defra as a Department did not exist prior to June 2001.

(a) As has been published on previous occasions, the overall number and cost for Special Advisers across all Departments are:

Year	*Number*	*Cost (£ million)*
1995–96	38	1.5
1996–97	38	1.8
1997–98	70	2.6
1998–99	74	3.5
1999–2000	78	4.0
2000–01	79	4.1
2001–02	81	5.1

In order to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned it would not be appropriate to break down the cost by Department. As at 21 January 2003 there were 81 special advisers across all Departments. The cost for 2002–03 is not yet available.

(b) In March 2002 there were 21 press officers employed in the Defra press office, including the head of news.

The cost of the Defra permanent press officers for the 10 months of June 2001 to 31st March 2002 was £887,000. Figures are not yet available for the current financial year (2002–03).

Retrospective information on the press officers employed prior to June 2001, by the Home Office, the former DETR and MAFF press offices on policy subjects now covered by Defra would be disproportionately costly to produce.

TREASURY

Barnett Formula

Mr. Watts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has for replacing the Barnett Formula as a method of distributing public expenditure; [94757]

(2) what plans the Government have to review the Barnett Formula. [94758]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have no plans to review the Barnett formula. The Government's funding policies for the devolved Administrations were set out in the updated Statement of Funding Policy published by the Treasury on 15 July 2002.

Business Investment

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of levels of investment of businesses in *(a)* the services sector, *(b)* the financial sector and *(c)* the manufacturing sector; and if he will make a statement. [94860]

Ruth Kelly: In 2001, the latest full year for which statistics are available, current price business investment was £80.2 billion in private services and £16.8 billion in manufacturing. A similar comparison is not available for financial services. A full assessment of business investment developments and prospects will be published in the forthcoming Budget report.

Capital Modernisation Fund

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place evaluation reports for completed Capital Modernisation Fund projects in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [95111]

Mr. Boateng: It is a requirement of receiving funding from the Capital Modernisation Fund that Departments have robust arrangements for implementing, monitoring and evaluating projects. It is the responsibility of individual Departments to determine the evaluation arrangements that operate for each project.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of allocations from *(a)* round one, *(b)* round two, *(c)* round three, and *(d)* the first tranche of round four of the Capital Modernisation Fund are classified in the national accounts as capital spending; and if he will make a statement. [95112]

Mr. Boateng: The Capital Modernisation Fund provides capital funding for innovative projects which will deliver genuine improvements in public services. For that reason, the majority of funding provided will score as capital in national accounts. Where the funding scores as current expenditure, for example because a PFI procurement route represents best value for money, that is properly accounted for in departmental budgets and accounts, and in national accounts.

City Job Losses

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment his Department has made of the effect job losses in the City of London have on the employment market in *(a)* Greater London, *(b)* the south-east of England and *(c)* the UK; and if he will place the results of his research in the Library. [94852]

Ruth Kelly: The Office for National Statistics does not produce employment statistics for the City of London. However there is a range of sectoral, regional and sub-regional labour market data that the Treasury regularly monitors. Although we are aware that there have been a number of recent job losses in the London financial services sector, in the year to November 2002, employment rose by 31,000 in the London region, by 19,000 in the South East region and by 107,000 across the UK as a whole.

Delivery Unit

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when the permanent secretary in his Department last met members of the Delivery Unit; [94336]

(2) when Ministers from his Department last met with *(a)* the Prime Minister and *(b)* his officials to discuss targets set by the Delivery Unit; and what plans there are for further meetings; [94337]

(3) what targets have been set for his Department by the Delivery Unit since June 2001; and what progress has been made in meeting such targets; [94338]

(4) how many reports his Department has been commissioned to produce by the Delivery Unit in the next *(a)* 12 and *(b)* 24 months; [94334]

(5) when Ministers from his Department last met members of the Delivery Unit; and on how many occasions since its establishment Ministers have met members of the unit; [94339]

(6) which Ministers and officials from his Department have visited areas outside London accompanied by members of the Delivery Unit; [94331]

(7) which announcements made by his Department since June 2001 have been cleared in advance with the Delivery Unit; [94332]

(8) how many officials in his Department have been assigned to do specific work *(a)* with and *(b)* for the Delivery Unit since June 2001; [94333]

(9) if he will list the reports which he has made since June 2001 to the Delivery Unit. [94335]

Mr. Boateng: The work of the Treasury does not come within the Delivery Unit's remit.

Equitable Life

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what recent discussions Ministers and officials have had with Lord Penrose concerning Equitable Life; [R] [95193]

(2) what recent discussions Ministers and officials have had with the Parliamentary Ombudsman concerning the FSA's regulation of Equitable Life. [R] [95192]

Ruth Kelly: The inquiries by both Lord Penrose and the Parliamentary Ombudsman are being conducted independently of the Treasury.

The Treasury has continued to co-operate fully with both Lord Penrose and the Parliamentary Ombudsman.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate his Department has made of the number of policy holders affected by the problems at Equitable Life; [R] [95195]

(2) what recent discussions Ministers and officials have had with the Financial Services Authority concerning Equitable Life. [R] [95194]

Ruth Kelly: The management of Equitable Life is a matter for the Board of the Society. The FSA has been working with Equitable Life to ensure that clear and appropriate information is available to policyholders, and that the Society continues to give adequate support to its policyholders.

There are regular discussions between the Treasury and the FSA on a variety of issues.

Euro

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 54W, on the euro, when the Treasury will next update its estimate; and if he will make a statement. [94780]

Ruth Kelly: HM Treasury has regularly commissioned surveys tracking the level of euro preparations among businesses for dealing with the euro as a foreign currency. The results of the most recent survey will be published shortly and be available on the Treasury's euro website (www.euro.qov.uk).

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 411W, regarding the euro, whether he has commissioned additional studies since 6 September 2002; and if he will make a statement. [95008]

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many background studies are being or have been undertaken in respect of the five economic tests for assessing the UK's possible entry into the euro; who is undertaking each of the background studies; and which studies are being undertaken by persons or organisations outside the Treasury. [95087]

Ruth Kelly: The 6 September Paper for the Treasury Select Committee made clear

"the preliminary and technical work ... continues to evolve to take account of the latest technical research and analysis".

The supporting studies will be published alongside the assessment of the five economics tests.

Financial Advertising

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what change the Financial Services Authority plan to make to the public complaints procedure for financial advertisements; [94632]

(2) what plans the Financial Services Authority has to make changes to the public complaints procedure for financial advertisements. [95377]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Consumer Panel wrote to the Financial Services Authority (the FSA) on 20 January about their concerns about the disclosure of information where members of the public make complaints about financial promotions. I am told that the FSA replied to the Consumer Panel on 23 January.

The FSA tell me that they are committed to intensifying its efforts to reduce the number of unclear and misleading financial promotions. They have introduced various initiatives to make it easier for consumers to complain about financial promotions and they have given publicity to those measures. To help consumers understand their approach, and the actions they take, they have introduced an online bulletin and they will be publishing statistics to report on their work in this area.

The information they receive from consumers is combined with intelligence from other sources and from their own monitoring activities. Where they deem it appropriate they act, normally through the supervisory process, to ensure that advertisements are changed or withdrawn. Where serious problems arise, they already require firms to contact customers directly to correct possible misunderstandings and to offer appropriate restitution.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what response his Department will give to the call by the Financial Services Consumer Panel on 24 January for a review of the law on financial advertising; [95010]

(2) what response he will make to the Financial Services Consumer Panel on its proposals for a review of the law on financial advertising. [95376]

Ruth Kelly: We are considering the issues raised by the Financial Services Consumer Panel.

Gold Disposals

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average price received was during HM Treasury's recent programme of gold disposals. [94504]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested by the right hon. Gentleman can be found in Table 2 of the Treasury's Review of the Sale of Part of the UK Gold Reserves (dated October 2002). Copies of this document have been place in the House of Commons' Library and is also available on the Treasury's website—http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media//9EFEF/GoldReserves.PDF.

House Market Volatility

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the links between macroeconomic and housing market volatility; and if he will make a statement. [94599]

Ruth Kelly: As set out in the "Paper for the Treasury Committee on the Treasury's approach to the preliminary and technical work", published on 6 September 2002, a number of supporting studies will be published alongside the assessment of the five economic tests. One of these will assess the behaviour of the housing market, and its impact on consumption. Further detail can be found in the 6 September paper.

Income Drawdown Policies

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures his Department has taken to ensure that consumers are given adequate warnings about the risks associated with income drawdown policies. [94628]

Ruth Kelly: Sales of income drawdown (also known as income withdrawal) products are regulated in the same way as the sale of other investments. Under the Financial Service Authority's rules, an adviser is required, as part of the sales process, to establish that the product is suitable and that the customer understands and is content with any investment risks involved. The Financial Services Authority also publishes, as part of its consumer education programme, information on income withdrawal products, which is designed to help consumers understand these products and explain the risks involved.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the latest value of Inland Revenue total fixed assets, broken down by *(a)* land, *(b)* buildings and *(c)* other assets; and if he will make a statement. [91717]

Dawn Primarolo: The net book value of land and buildings in the latest consolidated audited accounts as at 31 March 2002 is £4.7 million.

This figure comprises £0.1 million for land, £0.1 million for buildings and £4.1 million in respect of refurbishments, from the accounts of the Valuation Office Agency.

The remaining £0.4 million represents the combined net book value of land and buildings in the accounts of the Inland Revenue.

The net book value of other assets as at 31 March 2002 is £479.4 million.

Insurance

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 412W, on insurance, what plans he has to discuss the development of a new insurance standard with the International Accounting Standards Board. [94422]

Ruth Kelly: The responsibility for developing an international standard on accounting for insurance contracts rests with the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB). The IASB is still developing its proposals for 'Phase 1' on accounting on insurance contracts, which will be issued for public consultation later this year. The Treasury currently has no plans to discuss the proposals with the IASB. The implications of accounting for insurance contracts by UK entities are a matter for the UK Accounting Standards Board (ASB), which is continuing to monitor closely the IASB project. The Treasury has regular contact with the ASB on a range of issues.

Insurance Brokers

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has made an assessment of the likely impact of the Financial Services Authority assuming responsibility for regulating insurance brokers; and if he will make a statement. [95098]

Ruth Kelly: On 21 October 2002 the Treasury issued a public consultation document entitled "Regulating Insurance Mediation". This sets out in detail the Government's proposals for giving the Financial Services Authority responsibility for regulating insurance brokers. This document includes a draft "Regulatory Impact Assessment" (RIA) of the likely impact of these proposals and seeks views on the content of this draft RIA.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with representatives of insurance brokers regarding the Financial Services Authority's assumption of responsibility for regulating insurance brokers. [95099]

Ruth Kelly: Treasury officials have had various meetings with insurance brokers' representatives before and during the public consultation on regulating insurance mediation issued on 21 October 2002. In addition Treasury officials have attended meetings arranged by the Financial Services Authority (FSA) and the General Insurance Standards Council (GISC) which have included insurance broker representatives as well as making presentations at seminars and conferences aimed at insurers and insurance brokers. Insurance broker representatives have had the opportunity to respond to the Treasury's consultation document "Regulating Insurance Mediation" and the Treasury will take their views fully into account when finalising their proposals.

Landfill Tax

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of changes in the landfill tax credit scheme on the economic viability of *(a)* incineration of waste and *(b)* recycling and recovery. [94559]

John Healey: The Government reviewed the role of the scheme in consultation with key stakeholders last summer and the pre-Budget report announced the decision to reform the scheme from 1 April 2003. Approximately two thirds of the funding currently going though the scheme, under objects C and CC, will be allocated to additional public spending on sustainable waste management. The remainder, around £47 million per year, will be spent on community environmental projects though a successor tax credit scheme. The LTCS reform, by boosting strategic waste management, will help improve recycling and recovery, though any impact on incineration from this specific reform is expected to be very limited.

The pre-Budget report also announced an increase in the standard rate of landfill tax from the year 2005–06 by £3 per tonne as part of an escalator to a medium to long term rate of £35, which helps to make alternatives to landfill more economically viable. Both measures, the

reform of the LTCS as well as the increase in the rate of landfill tax, are in support of our objective of increasing support to sustainable waste management.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will consult on proposals for the landfill tax escalator rate. [94570]

John Healey: The Government are currently consulting key stakeholders on options for a revenue-neutral proposal on the landfill escalator, as stated in the pre-Budget report.

Occupational Pensions Survey

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when the Government Actuary will publish the full results of the 11th occupational pensions survey 2000; [95262]

(2) when the Government Actuary expects to publish the full results of the 11th occupational pensions survey 2000. [95539]

Ruth Kelly: The Government Actuary plans to publish full results of the 11th occupational pension schemes survey 2000 in spring 2003.

Public Service Agreement

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether the money allocated to Departments by HM Treasury is directly dependent upon Departments achieving the targets set in their public service agreements. [94428]

Mr. Boateng: The money the Government allocates to Departments is determined by a range of factors including performance against public service agreements.

Revenue Qualifying Regime

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what response he has made to observations from the Association of Friendly Societies on the effect on the savings of those on low incomes of the Government's proposed abolition of the Inland Revenue's qualifying regime. [95015]

Ruth Kelly: The Sandler review of the market for medium and long-term retail savings, which was published last July, recommended two changes to the regime for taxing life insurance products. These changes are the abolition of qualifying policies and the replacement of the so-called 5 per cent. tax-deferral rule which applies to withdrawals.

As we announced in the pre-Budget report, the Government are considering these proposals as part of the Budget process and is discussing their implications with the insurance industry and friendly society movement. I understand that the Association of Friendly Societies has been in frequent contact with Treasury and Inland Revenue officials. These discussions include considering how the Sandler recommendation to abolish the qualifying policy regime for new policies would effect the savings of those on low incomes.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when *(a)* HM Customs and Excise's, *(b)* the Inland Revenue's, *(c)* the Office for National Statistics', *(d)* the Office of Government Commerce's and *(e)* the Government Actuary's Department's service delivery agreements for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94106]

Ruth Kelly: The Office of Government Commerce does not have a separate service delivery agreement; PSA10 in the Treasury's service delivery agreement, published in December 2002, relates to the OGC.

Service Delivery Agreements for HM Custom's and Excise, The Inland Revenue and the Office of National Statistics will be published by the end of February 2003.

The Government Actuary's Department's SDA targets are published within GAD's annual departmental report which is planned to be published in April 2003.

Westminster Census

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will exercise his power to ensure a local census is undertaken in the City of Westminster in order to provide a more accurate figure than the 2001 count. [94835]

Ruth Kelly: The Government are confident that the 2001 Census provides the most accurate estimate of the population nationally and for each of the 376 local authorities in England and Wales. The Office for National Statistics continues to work closely with representatives from a relatively small number of local authorities, including Westminster, which have raised issues about the Census count in their area. However, to date the Registrar General has seen no evidence to justify conducting a local census in Westminster or in any other local authority area in England and Wales.

TRANSPORT

Airport Policing

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will ensure that there is parity of treatment between police forces and airports on the charges forces make to airport operators for providing policing; and if he will make a statement. [94476]

Mr. Jamieson: Part III of the Aviation Security Act 1982 provides for the designation of airports, where the Secretary of State considers that their policing should be undertaken by constables, and requires airports so designated to make payments to the police authority in respect of their policing, as agreed between the two parties. There are currently nine such designated airports.

In his recent review of the policing of airports Sir John Wheeler recommended that a new process of designation should be developed, founded on national criteria and agreed local multi-agency risk assessments. This recommendation has been accepted in principle, and Home Office and Department for Transport officials are taking this work forward in concert with the police, industry and other stakeholders.

Light Dues

Miss Anne McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent representations he has received concerning light dues; and if he will make a statement. [94618]

Mr. Jamieson: We have received some 150 responses to our consultation on light dues, expressing a wide range of views.

Miss Anne McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what recent assessment he has made of the impact of light dues on *(a)* the UK economy, *(b)* the UK maritime industry and *(c)* UK ports. [94619]

(2) if he will make a statement on the assessment he has made of the alternatives to light dues used in other EU member states; and what impact that has had on *(a)* their individual economies, *(b)* their maritime industries and *(c)* their ports. [94620]

Mr. Jamieson: We are considering these issues in the light of responses to our Consultation Paper 'Light Dues Review: Meeting the Costs of Marine Aids to Navigation, issued last Summer, on which we plan to make a statement soon.

A14

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what estimate he has made of the change in freight usage of the A14, by reason of the proposed expansion of the container port at Felixstowe; [95209]

(2) what plans he has to improve road capacity on the A14, following the announcement of the proposed expansion of capacity at Felixstowe port. [95223]

Mr. Jamieson: The Highways Agency is aware of the proposed expansion plans for Felixstowe port and the potential the development may have for an increase in freight on the A14. The developer, Hutchison Ports (UK) Ltd., is currently consulting with the Agency on the key transport issues that will need to be considered in the development of the proposal. Until such times as the developer has formally submitted an application to the relevant authority to develop the port, and there has been an opportunity to scrutinise the proposal, I cannot offer any comment on the future capacity needs of the A14.

A21 Bypass

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what on-site investigations have been undertaken by the Highways Agency in surveying the geology of the proposed route for an A21 bypass at Hurst Green, with specific reference to the proposed tunnel at Silver Hill; [93815]

(2) what representations *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Highways Agency have received concerning proposed plans for the building of an A21 bypass at Hurst Green; [93812]

(3) what account was taken of previous route proposals for an A21 bypass at Hurst Green during the planning of the current proposed route for an A21 bypass at Hurst Green; [93811]

(4) what previous route proposals there have been for an A21 bypass at Hurst Green; and for what reasons these schemes were withdrawn; [93810]

(5) what *(a)* the cost is of and *(b)* the reasons are for the junction improvements and roundabout installation on the A21 at John's Cross; [93820]

(6) what investigations have been undertaken by the Highways Agency to deduce the levels of *(a)* noise and *(b)* air pollution that would affect residents living between the current A21 and the proposed bypass route at Hurst Green; [93814]

(7) how many accidents were recorded on the A21 between *(a)* Flimwell and Hurst Green, *(b)* Hurst Green and Robertsbridge and *(c)* south of Robertsbridge in each year since 1997; [93809]

(8) what on-site investigations have been undertaken by the Highways Agency in planning and plotting the proposed route for an A21 bypass at Hurst Green. [93813]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Gregory Barker, dated 3 February 2003:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about issues relating to the A21 and the proposed strategy for the improvement of the length south of Pembury to Hastings.

The investigations undertaken for the proposed strategy have so far been limited to the assembly of existing data such as geological maps and environmental constraints for a desktop assessment. Route alignment has been based on this information, which is the normal level of study for a scheme at this early stage of development. Particular emphasis has been placed on environmental constraints and consequently, in developing the alignment, we have sought to reduce the impact on the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and designated areas of ancient woodland. At the same time we have assessed future traffic patterns and the safety and economic benefits of the proposals.

No specific ground investigation, air pollution or noise surveys have been undertaken to date, but if a decision is taken to proceed with further development of the route proposals, a comprehensive programme of surveys will be undertaken. The results of the surveys will be taken into account when preparing the Environmental Statement for the scheme which would be published with the draft Orders under the Highways Act.

Studies for improvement of the A21 at Hurst Green were undertaken in the late 1980s and were concluded in 1993 without any proposals being formally published. The area of the studies extended from just north of Coopers Corner to a point midway between Hurst Green and Silver Hill, which limited the opportunities for a line significantly away from the village. At the same time a scheme for a climbing lane at Silver Hill was being investigated and a public consultation was held in the early 1990s. This scheme was cancelled in 1993 due to constraints on funding.

During 1996–97 a DBFO package was put forward for the Weald and Downland area which included the A21. There were no major improvements of the A21 proposed south of Lamberhurst Bypass, only minor improvements. This DBFO project was cancelled in 1997 as part of the Government's review of the road programme.

The current study has examined the whole of the A21 against future needs and modern engineering and environmental standards and therefore supersedes previous studies and proposals. The purpose of the current consultation is to hear the views of all who are interested in the proposals. Where members

of the public suggest an alternative alignment we will undertake a review of these to establish whether they have merit. The outcome of these reviews will be included in our submission to Ministers.

Public consultation on the strategy started on 19 November last year and the last date for submitting comments is 14 February. Public exhibitions were held between December 5 and December 10 at a variety of locations along the A21 with additional venues added on 13 and 17 December at the request of Hastings borough and Hurst Green parish councils. Around 1,500 people attended these exhibitions. To date over 800 prepaid questionnaires, 100 letters and emails have been received by the Agency whilst a further six letters to the Department for Transport have been passed onto us for the comments to be considered. These do not include letters sent directly to you and copied to the Agency. We are examining all these responses in detail before preparing our submission to Ministers.

The cost of the roundabout installation and junction improvements on the A21 at Johns Cross is £1.5 million. As part of the scheme a new signal controlled pedestrian crossing will be installed to provide a safer means of access to the local school and an improved footpath at New Cut.

The existing junction layout, together with nearby accesses, is complicated and can be confusing to road users. The accidents recorded on the length affected by the roundabout scheme total 14 injury accidents in five years (2.8 per year). This figure is higher than the national average for accidents at rural junctions of this type (1.11 per year). The installation of a roundabout will reduce traffic speeds and is expected to save one injury accident per year.

The accident statistics recorded on the A21 between Flimwell and Hurst Green, Hurst Green and Robertsbridge and south of Robertsbridge in each year since 1997 are as follows:

Flimwell to Hurst Green—accidents

	Fatal	*Serious*	*Slight*	*Total*
1997	0	4	5	9
1998	0	4	10	14
1999	1	2	7	10
2000	3	1	4	8
2001	0	4	10	14
Total	4	15	36	55

Hurst Green to Robertsbridge—accidents

	Fatal	*Serious*	*Slight*	*Total*
1997	1	3	6	10
1998	0	1	5	6
1999	0	3	12	15
2000	1	0	2	3
2001	0	3	9	12
Total	2	10	34	46

Robertsbridge to Hastings (Baldslow Junction)—accidents

	Fatal	*Serious*	*Slight*	*Total*
1997	1	11	23	35
1998	0	6	28	34
1999	0	8	17	25
2000	1	2	8	11
2001	0	10	25	35
Total	2	37	101	140

Advertising

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what advertising is displayed on his Department's website from other Government Departments and agencies; on what other Government Department websites information from his Department is advertised; over what time this advertising has, or will be, displayed; and under what guidance, direction and agreements any such advertising is displayed. [93239]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department is taking part in a pilot to promote campaigns across Government websites, in conjunction with No. 10, DFES ODPM, Home Office, HSE, the Office of the E-Envoy and ukonline.gov.uk. Each of these Departments has included two or three campaign promotions into the pilot, which are then rotated across the websites taking part.

All the campaigns being promoted are from other Government Departments or agencies and follow government accessibility guidelines on online advertising and promotion.

The pilot commenced on 10 December 2002, and is due to end on 10 June 2003. The campaigns are delivered via Real Media, a third party solution provider.

Air Marshals

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the need for air marshals on aeroplanes, with specific reference to *(a)* the number stationed on a plane during a flight, *(b)* the estimated cost of one plane journey with air marshals and *(c)* domestic flights; and if he will make a statement. [94277]

Mr. Jamieson: My right hon. Friend announced on 19 December 2002 that a capability had been developed to place armed police officers aboard UK civil aircraft, should that be warranted, as a sensible addition to the security measures available for addressing the threat to UK interests and UK aviation. It would not be appropriate to comment on the detail of this new capability.

Air Transport Consultation

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many copies of the National Consultation on the Future of Air Transport in the UK have been issued *(a)* by hard copy and *(b)* by website download, broken down by region. [94926]

Mr. Jamieson: Estimates of consultation documents (main, summary and questionnaire) by region that have been issued and downloaded from the website up until 30 January 2003 are shown as follows:

Region	*Number of documents dispatched*	*Number of documents downloaded*
South East of England	184,100	150,600
Midlands	180,200	23,300
South West of England	34,100	19,600
Wales	12,900	5,900
North of England	106,700	16,900
Scotland	28,600	31,700
Northern Ireland	20,700	6,140

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many completed questionnaires and

other responses to the National Consultation on the Future of Air Transport in the UK he has received, broken down by region. [94927]

Mr. Jamieson: Estimates of responses received (questionnaires and others) by region that have been received up until 30 January 2003 are shown as follows:

Region	*Number of completed questionnaires received*	*Number of other responses received*
South East of England	11,290	35,000+
Midlands	18,140	35,000+
South West of England	1,110	400
Wales	90	40
North of England	2,760	600
Scotland	890	200
Northern Ireland	130	120
Total	34,410	70,000+

Airports (Midlands)

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many letters he has received *(a)* supporting and *(b)* opposing the Midlands New Site Option contained within the National Consultation on the Future of Air Transport in the UK: Midlands. [94928]

Mr. Jamieson: We have not yet analysed all the responses to the consultation but we will produce a summary after the consultation closes.

British Transport Police

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress in the British Transport Police. [93689]

Mr. Jamieson: The British Transport Police (BTP) have provided the following information about absences in the BTP since 1 April 2002:

	Mental health[1]		*Stress*[1]	
	Police officers	*Support staff*	*Police officers*	*Support staff*
Absences	50	17	21	7
Number of officers/staff	49	17	21	7
Current absences	17	5	7	1
Duty days lost	2,172	4,660	829	172
Percentage of total duty days lost	12	16	5	1

[1] The figures for mental health include those provided for stress.

The BTP are unable to provide information regarding the causes of occupational stress within the force. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety announced on 31 October 2002 the Governments "Strategy for a Healthy Police Service" with the aims to promote and maintain good health in all police forces, reduce injuries and manage all cases of ill health more effectively. The BTP themselves have a number of strategies regarding the prevention and management of ill health. This includes the provision of 11 internal health managers and advisers. External occupational health providers and counselling services are also available to the force.

The BTP is currently running a 'Buddy' pilot system scheme where trained BTP volunteers provide a 'first contact' facility to advise and assist staff. The BTP are also evaluating the work of the ACPO Joint Working Group on Health and Safety Welfare.

Car Navigation

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what measures the Department is taking to ensure that *(a)* commercial in car route management systems and *(b)* the Highways Agency's variable message signs do not divert motorists on to unsuitable local roads. [94837]

Mr. Jamieson: In-vehicle route guidance systems that take account of prevailing traffic conditions ("dynamic systems") require an operator licence under the Road Traffic (Driver Licensing and Information Systems) Act 1989 and associated regulations. Licences are only issued if systems meet certain safety and routing design and performance criteria, which include a check that they avoid diverting drivers along unsuitable local roads. Other route guidance systems do not require licensing.

The Highways Agency's VMS signs are used to assist the police with local incident management and to notify drivers when it is advisable to make strategic long distance diversions. Local diversion routes are devised by the police in collaboration with the local Highway Authority. Long distance diversions are selected from sets of recommended strategies agreed with all involved parties.

Chancery Lane Underground Derailment

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement about the Chancery Lane Underground derailment; and what investigations are taking place into its causes. [95086]

Mr. Jamieson: The independent Health & Safety Executive has begun a full investigation into the train derailment at Chancery Lane station on Saturday 25 January, to establish the causes of the incident. Initial indications are that the derailment was caused by a traction motor falling from beneath the train onto the track. London Underground is also conducting its own investigation. A summary of their findings and recommendations will be made public.

Crossrail

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) when he will respond to the proposal submitted by London Regional Metro; [94513]

(2) if he has received a costed funding proposal for the SRA/TfL Crossrail project. [94514]

Mr. Jamieson: It is premature to determine how best Crossrail may be taken forward or financed until route options have been considered and a business case for the project established.

The Strategic Rail Authority and Transport for London are aiming to report to Ministers on these matters by the end of February.

Driving Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many applications for short period licences were received in 2002; and how many were determined later than *(a)* one month, *(b)* three months and *(c)* six months after the date of application; [94501]

(2) what the average time in the last year taken to determine applications for short period driving licence renewals was where the medical condition of the applicant had to be considered. [94500]

Mr. Jamieson: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's published charter standards for dealing with all applications, where a medical condition has to be considered, are as follows (no separate figures are available for short period driving licences):

(a) if a decision can be made based on the information originally provided by the applicant, the Agency aims to make a decision on 90 per cent. of cases within 15 working days;

(b) if further information is needed about the medical condition from the applicant, his doctors or other sources, the Agency aims to make a decision on 80 per cent. of cases within 90 working days.

The Agency's cumulative performance figure from April 2002 to December 2002 are that for *(a)* 98 per cent. of cases were cleared within 15 working days and for *(b)* 81 per cent. of cases were cleared within 90 working days.

Gatwick Airport

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects to release the supplementary paper to the National Consultation on the Future of Air Transport in the UK: South East regarding Gatwick; and when he expects the consultation period to close. [94929]

Mr. Jamieson: The consultation period, throughout the UK, has been extended until we have consulted on Gatwick runway options. We intend to issue a revised South East consultation paper later this month. The consultation period will then run for four months after the date of publication of the new material. Those who have already responded to the consultation will be able to amend, add to, or replace their response having considered the new material, if they wish to do so.

All responses to the consultation will be considered and analysed carefully before final decisions are taken. These will be set out in an air transport White Paper, which we aim to publish towards the end of the year.

Hawarden Airport

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* passenger flights and *(b)* passengers used Hawarden airport in each year since 1995. [94786]

Mr. Jamieson: Available data are as follows:

Hawarden airport: 1995–2001[1]

	Passenger flights[2]	*Terminal passengers*[3]
1995	4	44
1996	3	130
1997	173	1,940
1998	215	3,507
1999	164	2,908
2000	100	2,490
2001	104	2,751

[1] Figures exclude air taxis ie aircraft less than 15 tonnes operating on a non-scheduled service. These are predominantly sole-use charter operations.
[2] Landings or take-offs.
[3] Excludes transit passengers ie passengers who arrive at or depart on the same aircraft which is transiting the airport.

Hydrogen Fuel

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many cars have been converted from petrol to hydrogen fuel in each year since 2000; and if he will make a statement; [94278]

(2) what steps he has taken to encourage the fuel conversion of cars from petrol to hydrogen; and if he will make a statement; [94279]

(3) what percentage of petrol stations in the UK provide hydrogen fuel; and if he will make a statement; [94281]

(4) how much has been provided by the Government in grants for converting cars from petrol to hydrogen; and if he will make a statement. [94280]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government are committed to promoting the development, introduction and take-up of clean, low-carbon new vehicle technologies and fuels, including hydrogen, where these offer environmental and other advantages over conventional alternatives. Our "Powering Future Vehicles" strategy, published in July 2002, sets out how we will do this, and sets challenging targets for increasing the numbers of clean, low carbon vehicles on our roads.

The Government's research, development and demonstration programmes include support for hydrogen fuel cell research, funding for the trial operation of hydrogen fuel cell buses in London in 2004, and support for the associated hydrogen refuelling installations. We have also announced our intention to exempt hydrogen from fuel duty for a period to encourage early development and take-up, and have introduced 100 per cent. first-year capital allowances for investments in hydrogen refuelling infrastructure.

Hydrogen technologies, however, are still at an early stage of development with many technical challenges to be overcome. There are currently no hydrogen cars on UK roads, and no filling stations selling hydrogen.

Hydrogen fuelled vehicles, though having zero tailpipe emissions, provide carbon-free transportation only where the hydrogen is produced with non-fossil energy sources. My Department has recently commissioned a number of reports into the long-term future potential of hydrogen and other road fuels. These include a report by Ricardo Consulting Engineers Ltd. ("Carbon to Hydrogen—roadmaps for passenger cars"), and a study carried out by leading experts on energy and environmental matters ("Fuelling Road Transport: Implications for Energy Policy"). These are available via the DfT website.

Both reports, as well as reviewing hydrogen fuel cell technology, indicate the scope for further substantial and early reductions in conventional cars' fuel consumption and carbon emissions, including hybrid engine technology. The second study also identifies the potential for renewable transport fuel from biomass.

Infrastructure Projects

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the cost was of the largest UK infrastructure project funded without Government support since 1973. [94725]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 27 January 2003 *Official Report*, column 529W.

Leisure Flights (Fuel Consumption)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the fuel consumption, in passenger miles per gallon, of a typically loaded leisure airline flight from London to Orlando; and what programmes the aviation industry has notified his Department of which are designed to reduce CO2 emissions per passenger. [R] [95196]

Mr. Jamieson: Data provided by UK charter airlines, assuming a typical aircraft and the latest average Summer load factor on this route, yields an estimate of 100 passenger miles per gallon. My Department is aware of proposals by Air Travel Greener by Design and by the Advisory Council for Aeronautics Research in Europe (ACARE), both of which include among other objectives the reduction of CO2 emissions.

London Underground

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what statutory body has power, and under what statute, to ensure effective co-operation and liaison between the planned operating companies of the London underground; what personnel have been appointed to such a body; and to whom they will be accountable for their statutory duties and powers; [95020]

(2) if he will list the public and private network of corporate bodies who form the functional, operational and financial units which from specified dates have been responsible for *(a)* day to day inspection of rolling stock, *(b)* routine maintenance, *(c)* periodic overhaul, *(d)* upkeep of depots, *(e)* employment of train crews, *(f)* track maintenance and *(g)* signalling and communications on each underground line within the ambit of London Underground Ltd.; [95018]

(3) what plans have been authorised under statute for bodies to be responsible for staffing, maintenance and safety for multi-line London underground stations served by two or more future distinct operating companies; and which all-line common services and operational activity will remain with a named central body, not being the planned operating companies. [95019]

Mr. Jamieson: London Underground Ltd., a wholly owned subsidiary of London Regional Transport in the public sector, is responsible for the operation and maintenance of the London underground.

Since 2000, three infrastructure companies, operating as subsidiaries of London Underground Ltd., have been carrying out the maintenance and renewal of the underground's physical infrastructure.

On 31 December 2002 ownership of one of the infrastructure companies (Infraco JNP Ltd.) passed to the privately owned consortium Tube Lines, under the public private partnership (PPP). Ownership of the other infrastructure companies (Infraco BCV Ltd. and Infraco SSL Ltd.) is expected to pass to Metronet, also under the PPP, this spring. Under the PPP, infrastructure companies work for London Underground under 30 year contracts.

London Underground remains solely responsible for operations on the underground network. The infrastructure companies work under contract to London Underground, which itself retains responsibility for overall safety across the network.

Ministerial Meeting

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) last had an official meeting with the General Secretary and elected officials of NUMAST. [95309]

Mr. Jamieson: I last met Brian Orell, General Secretary of NUMAST, on Tuesday 16th April 2002.

Multi-modal Study (Cambridgeshire)

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will make his decision on the proposal for a guided bus system submitted by Cambridgeshire County Council constituting the public transport element of the Preferred Plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon Multi-Modal Study; and when building work would *(a)* commence and *(b)* be completed. [94605]

Mr. Jamieson: Cambridgeshire County Council have submitted an application for funding for the proposed guided bus system and this is currently being assessed by my Department. Until this assessment is completed I am unable to provide any further information.

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) whether he plans that the major A14 improvements included in the Preferred Plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon Multi-Modal Study will be *(a)* carried out at one time or *(b)* phased; [94888]

(2) when consultants will be appointed to begin detailed design work on the main A14 highway schemes in connection with the major A14 improvements included in the Preferred Plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon Multi-Modal Study and whether he plans to review alternative forms of *(a)* design and *(b)* procurement; [94604]

(3) for what reasons public consultation on the major A14 improvements included in the Preferred Plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon Multi-Modal Study had not commenced by 18 January, following the undertaking given by the Minister on 18 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 493W. [94732]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]*: The answer given on 18 January, *Official Report*, column 493W stated that public consultation on the route would be expected within 12 months of the scheme entering the Highways Agency's Targeted Programme of Improvements (TPI). The Secretary of State will reach a decision on TPI entry once he has considered the further work which he asked the Highways Agency to undertake. I cannot give any more details about the way these schemes will be taken forward until he has reached a view.

Parliamentary Questions

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will reply to the question (ref 92574) from the hon. Member for Vale of York on rail freight and targets. [94789]

Mr. Jamieson: I have replied to the hon. Member's question today.

Public Transport (Birmingham)

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what progress is being made to create effective park and ride facilities at Longbridge station in Birmingham. [94739]

Mr. Jamieson: Discussions are taking place between Birmingham City council, Advantage West Midlands, MG Rover, St. Modwen Developments Plc and residents with regard to the use of surplus land adjacent to the MG Rover factory for a strategic park and ride site. We will of course consider any proposal as soon as it is passed to us.

Rail Freight

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his policy is on the target of 80 per cent. growth in rail freight set out in the 10 Year Transport Plan. [92574]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority published on Thursday 30 January a new Strategic Plan, which details its plans for achieving the rail freight growth envisaged by the Government's 10 Year Plan for Transport.

Rail Services

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the decision of Virgin to withdraw Cross Country services. [92069]

Mr. Jamieson: The Cross Country service changes announced on 16 January are designed to improve the reliability and punctuality of services, and reduce overcrowding on key routes, through the redeployment of rolling stock to provide longer trains on some services.

Out of 175 daily Cross Country trains, 12 trains a day will be withdrawn completely, and a further 20 will be terminated short of their original destination. Cross Country services to most destinations will remain at or above October 2002 levels. These changes will take effect in May 2003.

Rail Services (Birmingham)

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received in respect of possible extensions to the Birmingham cross-city railway line to serve Frankley; and if he will make a statement. [94740]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) received and pre-qualified an initial bid for Rail Passenger Partnership (RPP) funding for this extension. The bid has been further considered with the sponsors but a formal, full bid has not been submitted.

Railway Staff

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many staff were employed by *(a)* the Office of the Rail Regulator, *(b)* Strategic Rail Authority, *(c)* Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate, *(d)* other staff relating to railway matters within the Health and Safety Executive and Health and Safety Commission, *(e)* the (i) Rail Delivery Directorate and (ii) Railways Restructuring Directorates, or their equivalent, within his Department and *(f)* British Rail or shadow private companies within the railway industry, for those years where this is applicable (A) in each year since 1992 and (B) projected for future years. [93222]

Mr. Jamieson: Staff numbers for the Office of the Rail Regulator, the Strategic Rail Authority, Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate, the Health and Safety Executive and British Rail are contained in the relevant organisation's Annual Reports. Copies of such reports are routinely placed in the Libraries of the House. Figures for shadow private companies within the rail industry are not collated centrally.

Figures for my Department's Railways Directorate (or its previous equivalent) are as shown in the following table. Details for 2003–04 are yet to be finalised. I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 1 February 2002, *Official Report*, columns 585–86W, in relation to staff numbers in the Railways Directorate as of June 2001 and February 2002.

Year[1]	*Railways Directorate*
1992	70
1993	102
1994	107
1995	126
1996	143
1997	85
1998	66
1999	67
2000	64
2001	63
2002	84

[1] As of 1 April.

Railway Stations (Wales)

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the railway stations in Wales that have opened or reopened since 1 May 1997. [94787]

Mr. Jamieson: No new railway stations have been opened in Wales since 1 May 1997. There have been two re-openings following closures to relocate the stations: Wrexham Central and Mountain Ash.

Railways

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the breakdown was of spending in each nation and region in the UK of the 10 year Rail Passenger Partnership Funding programme announced in December 2001. [94904]

Mr. Jamieson: Up to January 2003 the Strategic Rail Authority has approved funding under the Rail Passenger Partnership scheme to a total of 87m. The breakdown by each region is as follows:

Schemes by Region—by January 2003	*Approved —millions*
All regions	3.0
East Midlands	0.4
Eastern	14.5
London	1.4
North East	1.1
North West	3.5
South East	3.5
South West	10.1
Scotland	2.9
Wales	14.8
West Midlands	4.1
Yorkshire and Humberside	27.7
Total	[1]87

[1] Million

Road Schemes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on how many occasions the Government have taken a decision not to proceed with a road scheme which has entered the Targeted Programme of Improvements. [94836]

Mr. Jamieson: Since the TPI was established in 1998, there have been no such occasions. A decision on entry to the Targeted Programme of Improvements is only made after a consideration of a proposed scheme using the New Approach to Appraisal, which considers the impact on the scheme under the five headings environment, economy, integration, accessibility and safety. Issues concerning construction and the available finance are also taken into account. However, future progress on schemes is subject to the satisfactory completion of all remaining statutory procedures.

The A23 Coulsdon Inner Relief Road was originally included in the TPI on 31 July 1998 but subsequently became the responsibility of the Mayor for London.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether it is Government policy to build the road schemes included in the Targeted Programme of Improvements. [94844]

Mr. Jamieson: Yes. Schemes are added to the Targeted Programme of Improvements when Ministers are satisfied that such schemes are necessary, affordable and that their assessment under the New Approach to Appraisal is acceptable. Future progress on schemes is subject to the satisfactory completion of all remaining statutory procedures.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when his Department's Service Delivery Agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94121]

Mr. Jamieson: Service Delivery Agreements relating to my Department's Public Service Agreement targets will be published later this year.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department, its predecessors and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93499]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was established following machinery of Government changes in May 2002.

All cases of absence are taken up and dealt with by line management. Separate information on absenteeism is not available.

In respect of sickness absence, the most recent "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service" was published by the Cabinet Office and announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002. This covered the calendar year 2001 for the predecessor Department, the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions and its executive Agencies. Previous reports go back to 1996. Figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

The Department is committed to managing sickness absence effectively and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) target of reducing sick absence by 30 per cent. by the end of 2003 based on a 1998 baseline.

The Department is committed to managing sick absence effectively and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) target reductions in sick absence by the end of 2003.

Taxi Licences

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many people were successfully prosecuted for running a taxicab without a taxi licence in each year since 1990; what the average sentence was for first time offenders of this offence; and if he will make a statement. [94276]

Mr. Jamieson: In England and Wales, it is an offence to ply for hire without a taxi licence. The penalty for this offence is a maximum fine of Level 4 on the Standard Scale (£2,500). The actual enforcement of this offence is undertaken at a local level, by district/borough councils, unitary authorities or Transport for London, in concert with the relevant police force. Records of such enforcement activity are not kept centrally.

Transport Interchanges (Toilet Provision)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received

regarding the *(a)* availability and *(b)* quality of toilet provision at transport interchanges; and if he will make a statement on the standard of such facilities. [94771]

Mr. Ja on: My Department does not hold information on the availability or quality of toilet provision at transport interchanges. However, we are working with Delivery Agencies to improve travel interchange, including improved facilities.

Unused Rolling Stock

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many newly commissioned *(a)* engines and *(b)* carriages lie unused in sidings within the south-eastern rail network, with particular reference to Kent and Sussex. [93827]

Mr. Jamieson: There are no trains that have been accepted for passenger service stabled in sidings unused. However there may be units that either have not yet been accepted into passenger service, or are in use for driver training, or are available for to cover for trains that are temporarily out of service maintenance or modifications.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on *(a)* the levels of deployment to and *(b)* pattern of activities in Afghanistan of Royal Marines since 2001. [94539]

Mr. Ingram: 40 Commando provided a company to help secure the airfield at Bagram from November 2001 to October 2002. While not a part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), they provided an initial presence in Kabul to assist ISAF deployment and provide security for the inauguration of the Interim Authority.

In March 2002, Task Force JACANA deployed. Built around HQ 3 Cdo Brigade and 45 Commando, supported by the Commando Logistics Regiment, it conducted operations to interdict AQ/Taliban and destroy the terrorist infrastructure. On the successful completion of its deployment, it withdrew, with all troops back in the United Kingdom by August 2002.

Anthrax Vaccine

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the discovery of phials of anthrax vaccine on beaches in Hampshire and Dorset on 20 January. [93910]

Dr. Moonie: The Anthrax vaccine found on the South Dorset coast is from a batch produced by the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research and purchased by the Ministry of Defence in February 2001. Because ampoules from the batch were issued to a large number of units it has not yet been possible to identify how they came to be in the sea. Investigations into the source of the items found are continuing.

Anti-submarine Warfare Helicopters

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Fleet Air Arm anti-submarine warfare helicopters have been taken out of storage for use as troop carriers. [94542]

Mr. Ingram: Four Sea King Mk 6 Anti-Submarine Warfare aircraft, originally due for disposal, are undergoing conversion to support helicopters in order to maintain the Support Helicopter Operating Fleet at required levels during the Sea King Mk 4 Avionics Upgrade Programme (AUP).

Armed Forces (Inoculations)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which *(a)* Army *(b)* Royal Navy and *(c)* RAF units have been (i) warned to deploy and (ii) deployed for possible operations against Iraq have been given inoculations against biological weapons. [93645]

Dr. Moonie: All units warned to deploy and deployed for possible operations against Iraq are included in the voluntary immunisation programme against anthrax. We are expanding the programme, in phases and beginning with units held at the highest readiness, with the aim of making immunisation against anthrax routine for all service personnel. I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence gave on 13 June 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1345–46W, to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt).

We have announced plans to vaccinate a cohort of specialist medical personnel and nuclear, biological and chemical specialists against smallpox. I refer the hon. Member to the written statement I made on 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 60WS. Some of these specialist personnel will be attached to units warned to deploy and deployed for possible operations against Iraq.

Armed Forces (Transport)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many personnel were transported around the United Kingdom by each of the armed forces by *(a)* road, *(b)* rail and *(c)* air, broken down by (i) number and (ii) distance travelled in the last year for which figures are available; [93241]

(2) how much equipment was transported around the United Kingdom by each of the armed forces by *(a)* road, *(b)* rail and *(c)* air, broken down by (i) type of equipment, (ii) weight, (iii) number of items, (iv) volume and (v) distance travelled, in the last year for which figures are available. [93240]

Mr. Ingram: The detailed breakdown of personnel and equipment transportation requested is not required for use by the Ministry of Defence. Accordingly, the information is either not held at all or is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if she will list the hon. Members who have completed the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme. [95084]

Dr. Moonie: As at 27 January 2003, 78 hon. Members have completed and passed the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, in the following list, along with the Service with whom they have served. In addition, 20 former Members, 10 Peers and four MEPs have also successfully completed the Scheme.

Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme

Adam Ingram (L)	Army
Adrian Flook (C)	Royal Marines
Alan Keen (L)	Royal Air Force
Andrew Mackinlay (L)	Royal Marines
Andrew Miller (L)	Royal Navy
Ann Keen (L)	Royal Air Force
Anne McGuire (L)	Royal Navy
Anne McIntosh (C)	Royal Navy
Austin Mitchell (L)	Royal Navy
Bob Russell (LD)	Army
Brian Donohoe (L)	Royal Air Force
Calum MacDonald (L)	Army
Cheryl Gillan (C)	Royal Air Force
Claire Ward (L)	Royal Marines
Dan Norris (L)	Royal Air Force
David Borrow (L)	Army
David Crausby (L)	Royal Marines
David Drew (L)	Army
David Heath (LD)	Royal Navy
David Jamieson (L)	Royal Marines
David Stewart (L)	Royal Air Force
David Watts (L)	Army
David Wilshire (C)	Royal Navy
Debra Shipley (L)	Royal Navy
Dr. John Reid (L)	Army
Dr. Julian Lewis (C)	Royal Air Force
Dr. Robert Spink (C)	Royal Marines
Edward Garnier QC (C)	Army
Edward Leigh (C)	Royal Navy
Frank Cook (L)	Army
Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (C)	Royal Air Force
Gerald Howarth (C)	Army
Gerald Steinberg (L)	Royal Air Force
Gillian Merron (L)	Royal Air Force
Gwyn Prosser (L)	Royal Navy
Hugh Bayley (L)	Royal Air Force
Ian Davidson (L)	Royal Marines
Ivan Henderson (L)	Royal Navy
James Cran (C)	Royal Marines
James Gray (C)	Army
Jimmy Hood (L)	Army
Jim Murphy (L)	Royal Navy
Joan Walley (L)	Royal Air Force
John Greenway (C)	Royal Air Force
John Home Robertson (L)	Army
John McWilliam (C)	Royal Marines
John Wilkinson (C)	Royal Marines
Jonathan Shaw (L)	Army
Kerry Pollard (L)	Royal Navy
Linda Perham (L)	Royal Navy
Lindsay Hoyle (L)	Royal Marines
Lorna Fitzsimons (L)	Army
Marion Roe (C)	Royal Navy
Mark Todd (L)	Royal Navy
Martyn Jones (L)	Royal Air Force
Michael Connarty (L)	Army
Michael Fabricant (C)	Royal Marines
Mike O'Brien (L)	Army
Nicholas Winterton (C)	Army
Nick Hawkins (C)	Army
Nigel Evans (C)	Royal Air Force
Paddy Tipping (L)	Royal Marines
Paul Keetch (LD)	Royal Navy
Peter Bottomley (C)	Royal Air Force
Peter Luff (C)	Royal Navy
Rachel Squire (L)	Royal Navy
Roger Gale (C)	Royal Navy
Sandra Gidley (LD)	Army
Sir George Young	Army
Stephen Hepburn (L)	Royal Marines
Stephen McCabe (L)	Royal Air Force
Stephen Pound (L)	Royal Navy
Syd Rapson (L)	Royal Marines
Terry Lewis (L)	Royal Air Force
The Right hon. Dr. Gavin Strang (L)	Royal Air Force
Tom Cox (L)	Royal Navy
Tony Colman (L)	Royal Air Force
Tony McWalter (L)	Royal Navy

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if she will list the hon. Members who have completed the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme and who have reserve liabilities for Operation Fresco. [95091]

Dr. Moonie: None. The Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme does not have reserve service commitment. Only regular armed forces personnel have been deployed on Operation Fresco.

Army Boot

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research has been carried out on the standard issue Army boot and its effect on feet. [94098]

Mr. Ingram: As part of an on-going development programme an extensive range of research (in conjunction with industry and research organisations) has been, and is still being, carried out on the standard issue Combat Assault Boot and its effect on feet. This research is examining aspects such as materials, design, comfort and protection.

Astute Class Submarines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to fill the capability gap arising from the late delivery of the Astute class submarines. [94551]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence routinely considers changes to the Defence programme to ensure the required level of capability to meet its current and contingent operations. The Royal Navy is reviewing its plans for meeting the operational requirements of the SSN Flotilla in the light of potential delays to the delivery of the Astute Class. It is still intended that the Astute Class will progressively supersede the existing Swiftsure and Trafalgar Classes through a phased replacement programme.

BAE Systems

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was discussed at his meeting with the chief executive of BAE Systems on 22 January. [93992]

Mr. Hoon: I regularly hold meetings with senior executives from major defence suppliers. At my meeting on 22 January with the chief executive of BAE Systems, we discussed a range of subjects including the ASTUTE and Nimrod programmes.

Courtesy Calls

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the terrorist threat to the Royal Navy since 2001 has *(a)* restricted public access to RN warships paying courtesy calls and *(b)* reduced the number of such calls. [94540]

Mr. Ingram: There has been no change in policy with regard to public access to Royal Navy ships paying courtesy calls since 2001. Such visits have always been undertaken with appropriate security measures commensurate with the perceived threat. For example, public access to RN ships during some visits to overseas ports has not been permitted following advice from our attaches and host Governments. During 2002 there was a slight increase in the number of visits to both overseas and United Kingdom ports compared with those undertaken in 2001.

Defence Science and Technology Laboratory

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies led his Department to take the view that to preserve, sustain and develop essential technical capabilities found in Dstl a critical mass of staff is required that cannot be achieved with the current dispersed organisation; and if he will place copies of the studies in the Library. [94065]

Dr. Moonie: The Dstl Main Board believes that the geographical fragmentation of its work force inhibits their ability to build technical excellence and that the dispersion of staff significantly degrades the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation.

While information technology and advances in communication can aid knowledge sharing, people still need to interact with each other on a regular basis and this is best achieved when they work in the same or adjoining buildings. The career development of staff will also be much easier if Dstl reduces the geographical fragmentation of the organisation as it will be far simpler for people to move between areas increasing their skill base and overall deployability. Dstl has also carried out studies and sought opinions from managers, customers and staff. The results of these studies were summarised in the consultation document issued to trades unions as part of the formal consultation process over Dstl site rationalisation plans. Copies of this document will be placed in the Library.

HMS Fearless

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when HMS Fearless was last at sea as an operational vessel. [94554]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Fearless was last used operationally in Exercise Sea Dagger in February 2002, after which she returned to the United Kingdom on 18 March 2002 to be decommissioned.

Fighting Equipment

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, how many members of the armed forces indicated when last questioned that they had confidence in their fighting equipment; what percentage of respondents this represents; and if he will make a statement. [85012]

Mr. Ingram: Confidence in fighting equipment is not the subject of specific surveys among armed forces personnel but it does feature in some more general surveys. For example, the Army's continuous attitude survey contains a question on confidence in fighting equipment and the latest results are as follows:

The questionnaire was sent out to 3,978 personnel, 2,037 surveys were returned of which 1,843 people answered the following specific question:

Do you have confidence in your fighting equipment?

	Number	*Percentage*
Very unhappy	56	3
Unhappy	264	14.3
Neutral	582	31.6
Confident	831	45.1
Very confident	110	6

Figures represent the total numbers for that response. Figures in brackets are the percentage figures of those responding.

In the Royal Navy and the RAF questions on this subject are not included in attitude surveys of all personnel but they do feature in surveys of some of those who have decided to leave. The latest details are as follows:

Royal Navy Officers Notice Option Survey 2000–01:

The total number of officers surveyed in this survey was 247, of which 174 responded with 165 personnel answering the following question:

Satisfaction with equipment effectiveness?

	Number	*Percentage*
Very satisfied	0	0
Satisfied	34	20
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	75	43
Dissatisfied	42	24
Very dissatisfied	14	8

RAF Airmen and Aircrew Leavers Survey:

The questionnaire was issued to 4,278 airmen/women. A total of 1,208 questionnaires were completed with a total of 1,190 personnel answering the following question:

How satisfied are you with RAF equipment?

	Number	*Percentage*
Very satisfied/satisfied	366	31
Neutral	380	32
Dissatisfied/very dissatisfied	444	37

Note:
1,190 individuals responded to this question

Firefighters' Dispute

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on pay differentials between Royal Navy personnel engaged on firefighters duties during the present strike and the striking firemen. [94536]

Mr. Ingram: As the Ministry of Defence is not a party to the national firelighters dispute, no assessment has been made by the Department of any differential between the pay of Royal Navy personnel engaged on Operation Fresco and that of professional firemen. The pay structures for both service personnel and firelighters are in the public domain.

Friendly Fire

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British service personnel were *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured by friendly fire from US forces in the Gulf War. [94136]

Mr. Ingram: Nine personnel were killed and 13 wounded by friendly fire from US forces during the Gulf War in two separate incidents.

Gibraltar

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to commemorate 300 years of British sovereignty in Gibraltar. [94867]

Mr. Ingram: At this time the Ministry of Defence has no plans to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the capture of Gibraltar in 1704 by British forces, though the Department will undoubtedly consider the matter as and when the Government of Gibraltar raises the subject.

Harrier

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether Harrier GR7s have recently been subject to engine problems. [94557]

Mr. Ingram: Currently, the Harrier GR7 fleet is fitted with the Rolls-Royce Pegasus Mk105 engine. There have been no recent problems with this engine.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; and if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92393]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, columns 326–27W to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan). This relates to the disposal of surplus equipment of historical interest, the total proceeds of the items listed being £123,500. Records of similar disposals prior to 2000 are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

In addition we have disposed of the following historical buildings and sites since 1997:

Anglesey House and Cottage, Aldershot
Beaumont Stables and Riding School, Aldershot
30 Carlton Place, Southampton (TA offices)
Caslandhill Farm, Rosyth
Caterham Barracks, Surrey
Colchester Abbey Gate House
Ditton Park, Slough
Duke of York's Barracks, London
Dreghorn Barracks, Dunalister, Edinburgh
Farnborough Aerodrome
Farnborough Factory Site
Former Mine Watching Establishment, Inchgarvie Island
Former Maritime Headquarters (part of site), Pitreavie
Former Naval Base, Rosyth
Fulford Steading, Woodhouselee
Gilmore Place, Edinburgh
Gogarbank Steading, Edinburgh
Gordon Barracks, Site 31, Aberdeen
Hanover Street, Edinburgh
Horseshoe Barracks, Shoeburyness
Limekilns Road, Dunfermline
Migilligan Martello Tower, County Londonderry
Morlich House (The Square), Grantown-on-Spey
Ness Battery, Stromness, Orkney Islands
Park Circus, Glasgow
Ramsay Garden, Edinburgh
Royal Naval Engineering College, Plymouth (within the College were two Grade 2 listed buildings)
Royal Army Medical College, Millbank, London
Royal Terrace, Edinburgh
Rutland Square, Edinburgh
St. Leonard's Bank, Perth
St. Mark's Church Shorncliffe, Kent
Snowden Place, Stirling
Strathearn Road, Edinburgh
Waltham Abbey

Total proceeds were some £204 million.

Iraq

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for how long the *(a)* Royal Navy and *(b)* Royal Marines components of the Middle East Task Force will be able to maintain the deployment. [94529]

Mr. Ingram: We continue to hope that Saddam Hussein will disarm voluntarily, but it is evident that we will not persuade him to do so unless we present him with a clear and credible threat of force. No decision has been taken to commit British forces to military action, nor is such a decision inevitable or imminent. It is therefore premature to speculate about the duration of military deployments or about the rotation or replacement of those forces involved.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he has made of the practicability of Iraqi *(a)* aircraft and *(b)* missiles using (i) chemical weapons and (ii) biological agents to attack Royal Navy warships; [94533]

(2) what his latest assessment is of the level of air threat to British naval forces in the Gulf in the event of hostilities with Iraq. [94534]

Mr. Ingram: The threat to United Kingdom assets is kept under review. I am withholding details of the assessment of threat levels in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which relates to defence, security and international relations.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* chemical and *(b)* biological weapons have been identified as parts of Saddam Hussein's chemical and biological warfare arsenal since the end of the Gulf War. [94535]

Mr. Hoon: The Government's assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was published on 24 September 2002.

John Hall

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether an official from his Department attended the inquest of John Hall of Shetland Road, Leicester. [80122]

Dr. Moonie: There is no evidence in records that are available that any officials from the Ministry of Defence attended the inquest of John Hall of Shetland Road, Leicester.

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what involvement his Department had in the examination of the brain of the late John Hall. [80124]

Dr. Moonie: There is no evidence in records that are available that the Ministry of Defence had any involvement in the examination of the brain of the late John Hall.

Media Representatives (Gulf)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements will be put in place for press and broadcast media representatives covering military activities in the Gulf. [93905]

Mr. Ingram: Arrangements between the media and the Ministry of Defence are conducted in accordance with the details laid out in the Green Book,"Working Arrangements with the Media in times of Emergency, Tension, Conflict or War". This covers the practical arrangements for enabling media representatives to report events both at home and abroad and includes our plans for representative numbers of correspondents to accompany British forces in the frontline. It also outlines the policy that would facilitate or restrict the activities of journalists during operations. A copy of the Green Book is available on the Ministry of Defence website, at www.mod.uk.

On 17 January, the Director General Corporate Communications wrote to media representatives to inform them of the broad arrangements we intend to put in place in the event of military action. If and when the situation demands, editors will be called forward for fuller briefing on evolving events in order to clarify the detailed working arrangements for inclusion of UK media with our armed forces.

The above arrangements do not imply that military action is any more likely. It is simply a question of prudent preparation. It remains the case that military action is neither imminent nor inevitable.

Military Bases (Seaward Defence)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the capability of the Royal Navy to mount a seaward defence of British military bases *(a)* in Gibraltar and *(b)* in Cyprus following the assembly of the Middle East Task Force. [94547]

Mr. Ingram: Seaward defence of United Kingdom bases in both Gibraltar and Cyprus is provided in a joint manner, using Maritime, Air and Land assets. The ability to defend British military bases is kept under review. I am withholding details of the capability in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Defence, Security and International Relations).

Ministerial Travel

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many flights by *(a)* his Department's Ministers and *(b)* other Ministers were made last year using aircraft belonging to his Department; and how many non-scheduled special flights carrying ministers were made in 2002. [94987]

Dr. Moonie: Since 1999 this Government have published an annual list of all visits overseas undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more during each financial year. The Government have also published on an annual basis the cost of all Ministers' visits overseas. Copies of the lists are available in the Libraries of the House.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Naval Air Squadrons

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the *(a)* newest and *(b)* oldest helicopter airframe in service with (i) 847 NAS, (ii) 846 NAS and (iii) 845 NAS. [93649]

Mr. Ingram: The newest and oldest airframes in service with 847 NAS, 846 NAS and 845 NAS are as follows.

	Newest—in service date	*Oldest—in service date*
847 NAS		
Lynx Attack Helicopter Mark 7	May 1982 as Mark 1, converted to Mark 7 October 1991	June 1979 as Mark 1 converted to Mark 7 July 1998
Gazelle Attack Helicopter Mark 1	November 1980	May 1973
846 NAS		
Sea King Helicopter Mark 4	January 1987	June 1980
845 NAS		
Sea King Helicopter Mark 4	October 1990	July 1980

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in what operations *(a)* 847 NAS, *(b)* 846 NAS and *(c)* 845 NAS have been involved in the past five years. [93650]

Mr. Ingram: The table lists the operations in which *(a)* 847 NAS, *(b)* 846 NAS and *(c)* 845 NAS have been involved in the past five years:

Serial	*Squadron*	*Operation*	*Date of deployment*
1	847 NAS	Palliser	5 May–4 June 2000
		Silkman	2–18 November 2000
		Agricola	16 November 2000–22 May 2001
		Oracle 1	1 November 2001–4 June 2002
		Telic	16 January 2003–
2	846 NAS	Northern Ireland	1 April 1994–4 March 1999
		Northern Ireland	28 June–16 July 1999
		Northern Ireland	26 June–14 July 2000
		Northern Ireland	23 June–18 July 2001
		Northern Ireland	26 March–20 October 2002
		Palliser	5 May–4 June 2000
		Silkman	2–18 November 2000
		Palatine	27 June–10 November 2002
3	845 NAS	Palatine	11 November 1992–1 January 2001
		Oracle 1	11 November 2001–4 June 2002
		Telic	16 January 2003

Non-lethal Weapons

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions have taken place with United States military representatives on the development of non-lethal weapons; and if he will make a statement. [94083]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence has held discussions on non-lethal weapons with United States military representatives bilaterally, multilaterally and in NATO. The United Kingdom considers that non-lethal weapons have potential military uses, where such uses are compatible with international legal obligations. No joint developments of non-lethal weapons with the United States are currently planned. All potential new weapons are subject to stringent review at all stages of the research and procurement process to ensure compliance with the United Kingdom's obligations under international and domestic law.

Ocean Class Commando Carrier

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when HMS Ocean is due to undergo her next refit. [94549]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Ocean recently completed her first docking period at Portsmouth as part of a planned maintenance cycle. Under this maintenance cycle Ocean will undergo a further docking period in about four years and a refit, which is a more substantial package of work, in about eight years time.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to fulfil the landing platform helicopter role when HMS Ocean is not available. [94550]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy aircraft carriers have the capability to operate in the Landing Platform Helicopter role as a secondary role, as demonstrated by HMS Ark Royal in her current deployment as part of Naval Task Group 2003.

Operational Capacity

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the capacity of the *(a)* Royal Navy and *(b)* Royal Marines to engage in operations other than in the Gulf with the personnel and equipment not despatched to the Gulf. [94530]

Mr. Ingram: I am withholding details of capability in accordance with Exemption 1 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Defence, Security and International Relations).

Qinetiq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what safeguards were built into the partial sell-off of QinetiQ to protect intellectual property rights held by DSTL. [93887]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has retained full ownership for Intellectual property that was generated and predominantly used within that part of DERA which became Dstl. QinetiQ has no rights in this intellectual property. Additionally MOD has free rights of continued use for defence and security purposes of the Intellectual Property that was transferred to QinetiQ at Vesting.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what process was used by his Department to determine the balance of debt and equity in the sell-off of QinetiQ. [93888]

Dr. Moonie: When QinetiQ was created as a plc it had to purchase its assets from the Ministry of Defence. The MOD required the company to purchase these with a combination of shares and interest bearing loan notes payable to the MOD.

The split between debt and equity was made following specialist advice to MOD from its external banking advisors and discussions with QinetiQ senior management.

In creating a new company it is usual to inject a degree of debt into the capital structure; this ensures that management have the correct incentives to manage cashflow and capital expenditure in a prudent manner.

As is customary in leveraged transactions the bidder indicated its preferred capital structure for the business. The MOD has sought professional advice at each stage of the process to ensure that the levels of debt and equity are sustainable and will ensure the future financial stability of QinetiQ.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what formula was used by his Department to calculate the value of QinetiQ prior to its partial privatisation. [93890]

Dr. Moonie: In order to inform the decision process and the negotiations with potential bidders the Ministry of Defence had obtained valuations for QinetiQ at various stages of the PPP. Prior to the sale MOD's advisors undertook a valuation based on the information provided to potential purchasers in the QinetiQ information memorandum. Their valuation approach was to use two methods, a discounted cashflow analysis and an analysis of comparable trading companies.

The discounted cash flow was based on the company's financial model and made use of cost of capital estimates provided by advisors.

The analysis of comparable companies attempted to provide a price for QinetiQ based on other firms in the same sector. QinetiQ is a complex business operating in several different sectors. In order to derive a more accurate view of the overall value the comparison was based on sub-divisions of QinetiQ which were compared to a selection of companies in the same sector.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what expenditure was incurred in the sell-off of QinetiQ *(a)* in consultancy payments by his Department, *(b)* by DERA, *(c)* by QinetiQ, *(d)* by DSTL and *(e)* by other parties. [93892]

Dr. Moonie: The total forecast costs to the Ministry of Defence of consultancy, up to completion, is expected to be £17 million. This covers all stages of the Defence Evaluation Research Agency (DERA) Public Private Partnership (PPP), including the detailed options study, public consultation process, vesting of QinetiQ as a plc and completion of the sale of shares in the company.

The total cost of the PPP falling to DERA was £39.3 million, which includes consultancy costs. The total cost of the PPP falling to QinetiQ through to completion is expected to be £18.7 million, including consultancy fees, information technology and infrastructure costs. The total PPP cost falling to DSTL was £3.3 million, which was mostly infrastructure costs.

The competition attracted interest from around 40 potential investors. We have no information regarding how much was spent in total by these potential investors throughout the process.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what formula was used by his Department to calculate the contaminated land liabilities associated with the assets held by QinetiQ; and if he will make a statement on the value put on these liabilities by the Carlyle Group in its investment negotiations. [93891]

Dr. Moonie: Responsibility for almost all historic and all future environmental liabilities on freehold sites owned by QinetiQ transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the company on 1 July 2001. Following extensive discussions with insurance advisers and other technical specialists, MOD concluded that there were a small number of uniquely military potential liabilities which could not be transferred on terms which represented good value for money. These potential liabilities, identified in the Departmental Minute laid before Parliament on 8 July 2002, relate to work carried out over many decades by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) and its predecessors. This includes work carried out under the conditions of World War 2. Responsibility for these liabilities has always rested with the Ministry of Defence.

There is no cost-effective method of comprehensively identifying or quantifying these liabilities. MOD and DERA did, however, carry out land quality assessment studies on the properties and examine existing records and claims history. On this basis we conclude that the actual risk of MOD incurring these liabilities is extremely low. The decision to retain these liabilities was taken before the appointment of The Carlyle Group as preferred bidder for QinetiQ and followed advice from external advisers that potential purchasers would either refuse to accept these risks or would demand a substantial and disproportionate reduction in the price paid.

Radio Mast (Lagopatria)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 21 January, *Official Report*, column 209W, when the Italian authorities declined to grant the use of a viable radio frequency from Lagopatria for the British forces. [94312]

Mr. Ingram: Records relating to the precise date of an approach to the Italian authorities are not held by the Ministry of Defence. MOD officials have been advised by the Services Sound and Vision Corporation (SSVC), which at the time had lead responsibility, that the approach is thought to have been made in approximately 1994–95. However, SSVC further advise that specific records for that period are no longer held.

Recruitment

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in which countries the UK is recruiting personnel for service in the armed forces; and if he will make a statement. [94574]

Dr. Moonie: While employment in the armed forces is open to citizens of Commonwealth countries and Republic of Ireland nationals as well as British citizens, the services do not actively recruit overseas. Over the last three years, however, the Royal Navy and the Army have sent selection teams to some Commonwealth countries (eg Fiji, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines) at the specific request of the Government concerned, and only when evidence suggests that there is sufficient interest among the local population to merit a visit. The selection teams screen out those who are not thought capable of meeting the full entry standards to save applicants the cost of a potentially nugatory trip to the United Kingdom to undergo the recruitment

process. All applicants, regardless of nationality, are given equal consideration and all have to meet the same basic entry standards.

Reserve Call-up

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Territorial Army called up for service in the Middle East have not completed their basic training. [95349]

Dr. Moonie: As at 30 January 2003, all members of the Territorial Army called up for service under section 54 of the Reserves Forces Act 1996 for operations in the Middle East have completed their basic military training.

Royal Navy Firefighters

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Royal Navy firefighters are *(a)* with the task force and *(b)* on each ship; what the required number is of firefighting personnel on each ship; and if he will make a statement. [93935]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 327W, to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). Royal Navy vessels do not sail without a full complement of damage control and fire-fighting capabilities and that level of support varies from ship to ship. Fire-fighting is not however an individual specialisation. All Royal Navy personnel are trained to fight fires. This training includes training in the use of safety equipment, breathing apparatus and damage control. The level of that training is appropriate to the role they will fulfil at sea. In addition, on each ship, there will be individuals qualified to provide training in fire-fighting. Each ship in the Royal Navy is fully equipped and has the trained personnel to deal with fire hazards. This capability is regularly tested by means of fire-fighting drills.

Royal Navy Ships

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason HMS Fearless was withdrawn from service prior to HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark entering service. [94553]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 18 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 3 to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), and to the answer given on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 714W to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray).

Pursuant to these answers, HMS Albion has commenced contractor sea trials and is expected to enter service with the Royal Navy by July 2003. Following operational training, she should be available for tasking in October 2003. The programme for HMS Bulwark is still under discussion with the contractor, but the current expectation is that she will enter service by the end of next year.

Royal Ordnance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is supplied from ROF Chorley; and what the length is of each contract. [92034]

Mr. Ingram: Tube Vent Electric L4 are supplied to the Ministry of Defence from RO Chorley as part of a contract with RO Defence which has recently been extended to 31 March 2006. RO Chorley also supply initiating devices. In-service surveillance and proof activities work is undertaken at the proof yard facility at RO Chorley. This contract is due to expire at the end of March 2003 but negotiations are taking place with a view to extending this.

S-type Contracts

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers in the last 10 years have been employed on an S-type contract, broken down by *(a)* reason, *(b)* regiment, *(c)* those still serving on S-type contracts and *(d)* rank. [92703]

Dr. Moonie: The number of soldiers in the last 10 years employed on an S-type engagement, broken down by regiment/corps and rank, and indicating those still serving are shown in the table.

The reasons for soldiers being employed on an S-type engagement are not collated centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

A breakdown by rank for corporal and above is not given because this could identify individuals and breach disclosure and confidentiality policy. The information is therefore being withheld under Exemption 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Privacy of an individual). A breakdown within the RAC, AMS, some infantry regiments and some smaller corps is not given for the same reason. These are shown as single line entries for the RAC and AMS, under others for the smaller corps and line entries for each division of infantry to cover those regiments and former regiments within the division not listed separately.

Regt/corps	*Private*	*Lance corporal*	*Corporal and above*	*Still serving*
H CAV	8	4	5	2
RAC	6	3	50	70
RA	9	[illegible]	60	38
RE	63	20	44	41
R Signals	37	34	95	68
Welsh GDS	76	20	36	6
Other GDS div	50	14	32	42
Royal Scots	40	6	7	28
Kings Own Scottish Borderers	41	7	11	22
Black Watch	12	5	8	14

Regt/corps	Private	Lance corporal	Corporal and above	Still serving
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders	19	15	14	15
Other Scots div	40	7	16	25
Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment	37	14	29	31
Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	48	10	26	29
Royal Anglian	20	11	37	44
Other Queens div	12	1	2	3
Kings Own Royal Border regt.	25	6	8	17
Kings regt.	7	9	9	13
Green Howards	36	13	11	20
Queens Lancashire regt	33	15	17	12
Other Kings div	25	11	18	22
Devonshire and Dorset regt.	16	9	11	18
Royal Glocs., Berks and Wilts regt.	12	10	11	9
Worcs. and Sherwood Foresters regt.	28	5	10	10
Staffordshire regt.	27	7	7	7
Other Prince Of Wales's div	66	17	16	21
Light Division	89	35	70	74
R Irish	429	189	309	426
Para	104	23	32	39
SAS	0	0	33	18
RLC	123	94	125	121
AMS	89	18	35	20
REME	18	27	100	78
AGC	12	39	155	90
Others	2	0	6	6
Totals	1,798	764	1,455	1,499

Service Personnel (Gulf)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the food that is being sent to the Gulf with *(a)* the Naval Task Force and *(b)* the land forces deployment by (i) type, (ii) quantity and (iii) cost; and if he will make a statement. [93413]

Mr. Ingram: The type of food being sent to the Gulf in support of British Forces is a mixture of Operational Ration Packs and fresh food. I am withholding the quantity in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information which relates to Defence, Security and International Relations. Costs are not yet available as the bulk of our force has not arrived in the region and the military feeding plan is not sufficiently mature to generate meaningful data.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost is of providing United Kingdom military forces and medical auxiliaries deployed to the Gulf with prophylactic measures against *(a)* chemical and biological weapons and *(b)* insects. [93898]

Dr. Moonie: The United Kingdom armed forces have available to them a range of prophylactic measures to protect against chemical and biological weapons and insects. Because of the range of measures available and the fact that they are not specific to the deployment of personnel to the Gulf, the information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what help is being given to companies that are supplying the uniform for the troops on deployment to the Gulf. [93997]

Mr. Ingram: Under normal circumstances the Senior Commercial Officer is the initial point of contact within the Defence Clothing (DC) organisation for all contractor inquiries. He provides information on how the Ministry of Defence procures and the processes applicable. For the current deployment the Defence Clothing organisation has established a small operational cell to assist contractors in the delivery of clothing requirements. This cell provides a link between contractors and other Agencies within the defence supply chain.

Since the Defence Clothing organisation uses reputable contractors, many of whom have done business with the MOD before, the channels of communications are well known and the types of support available are well established.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost is of uniforms procured for troops deployed to the Gulf. [94082]

Mr. Ingram: The total cost approved to date for clothing and related items of personal equipment required for troops deployed to the Gulf, in addition to that already held in stock, is approximately £22 million, although the actual figure spent could be less.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when (1) he expects desert *(a)* jackets, *(b)* trousers, *(c)* boots and *(d)* helmets to be delivered to troops deployed to the Gulf. [94091]

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (2) when the new uniforms are due to be delivered to troops deployed to the Gulf. [94100]

Mr. Ingram: Troops deploying to the Gulf will be issued with the full desert clothing ensemble in time for any potential operations.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what uniform in addition to the standard issue is being ordered for use by troops deployed to the Gulf. [94101]

Mr. Ingram: In addition to standard issue items, troops will be issued with a full desert ensemble (listed as follows) covering all required elements of head-to-toe protection. Service personnel are issued with the clothing appropriate to the environment in which they are required to deploy.

Clothing:

Desert Field Jacket (plus hood), Desert Lightweight Jacket and Trousers, Desert Hat, Face Veil, Sweat Rags, Warm Weather T-Shirt, Warm Weather Socks, and Desert Combat Boots.

Nuclear:

Biological and Chemical: Suits, Boots, Gloves, Canisters and Respirators.

Enhanced Combat Body Armour:

Cover, Filler and Plates.

Other items:

Operational Travel Bag, Lightweight Sleeping Bag, Cotton Sleeping Bag Liner, Personal Load Carriage Equipment Cover, Mk 6 Helmet Cover, Goggles, Sun Glasses, Sun Cream and Mosquito Net.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what socks supplied for use by the Army are being modified for use by troops deployed to the Gulf. [94102]

Mr. Ingram: A Warm Weather Sock, designed specifically for use in hotter climates, is being procured for troops deploying to the Gulf. None of the existing socks are being modified.

Survey Ships

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Royal Navy *(a)* paid off each of its ocean and coastal survey ships and *(b)* brought into full operational service HMS Echo and HMS Enterprise. [94545]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy has not paid off each of its ocean and coastal survey ships, but has decommissioned one ocean class (HMS Herald, commissioned in 1974) and two coastal class (HMS Bulldog and HMS Beagle, both commissioned in 1968) survey ships during financial year 2001–02. Two replacement, and considerably more capable, coastal survey ships (HMS Echo and HMS Enterprise) are currently scheduled to enter service in May 2003 and December 2003 respectively.

Swiftsure Class Submarines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the operational status is of each of the Swiftsure class submarines; and when each is expected to be paid off. [94552]

Mr. Ingram: The specific operational status of each submarine is classified for security reasons and is being withheld under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The planned operational decommissioning dates for the Royal Navy's Swiftsure submarines are as follows.

	Submarines
2003	HMS Splendid
2005	HMS Sovereign
2006	HMS Superb
2006	HMS Spartan
2010	HMS Sceptre

Tanker Vessels

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Royal Navy *(a)* paid off each of the O-class RFA tankers and *(b)* brought into full operational service their Wave-class replacements. [94546]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy decommissioned two O-class RFA Fleet tankers during financial year 2000–01: HMS Olwen (commissioned in 1965) and HMS Olna (commissioned in 1966). Of their Wave-class Auxiliary Oilers (AO) vessel replacements, HMS Wave Knight is expected to enter service in February 2003 and HMS Wave Ruler in March 2003.

Terrorism

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the terrorist threat to *(a)* Royal Navy and Royal Marines recruitment offices and *(b)* Royal Navy and Royal Marines museums since September 2001. [94541]

Mr. Ingram: The assessment of threats to all establishments connected with the armed forces is kept under constant review. Royal Navy and Royal Marine careers office managers and the directors of our museums are kept aware of threat assessments and precautions are taken accordingly.

Type 23 Frigate

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will fit Goalkeeper or Phalanx systems to Type 23 frigates. [94543]

Mr. Ingram: Anti-Ship Missile Defence and Close in Weapon Defence for Type 23 is provided by the Vertical Launch Seawolf missile system and close-range guns, and we are currently considering a programme to provide self-defence to surface vessels by enabling them to identify, engage and defeat small enemy craft. However, physical constraints preclude fitting Goalkeeper or Phalanx to Type 23s.

Uniforms (Procurement)

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposed improvements to uniforms issued to HM forces are being studied by the Defence Procurement Agency. [94087]

Mr. Ingram: We constantly strive to improve service clothing. All of the latest improvements that have reached maturity have been incorporated into the orders that have been placed for contingency preparations for the Gulf. The Defence Logistic Organisation and not the Defence Procurement Agency are responsible for the procurement and management of clothing.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who is responsible for future strategy on the procurement of uniforms for HM forces. [94099]

Mr. Ingram: The Equipment Capability Customer organisation is responsible for the future strategy on the procurement of operational clothing. The Defence Clothing Joint User Working Group, in consultation with the single-Service Dress Committees, has responsibility for the strategy on the procurement of parade and ceremonial uniforms.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Reception Centres

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what due diligence was carried out on the company Accommodata, which is to operate the refugee and asylum reception centre at the Coniston Hotel; when NASS signed a contract with them; who owns Accommodata; under what jurisdiction they are based; and if he will make a statement. [91358]

Beverley Hughes: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is part of the Home Office and all its procurement exercises are undertaken in accordance with standard Government procurement rules. As part of the procurement process checks were made on the capability and suitability of Accommodata, a UK-based limited company. A contract for use of rooms at the Coniston Hotel was signed on 11 December 2002.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions NASS has had with the owners of the Coniston Hotel about its plans for a refugee and asylum reception centre. [91359]

Beverley Hughes: There have been no discussions between the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and the current owners of the Coniston Hotel. NASS has entered into a contract with Accommodata to provide up to 111 bedspaces at the hotel.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what undertakings the Home Office gave to Kent county council with respect to agreeing not to open further refugee and asylum reception centres. [91360]

Beverley Hughes: In 2000 we agreed that Kent would not be a dispersal area for asylum seekers. Since 2000 asylum seekers have been housed in emergency accommodation in Kent whilst their applications for support (including accommodation) were processed. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) have not given any undertakings to Kent county council that it would not open any additional emergency accommodation nor any induction centres which are planned as the replacement for emergency accommodation.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people formerly resident in the Sangatte camp have been given permission to enter the UK since the closure of the camp. [93581]

Beverley Hughes: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 182W.

Margaret Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of asylum claims received a decision within two months in the last period for which figures are available. [93864]

Beverley Hughes: The latest provisional data indicate that 77 per cent. of applications[1,2] received in April to June 2002 had initial decisions reached and served within two months[3]. The corresponding figure for 2001–02 was 60 per cent. Information on asylum applications is published quarterly. The next publication will be available from the end of February 2003 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

[1] A-CID database as at 1 November 2002.

[2] Excludes withdrawals and third country cases which may be the responsibility of other EU member states under the terms of the Dublin Convention. Home Office's Public Service Agreement target for 2001–02 was 60 per cent. and for 2002–03 is 65 per cent. Details of Government targets relating to the proportion of decisions served within two months are provided in the 2000 Spending Review Public Service Agreements White Paper available from .

[3] "Two months" is defined as 61 days, "Four months" is defined as 122 days, "Six months" is defined as 183 days.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list hotels and guesthouses in Horley, Surrey which are providing accommodation to asylum seekers; how many individuals are accommodated in each case; and what their country of origin is. [94446]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) does not currently accommodate any asylum seekers in hotels in Horley. NASS does not have a central record of hotels used by local authorities providing housing for asylum seekers.

Caythorpe Court

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will meet the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham in the next three days in order to discuss Home Office plans to use Caythorpe Court as an emergency centre for asylum seekers. [94639]

Mr. Blunkett: I refer the right hon. and learned Member to my letters of 28 and 29 January 2003.

Child Pornography

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with banks and credit card companies to request *(a)* that they proactively seek out child pornography sites, *(b)* that they take action to prevent their credit cards and other financial facilities being used to pay for child pornography and *(c)* that they report the details of customers who attempt to pay for internet child pornography by credit card to the police. [91975]

Hilary Benn: Those who view child pornography, particularly those who pay to do so, should be clear that they fuel the demand for those images. This demand

undeniably leads to actual abuse of children, sometimes as young as four or five, in the United Kingdom and abroad.

The payment card companies have been working on this issue for some time and work closely with the police. More recently, they have begun dialogue with the Children's Charities Coalition for Internet Safety, which they hope will lead to a joint statement. In addition, the use of payment cards in relation to child pornography is an area United Kingdom and overseas police are focussing on as a means of investigating those who supply and those who consume child pornography.

The answer to my hon. Friend's specific questions are as follows:

(a) The International Card Schemes, on behalf of the wider banking industry, monitor websites working together with law enforcement agencies around the world. In particular, Visa has a unit which scans the internet to identify websites that accept credit or debit cards and contain child pornography.

(b) United Kingdom financial institutions that provide facilities to merchants take precautions to ensure they do not do business with merchants distributing illegal material. If they discover that a merchant is engaged in such business, they terminate the relationship and contact law enforcement.

(c) Normally it will not be apparent from the information received by the card issuers that the transaction relates to illegal business. However, where a card issuer becomes aware that a customer has been conducting illegal business using their card, they will alert law enforcement. The card issuers also fully co-operate with the police when approached for information or assistance.

Co-ordinated action by the major credit card schemes can have a major impact on the commercial trade in child pornography, but this can only be effective if all the schemes are equally involved. We welcome the efforts they have made so far and will continue to work with them to make this as effective as possible.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been arrested in the course of Operation Ore; and how many have been charged. [93480]

Hilary Benn: I understand that 5,700 of the United Kingdom Operation Ore suspects are being investigated by Home Office police forces (the remainder are being investigated by Scottish Forces, Police Service of Northern Ireland and the island forces). In relation to those suspects, as of 23 January 2003, 1,512 searches have been carried out and 1,336 arrests have been made. 189 individuals have been charged.

All forces have prioritised those suspects who have access to children at home or at work and those in sensitive occupations. Typically, computer equipment is seized during the search of suspects' addresses. The capacity to forensically examine the volume of computer data accumulated by these suspects is limited and the Government has provided an additional £500,000 for training and equipment for forces to build capacity for this kind of operation. This Government has provided record funding for police forces and has established child protection as a priority in the National Policing Plan. It is for Chief Constables and police authorities to improve the quality of their child protection units within those resources. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and Ministers are continuing to monitor progress.

Conviction Data

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the performance of each constabulary in recording conviction data on the police national computer under the court results 90 per cent. data targets for the latest month available. [90306]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* The particular data to which the hon. Member refers relates to recording not only convictions but all court results. It shows the time taken from the completion of court proceedings to record the quickest 90 per cent. of cases entered during the period in question. The data reflects the longest time taken to record any case within the quickest 90 per cent. The figures include the time taken by courts to notify results to the police, and will be affected by factors such as delays due to a need to clarify results, or undertaking back record conversion exercises.

The following table shows the results for forces in England and Wales in December 2002. The average figure for the nine-month period from April to December 2002 was 71 days. This compares with an average of 220 days for the period from April 2000 to March 2001, and of 196 days for the period between April 2001 to March 2002.

We have made clear our determination that the timeliness of inputting data onto the police national computer should be improved. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) reported (Police National Computer Data Quality and Timeliness—Second Report December 2002) that substantial progress had been made following the inspection and review exercise that we commissioned, but that more needed to be done. To this end, we are working with the Association of Chief Police Officers to implement HMIC's recommendations.

Constabulary/Force	*Number of days*
Avon and Somerset	20
Bedfordshire	25
Cambridgeshire	56
Cheshire	45
City of London	145
Cleveland	419
Cumbria	19
Derbyshire	14
Devon and Cornwall	14
Dorset	20
Durham	53
Dyfed Powys	30
Essex	20
Gloucestershire	290
Greater Manchester	82
Gwent	84
Hampshire	59
Hertfordshire	66
Humberside	18
Kent	131
Lancashire	36
Leicestershire	30

Constabulary/Force	Number of days
Lincolnshire	94
Merseyside	49
Metropolitan	248
Norfolk	18
North Wales	23
North Yorkshire	90
Northamptonshire	155
Northumbria	11
Nottinghamshire	35
South Wales	30
South Yorkshire	30
Staffordshire	20
Suffolk	14
Surrey	47
Sussex	80
Thames Valley	22
Warwickshire	45
West Mercia	27
West Midlands	164
West Yorkshire	54
Wiltshire	69

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many ex-gratia payments have been made by the Criminal Records Bureau to customers because of maladministration. [91776]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The Criminal Records Bureau has made 225 ex-gratia payments to customers because of maladministration.

Custodial Sentences (Women)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women received a custodial sentence in each of the last five years; what the average length of sentence was in each year; and what proportion were imprisoned for offences of violence in each year. [93295]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is contained in the table.

Women sentenced to immediate custody, average custodial sentence length and proportion sentenced for violent offences[1], England and Wales

	Sentenced to immediate custody for all offences	Average custodial sentence length (months)[2]	Proportion sentenced for violent offences[1]
			Percentage
1997	5,506	9.8	12.9
1998	6,567	9.0	12.1
1999	7,504	8.9	11.2
2000	7,900	9.1	11.8
2001	8,061	10.4	12.2

[1] Offences of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery
[2] Excluding life

Figures for 2002 are not yet available.

Entitlement Card

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been taken to publicise the entitlement card consultation. [93490]

Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made a statement to the House when the consultation paper was published on 3 July 2002, *Official Report*, column 227. A press release was also published at the time and there was considerable coverage in the national and regional broadcast and print media.

During the consultation period the Home Office has published four further press releases to coincide with Ministerial events. There was also widespread print media reporting and coverage on Sky News of the Home Secretary's speech to a conference on entitlement cards organised by the Information Commissioner on 15 January 2003. The Home Office press office has responded to many requests for briefing by national, local and specialist media.

400 regional press packs were distributed to local broadcast and print media organisations throughout the UK to encourage them to run debates on their programmes or in their publications. Ministers accepted 10 invitations to debate the issues on local radio programmes and discussed the issue on feature programmes on Channel Four and BBC Radio 2. I also took part in a live webcast on BBC News Online.

In addition to media activities to raise general public awareness, considerable effort has been devoted to providing information to key stakeholder organisations through officials preparing special summaries of the consultation paper, holding face-to-face meetings and giving presentations at conferences.

Graffiti

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to tackle graffiti. [92038]

Mr. Denham: The Government take the problem of graffiti very seriously and are examining ways in which it can reduce the problem. It requires action by several Government Departments and is one of the areas addressed in the Government consultation, "Living Places, Powers, Rights and Responsibilities", which was launched at the Urban Summit on 31 October 2002 with a closing date of 14 February 2003.

Writing graffiti is an offence under the Criminal Damage Act 1971. Where criminal proceedings are not appropriate, it can also be dealt with through a number of measures designed to address anti-social behaviour, including anti-social behaviour orders.

The London Local Authorities Bill, which is currently before Parliament, would clamp down on the sale of spray paints to under 18-year-olds within the London area. We are looking carefully at whether we should adopt this approach nationally.

In addition, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships are working with local communities to tackle graffiti. Neighbourhood wardens' programmes and community safety officers are also helping to reduce yobbish behaviour, such as graffiti writing. Local authorities have developed graffiti cleansing programmes and are working with the police to apprehend the culprits.

We are exploring what extra measures may be necessary as part of the work on the Anti-Social Behaviour Bill and White Paper.

Immigration (Members Hotline)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many telephone calls were received by the hon. Members' hotline at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each of the last six weeks. [94480]

Beverley Hughes: The number of telephone calls received by the Members of Parliament hotline is as follows:

Week ending	*Number of calls*
20 December 2002	750
27 December 2002	[1]88
3 January 2003	[2]132
10 January 2003	751
17 January 2003	736
24 January 2003	735

[1] Only 2 days worked.

[2] Only 4 days worked.

Mrs. Gemmell

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the application by Mrs. Gemmell of Christchurch to transfer her visa from an old passport to a new one will be dealt with; and for what reason the application is awaiting a decision. [94445]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: Mrs. Gemmell submitted her passport to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) on 29 November for her visa to be transferred into her new passport. There has been a very large number of applications during this period and some applications, including Mrs. Gemmell's, had to wait longer than usual for initial consideration. However, Mrs. Gemmell's visa was stamped in her new passport on 28 January and her documents are in the process of being returned to her by recorded delivery at her home address.

National Asylum Support Service

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress is being made to increase the number of contracts NASS has with organisations and local authorities in Scotland to provide accommodation for asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [94062]

Beverley Hughes: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodates asylum seekers who request that this be provided as part of an application for support. Currently NASS has two contracts, one with Glasgow City Council and one with the YMCA, to provide accommodation for asylum seekers in Scotland. Discussions with another area are ongoing but I am unable to give further information at this stage because this information is commercially sensitive.

Passports

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will reduce the *(a)* length and *(b)* complexity of the forms used to apply for passports. [93582]

Beverley Hughes: The UK Passport Service (UKPS) introduced the current universal passport application form in 1998. The length of the application form is determined by the requirements for identity authentication, determination of entitlement and the fact that it is an application form for all types of passport application. UKPS had previously used different forms for the different types of service required. However there were problems with this arrangement. For example, people did not always use the form that was right for them and the printing and distribution arrangements were both costly and complicated. The current version of the universal form is the fourth produced by UKPS and has been reviewed and improved over the past four years to ensure that it best meets the needs of UKPS' customers. This is tested through analysis of customer error rates and regular market research as well as analysis of complaints.

The forms are supported by a passport application pack which aims to provide the information required by all UKPS customers. As well as essential information on eligibility and the documents needed to apply, it contains guidance on the services that UKPS offer, the methods of application, fees and details of the complaints procedure. The pack is regularly reviewed to consider where there are opportunities to improve the textual format, provide greater clarity and reduce, where possible, the amount of text.

UKPS is currently undertaking a further review of both the passport application form and the content of the application pack. All relevant stakeholders are being consulted and customer feedback is being taken fully into consideration as part of this process.

Prison Officers (Vacancies)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many vacancies there are for prison officers in prisons in England and Wales; and what the rate of sickness absence for *(a)* prison officers and *(b)* governors was in the last year for which figures are available. [93314]

Hilary Benn: Information on vacancies within Prison Service establishments in England and Wales is as follows.

Vacancies reported as at 1 December 2002 within establishments

	Number
Senior operational managers	54
Officer grades	934

Information relating to sickness absence rates is as follows.

Working days lost per person January-December 2002

	Days lost
Senior operational managers	6.7
Officer grades	17.2

Senior operational managers include all grades known as governors. Officer grades include senior officers and principal officers.

Information on private sector prisons is considered to be commercial in confidence and is not therefore available.

Prison Service Order

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy that there should be a consolidated Prison Service Order encapsulating best practice on safer custody; and if he will make a statement. [93328]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* Prison Service Order (PSO) 2700 (suicide and self-harm prevention) came into effect on 1 January 2003. It replaces the previous instructions and sets out mandatory requirements. This PSO brings existing policy in line with the direction of the Prison Service's approach to suicide prevention (the move from awareness to prevention) and the broader context (decency, safety, the concept of the healthy prison). It provides prison staff with instructions on identifying prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm, and on providing the subsequent care and support for such prisoners.

A guidance document "Suicide Prevention Strategies" has been issued in conjunction with this PSO. Copies of both have been placed in the Library. The guidance document provides suggestions in line with the suicide and self-harm prevention strategy based on the Internal Review of Suicide and Self-harm in the Prison Service, and incorporates protocols on the use of safer cells and information on the role of the Samaritans and prisoner peer supporters. It aims to support the practices and procedures set out in PSO 2700, while recognising that not all the guidance will be appropriate or feasible or affordable for all establishments. Managers are encouraged to judge which suggestions are appropriate to their type/category of establishment and carefully consider which aspects of the advice they believe realistically can be implemented in their establishment with the resources available.

These documents cannot reflect all the learning from the Prison Service's suicide prevention and self-harm reduction programme, which is at its halfway stage. This programme includes a series of projects to improve pre-reception, reception and induction arrangements; inter-agency information exchange; prisoner care; detoxification; prisoner peer support, and the learning from investigations into deaths in custody. The three-year programme, which started in April 2001, will be subject to an independent evaluation, and a new generation of replacement PSOs is planned for 2004. It is likely that, as with PSO 2700 and the supporting guide, the distinction between mandatory actions and good practice will be maintained.

Prisoner Data

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 26 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 252W, on prisoner data, whether the Inmate Information System allows *(a)* prison service staff, *(b)* the social services and *(c)* his Department's officials to access information on where prisoners served previous sentences; and if he will take steps to improve co-ordination between the prison service and social services. [93213]

Hilary Benn: The Inmate Information System allows authorised Prison Service staff to retrieve data of prisoners' previous sentences as long as they have been linked together (on the system) by a member of staff at an establishment or at headquarters. It does not currently allow direct retrieval of such information by other agencies. Approved access by others to agreed data within the new system under development will be enabled by the Criminal Justice System 'exchange' technology now under development by Criminal Justice IT, in line with the targets set out in "Justice For All" (CM 5563).

The Prison Service has taken significant steps in order to improve its liaison with social services, including meetings with individual social services and also centrally. Staffordshire Social Services have been short-listed as finalists in the child protection category of the Community Care Awards 2002 as a result of this work.

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 28 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 428W, on prisoners, whether his Department will make it its policy to put systems in place in order for information on whether prisoners under 35 have served time in young offenders institutions to be centrally available; and what measures his Department will put in place to ensure that reconvicted prisoners who serve sentences in prisons other than the prison in which they served their initial sentence receive continuity with regard to programmes aimed at their rehabilitation. [93218]

Hilary Benn: The Government have put in place targets to deliver improved information systems across the Criminal Justice System by 2005. As part of this, we are considering a replacement for the Prison Service Local Inmate Database System (LIDS) and Inmate Information System (IIS), which will centralise data, improve custodial history information and provide easier interrogation of data across the prison estate and beyond.

The Prison Service already has in place a sentence planning system which seeks to ensure that reconvicted prisoners, returning to custody in a different prison, receive continuity in programmes and other regime interventions designed to address their offending behaviour and prepare them for release. Improved continuity will derive from the new IT based joint prison probation offender assessment system, OASys. Rollout of OASys across the Prison Service is due to start in April 2003 and will take between 12 and 18 months.

Prisoners' Mail

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what security checks are carried out on prisoners' mail in UK prisons. [92028]

Hilary Benn: Prison Rule 35A (and Young Offender Institutions Rule 11) allows for a prisoner's correspondence to be intercepted where it is a necessary and proportionate response to what is sought to be achieved. Further detail is set out in the "Prison Service Security Manual", a copy of which can be found in the Library.

In high security prisons, prisoner correspondence is screened by an x-ray machine when it arrives at the prison, and as a matter of good practice, correspondence will also be subject to drug detection by the prison drug dog. At lower security prisons, this will happen when there is intelligence to suggest there is an illicit article in a prisoner's mail, although some prisons screen all mail as a matter of good practice.

Prisoners are aware that all letters are opened and can be read by staff, except correspondence that has the protection of Prison Rule 39, which protects legal professional privilege or contains confidential material. All correspondence involving a category A prisoner, or of prisoners held on a unit containing a category A prisoner, will be read.

Prisoners who have committed or are remanded for particular offences (e.g. those who pose a threat to children) will have all their mail read, subject to review about the continuing threat that they pose. In all other cases, except where it has been decided that a prisoner's correspondence may provide useful intelligence for particular investigations, around five per cent. of all mail will be read on a random basis based on an assessment of the threat to security at individual establishments.

A prisoner's mail will also be searched during a cell search, unless it is kept in stored property.

Information relating to Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the Scottish Executive and for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland respectively.

Prisons (Mother and Baby Units)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women are held in each of the prison service mother and baby units. [93296]

Hilary Benn: There are currently four mother and baby units which cover England and Wales. Their capacity is as follows: Askham Grange near York has 20 places; Holloway in London has 17 places; New Hall near Wakefield has nine places and Styal in Cheshire has 22 places. This provides a total of 68 places and at the week beginning 13 January 2003, 56 of these places were being used.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women prisoners applied for a place on a mother and baby unit in each of the last five years; and how many applications were successful. [93298]

Hilary Benn: Every woman prisoner with a child under 18 months may apply for a place on a mother and baby unit (MBU). Each women's prison has a mother and baby unit liaison officer who will outline the MBU process to new prisoners and assist with their applications. No figures are held centrally on the number of women who submit applications each year.

Reconviction Rates

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of women prisoners have been reconvicted within two years of release in each of the last five years. [93302]

Hilary Benn: The latest available information for women discharged from prison is for 1997; 51 per cent. were reconvicted within two years of release. Reconviction rates for women prisoners released in 1996, 1995, 1994 and 1993 were 47 per cent., 47 per cent., 46 per cent. and 40 per cent. respectively. These rates are published in "Prison Statistics-England and Wales".

Work Permits

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the transfer of work permits from the Northern Ireland Department of Education and Research to his Department take place. [93673]

Beverley Hughes: Since 1 September 2002 the work permit arrangements for the United Kingdom have been administered by Work Permits (UK) part of the Home Office's Immigration and Nationality Directorate. Prior to this date, Northern Ireland's Department for Employment and Learning undertook the role of administering the work permit arrangements for Northern Ireland.

Young Prisoners

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will bring forward proposals to reform custodial arrangements for 18 to 20-year-old prisoners; and if he will make a statement. [93339]

Hilary Benn: The Government are commited to improve custodial accommodation and offending programmes for 18 to 20-year-olds. A number of initiatives and policy proposals have emerged in the last two years, as the Government have considered their approach to this age group since the creation of the new Youth Justice System for under 18-year-olds.

Resources from the 2002 spending review will be used to pilot proposals made by the social exclusion unit to improve custody and resettlement arrangements for 18 to 20-year-olds. We will use these pilots to build up and test out new standards. The 18 to 20-year-old offender group are likely to benefit from higher standards and enhanced regimes.

We are also investing an additional £14.5 million a year from April 2003 in the Prison Service Custody to Work initiative to increase the number of prisoners getting jobs, education or training places after release. 18 to 20-year-olds are already benefiting from

additional money invested in the programmes funded from previous spending reviews, for example on drug treatment and offending behaviour programmes.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

University Degrees

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many students, from which colleges, have obtained university degrees in each of the last three years in *(a)* fashion knitwear, *(b)* surf science, *(c)* football studies, *(d)* golf course studies and *(e)* jazz studies. [93977]

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the universities and higher education institutions offering undergraduate courses in *(a)* aromatherapy, *(b)* counselling, *(c)* alternative therapies and *(d)* acupuncture; and in each case, how many graduates are produced on average each year. [94704]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The requested information is not held by the Department.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is responsible for the central collection of data on qualifications obtained in UK HE institutions. It records subject details using the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) which relates to standard academic categories rather than specific course titles of the type referred to in this question.

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) maintains a database of full-time HE courses in the UK. Details of courses for 2003 entry can be found on the UCAS website: www.ucas.ac.uk.

Advanced Extension Awards

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the subjects offered in the Advanced Extension Awards; and what plans he has to extend the range of subjects on offer. [94290]

Mr. Miliband: Advanced Extension Awards are currently available in biology, chemistry, critical studies, economics, English, French, geography, German, history, Irish, Latin, maths, physics, religious studies, Spanish, Welsh and Welsh second language. We have decided to extend the range of subjects offered, which will include piloting a vocational subject.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the student take-up of Advanced Extension Awards was in 2002; and what percentage of those candidates were in each grade boundary. [94291]

Mr. Miliband: There were 6,841 entries for Advanced Extension Awards in 2002, the first year this qualification was offered. 16.8 per cent were awarded a Distinction, 31.1 per cent. achieved a Merit and 52.1 per cent. were graded as Unclassified.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92379]

Mr. Miliband: I refer the hon. Member to the answer provided by Cabinet Office to this question on 22 January 2003. *Official report* column. 334W.

Degree Courses

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the effect of curriculum changes at secondary level on the future duration of the undergraduate degree course. [94313]

Mr. Miliband: The curriculum changes at secondary level planned under the 14–19 reforms which we announced last week are not expected to have any effect on the duration of undergraduate degree courses.

Examinations

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his answer of 4 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 24W, on examinations, whether the sums include the cost of *(a)* production, *(b)* printing, *(c)* marking and *(d)* moderation of progress tests taken by Year 7 pupils. [94147]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* The costs of producing Year 7 progress tests were included in my previous reply, as part of the costs of the Key Stage 2 tests.

The costs of printing/distributing and marking the Year 7 progress tests were not included in my previous reply. These are:

2001: £1.4 million

2002: £1.4 million

There are no moderation costs in relation to Year 7 progress tests.

Foundation Degrees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many universities will be involved in the Foundation Degree Forward network. [94077]

Margaret Hodge: We are discussing with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) the detailed arrangements, including the number of universities to be involved. A full announcement will be made shortly.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many universities his Department has consulted on the Foundation Degree Forward scheme. [94076]

Margaret Hodge: Officials discussed this proposal informally, with a range of universities and bodies representing universities prior to the publication of the HE Strategy document. Responses to "The Future of Higher Education"(Cm 5735) will inform how we take this initiative forward.

Further Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the ratio between students

and lecturers in the further education sector was in each of the last three years expressed in terms of full-time equivalents for both students and lecturers; and what ratio is projected for the next two years. [92831]

Margaret Hodge: Student staff ratios are routinely published in the DfES Departmental Report and the figures below are derived from Annex L of the Department's 2002 Report.

Student to academic staff ratio—Further Education in sector colleges

Year	Numbers
1997–98	16.2
1998–99	15.8
1999–2000	15.8

Formal projections are not made, but the expectation is that the numbers will remain around the same level for the next two years.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time lecturers in further education colleges had a recognised teaching qualification in each year since 1997. [94373]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* The proportion of teaching staff in FE colleges recorded as holding recognised teaching qualifications in each year since 1997 is shown as follows:

Percentage

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Full-time staff				
Fully qualified	46	45	48	48
Part-qualified	7	8	10	11
Part-time staff				
Fully qualified	19	17	19	21
Part-qualified	10	10	13	15

Source:
LSC Staff Individualised Record.

GCSEs

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of pupils sitting GCSE last year achieved grade C or higher in all three core subjects of English, mathematics and science in each local education authority. [93952]

Mr. Miliband *[holding reply 28 January 2003]*: The percentage of pupils achieving grade C or higher in the three core subjects (English, maths and science) in the 2001–02 GCSE examinations for each local authority is shown in the table.

LEA	*Percentage of 15-year-old pupils achieving GCSE A*-C in English, Maths and Science*
London, City of	n/a
Camden	35.5
Greenwich	20.6
Hackney	20.6
Hammersmith and Fulham	37.7
Islington	21.0
Kensington and Chelsea	40.0
Lambeth	24.2
Lewisham	27.1
Southwark	21.6
Tower Hamlets	22.8
Wandsworth	30.9
Westminster, City of	30.1
Barking and Dagenham	24.4
Barnet	46.8
Bexley	36.5
Brent	36.4
Bromley	45.8
Croydon	33.3
Ealing	34.3
Enfield	33.6
Haringey	23.6
Harrow	45.8
Havering	41.0
Hillingdon	32.8
Hounslow	36.2
Kingston upon Thames	49.5
Merton	28.8
Newham	27.9
Redbridge	48.8
Richmond upon Thames	38.4
Sutton	53.5
Waltham Forest	32.8
Birmingham	30.3
Coventry	29.7
Dudley	37.0
Sandwell	21.2
Solihull	40.1
Walsall	28.7
Wolverhampton	28.2
Knowsley	16.9
Liverpool	26.0
St Helens	30.6
Sefton	37.5
Wirral	40.3
Bolton	34.5
Bury	43.5
Manchester	22.0
Oldham	28.1
Rochdale	25.9
Salford	25.0
Stockport	41.1
Tameside	30.6
Trafford	48.2
Wigan	37.2
Barnsley	23.9
Doncaster	27.4
Rotherham	28.8
Sheffield	31.2
Bradford	25.2
Calderdale	34.8
Kirklees	33.4
Leeds	30.5
Wakefield	32.2
Gateshead	35.5
Newcastle upon Tyne	26.9
North Tyneside	34.3
South Tyneside	31.1
Sunderland	27.7
Isles of Scilly	44.4
Bath and North East Somerset	44.6
Bristol, City of	21.2
North Somerset	40.4
South Gloucestershire	38.2
Hartlepool	29.6
Middlesbrough	24.2
Redcar and Cleveland	35.0

LEA	Percentage of 15-year-old pupils achieving GCSE A*-C in English, Maths and Science
Stockton on Tees	32.5
Kingston upon Hull, City of	17.5
East Riding of Yorkshire	37.2
North East Lincolnshire	25.6
North Lincolnshire	30.9
North Yorkshire	46.7
York, City of	43.2
Bedfordshire	37.1
Luton	25.3
Buckinghamshire	52.3
Milton Keynes	27.7
Derbyshire	39.2
Derby City	33.2
Dorset	45.1
Poole	49.9
Bournemouth	41.7
Durham	28.6
Darlington	35.4
East Sussex	36.5
Brighton and Hove	29.0
Hampshire	42.8
Portsmouth	22.6
Southampton	28.7
Leicestershire	39.3
Leicester City	27.5
Rutland	47.5
Staffordshire	36.8
Stoke on Trent	26.1
Wiltshire	44.0
Swindon	35.3
Bracknell Forest	35.8
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	43.8
West Berkshire	43.6
Reading	33.9
Slough	40.5
Wokingham	52.4
Cambridgeshire	40.5
Peterborough, City of	27.8
Cheshire	45.8
Halton	29.7
Warrington	37.5
Devon	37.1
Plymouth, City of	37.1
Torbay	41.0
Essex	38.1
Southend	43.9
Thurrock	28.6
Herefordshire	42.7
Worcestershire	38.0
Kent	41.1
Medway	36.2
Lancashire	38.9
Blackburn with Darwen	28.1
Blackpool	23.7
Nottinghamshire	34.2
Nottingham, City of	19.5
Shropshire	43.7
Telford and Wrekin	34.8
Cornwall	38.9
Cumbria	39.9
Gloucestershire	47.4
Hertfordshire	43.0
Isle of Wight	30.6
Lincolnshire	41.3
Norfolk	37.6
Northamptonshire	35.2
Northumberland	38.2
Oxfordshire	38.9
Somerset	40.1
Suffolk	41.0
Surrey	43.9
Warwickshire	39.2
West Sussex	41.3
Total (maintained sector)	36.1

Higher Education

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his statement of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 303, on higher education, what his definition of participation is; and when he aims to achieve 50 per cent. participation in higher education. [93944]

Margaret Hodge: My right hon. Friend in his statement on 22 January 2003 stated that the Government's target remains, as we set out in the Department's public service agreement published in 2000 and reaffirmed in last summer's spending review settlement, to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent. of those aged 18 to 30 by the end of the decade. Participation in England is currently at 43 per cent.

Participation in higher education is measured by the Initial Entry Rate (IER). The IER covers English domiciled 18 to 30 year-olds who entered higher education for the first time in a particular academic year. It includes entry to all full-time and part-time courses of one year or more that lead to qualifications awarded by higher education institutions or widely-recognised national awarding bodies.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his definition is of experience of higher education in respect of the target for 50 per cent. of all 18 to 30-year-olds to experience higher education by 2010. [94499]

Margaret Hodge: Experience of higher education in respect of the higher education participation target is defined by the Initial Entry Rate.

The Initial Entry Rate sums the percentages of the English domiciled age group who enter higher education in the UK for the first time in each year of age between 18 and 30, on full or part-time courses of one year or more that lead to a qualification awarded by higher education institutions or widely recognized national awarding bodies.

Higher Education (West Cumbria)

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what funding he has allocated for the provision of access to degree level higher education courses for West Cumbrians locally; and when those funds will be received; [94134]

(2) what measures are being taken to provide young people and prospective college students with access to degree level higher education courses in west Cumbria; and if he will make a statement. [94135]

Margaret Hodge: It is not possible to identify the total sums allocated to courses for west Cumbria because funds are allocated to institutions, which will educate

students from a wide geographical area. However, the particular needs of Cumbria are being addressed through collaborative arrangements by the four core providers of HE in Cumbria; University of Central Lancashire, Lancaster University, St. Martin's College of HE and Cumbria Institute of the Arts. As a result of this collaboration, funding has been made available by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for an additional 1,200 HE student places in Cumbria since 1999. HEFCE is currently reviewing future funding for Cumbria through a task force chaired by Sir Brian Fender.

In addition, the Government's Excellence Challenge programme, which encourages universities to work closely with schools and colleges in disadvantaged areas, will, from 2003–04, expand to cover west Cumbria. Funds will be available from September 2003. West Cumbria will also be part of the National Partnerships for Progression Initiative run by HEFCE, and will be eligible for its share of funding for projects to enhance progression into higher education. Partnerships will be informed of their level of support in spring 2003. Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression will be merged as "Aim Higher" from 2004.

Higher Education Funding

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the review of funding for higher education. [92014]

Margaret Hodge: The Government's White Paper The Future of Higher Education was published on 22 January. The White Paper sets out our plans for the radical reform and development of higher education, including the outcome of our review of student finance.

Key Stage 2

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how many schools administered the Key Stage 2 English and mathematics tests to Year 7 pupils in 2002; [92150]

(2) how many Year 7 pupils took the Key Stage 2 tests in English and mathematics in 2002; [92151]

(3) what percentage of Year 7 pupils achieved a Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 tests in English and mathematics in 2002. [92152]

Mr. Miliband: In 2002, 2,107 schools chose to administer the Key Stage 2 test (known as the year 7 progress test) for their year 7 pupils, of which 1,947 school administered the English tests; and 1978 schools administered the mathematics tests. From those schools, 61,827 year 7 pupils took the English progress test; and 76,221 took the mathematics test. Some pupils who sat the test were not eligible to do so. Of those eligible pupils who sat the test and who had achieved level 3 at Key Stage 2 in 2001, 30 per cent. achieved level 4 or above in the English progress test, and 18 per cent. achieved level 4 or above in the mathematics progress test in 2002.

Lifelong Learning

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what action he will take to assure potential users of the quality of provision of information, advice and guidance on lifelong learning for adults. [94034]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Government have developed and are promoting the matrix quality standard for information, advice and guidance (IAG) services. This quality assures publicly funded IAG provision. Additionally, where IAG is offered within student support services in FE Colleges, it will be subject to inspection by Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate as part of the inspection of the institution as a whole, under the Common Inspection Framework.

Within the framework of the Government's Skills Strategy and Delivery Plan, we will consider what, if any, further action might be needed.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will promote a national brand to market information, advice and guidance on lifelong learning for adults. [94035]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Yes, as I said recently we need an information, advice and guidance service for adults that is highly visible and identifiable, so that people know what they can get and where they can get it. We are taking forward the development and promotion of an overarching identity for adult IAG within our work to develop an overall Skills Strategy and Delivery Plan.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he is making of whether the level of *(a)* resources and *(b)* funding for information, advice and guidance on lifelong learning for adults is sufficient to ensure that customer demand is met. [94036]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: As part of developing our overall Skills Strategy and Delivery Plan, we are reviewing the role information, advice and guidance (IAG) services for adults should play within the strategy. This involves looking at all aspects of IAG, including resources and funding.

Local Education Authorities

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the use of his powers to intervene in local education authorities as to the amount such authorities spend on education. [94461]

Mr. Miliband: The Education Act 2002 requires local education authorities to notify the Secretary of State of their proposed schools budget by 31 January 2003. My right hon. Friend will decide in the light of the proposed budgets whether it is necessary to use the reserve power, and will take into account all relevant circumstances in reaching any decision.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the total education formula

spending for Essex was for 2003–04; and what the standard spending assessment for education for Essex was for 2002–03. [94460]

Mr. Miliband: In 2003–04, Essex's total Education Formula Spending Share is £666.8 million. In 2002–03,Essex's Education SSA was £594.7 million.

The figure for 2003–04 is provisional and not fully comparable with 2002–03. The figure for 2003–04 includes funding transferred into EPS from grant and takes account of the increase in contributions to the Teachers' Pension Scheme. Neither figure includes funding transferred to the Learning and Skills Council for sixth form funding.

Ofsted

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when OFSTED'S service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94208]

Mr. Miliband: This is a matter for Ofsted. The HM Chief Inspector, David Bell, will write to my hon. friend and a copy of his letter will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what mandatory jurisdiction OFSTED has over independent schools; [94387]

(2) what jurisdiction OFSTED has over the *(a)* accommodation and *(b)* fabric in independent schools; [94388]

(3) what steps OFSTED has taken to ensure that independent schools comply with the health and safety at work legislation. [94389]

Mr. Miliband: Independent Schools in England which provide full time education for five or more pupils of compulsory school age must register with the Department for Education and Skills. Once registered, they must maintain satisfactory standards in respect of premises, accommodation, staffing and instruction. Independent boarding schools must also safeguard and promote the welfare of their pupils. For monitoring purposes they are inspected on a regular 6 year cycle either by OFSTED or by the Independent Schools Inspectorate in the case of schools belonging to the Independent Schools Council. In addition, independent schools are inspected by the fire brigade and, in the case of boarding schools, every three years by the National Care Standards Commission. Health and Safety requirements are considered by inspectors in the context of standards relating to premises and accommodation. More frequent inspections are undertaken where there are signs of failing and, where inspection evidence indicates that a school has fallen below the standards required, the Secretary of State has powers of enforcement which could lead to the closure of the school.

Post-16 Education

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) when 16 to 18-year-olds in Redcar constituency will become entitled to education maintenance allowances; [91836]

(2) if he will give priority to areas adjacent to the pilot schemes in the national implementation of Education Maintenance Allowances. [91838]

Margaret Hodge: Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) will be made available across the whole of England from September 2004. Initially, EMAs will be available to students in their first year of post-compulsory education (year 12), although in the EMA pilot areas, students in year 13 and 14 will also be eligible.

School Buildings (Kirklees)

Ann Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list building improvement projects and their value in each school in Kirklees in each year since 1997. [93791]

Mr. Miliband: The Department does not hold information at this level of detail. Much capital funding for school building improvement projects is allocated by formulae to local education authorities and schools. They then decide how to invest and prioritise these capital allocations between individual projects, in line with the locally agreed Asset Management Plan.

Kirklees Local Education Authority was also allocated £59.2 million Private Finance Initiative (PFI) credits in 2000–01 to repair, refurbish and operate 20 schools. A further £20.3 million PFI credits were allocated to Kirklees in 2002–03 to reorganise its special schools and build a new special school.

School Leavers

Paul Farrelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how many pupils left school at 16 years in each local education authority area in each academic year since 1990; [91751]

(2) how many pupils entered *(a)* further education and *(b)* higher education in each local education authority area in each academic year since 1990. [91752]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

School Places (Dewsbury)

Ann Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many *(a)* applications and *(b)* available places there have been for schools in Dewsbury for (i) the next academic year, (ii) the current academic year and (iii) the last three academic years. [93790]

Mr. Miliband: My Department does not collect detailed information on this. It is for local education authorities to plan and keep under review the supply of school places and to ensure that there are sufficient school places. Each year LEAs must publish a School Organisation Plan which sets out how they plan to deal with any surplus or deficit of school places over a rolling five-year period.

Where an LEA can demonstrate overall growth in the need for places it may apply to the Department for capital funding.

Schools (East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many *(a)* applications and *(b)* available places there were for schools in the East Riding for (i) the next academic year (ii) the current academic year and (iii) the last three academic years. [92914]

Mr. Miliband: My Department does not collect detailed information on this. It is for Local Education Authorities to plan and keep under review the supply of school places and to ensure that there are sufficient school places. Each year LEAs must publish a School Organisation Plan which sets out how they plan to deal with any surplus or deficit of school places over a rolling five year period.

Where an LEA can demonstrate overall growth in the need for places it may apply to the Department for capital funding.

Schools (Vocational Curriculum)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much flexibility schools will have under his proposals for a vocational curriculum. [94912]

Mr. Miliband: Our policy document 14–19: opportunity and excellence set out our intention to make changes to the curriculum at Key Stage 4 so that schools can offer programmes that better meet young people's individual needs and strengths, whilst ensuring they acquire the core of general learning and experience essential to later learning and employment.

All students will still have to learn English, mathematics, science and ICT. They will also continue to be taught citizenship, religious education, sex education, physical education and careers education. There will be a new statutory requirement that all young people should undertake some work-related learning, including enterprise. Schools will no longer be required to teach modern foreign languages and design and technology to all pupils. All schools will be required to ensure as a minimum that they are available to any pupil wishing to study them and there will be similar entitlements to study the arts and humanities.

This will allow schools flexibility to offer young people options—particularly vocational programmes—tailored to their interests and aptitudes. As an example the Increased Flexibility for 14–16 Year Olds' programme, which was launched in September 2002, enables young people participating in the programme to study at a college or with a training provider, for one or two days a week throughout Key Stage

Schools (Wycombe)

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list each school in the Wycombe constituency that has been in special measures in each year since 1997. [94419]

Mr. Miliband: Three schools in Wycombe have been in special measures since 1997:

Bellfield First School (1997–1998)

The Hatters' Lane School (2000–2001)

King's Wood Infant School (2000–2002).

All three schools have now been closed.

Scottish Universities

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his statement of 22 January, *Official Report*, columns 301–19, what steps he has taken to institute monitoring of the impact the changes in policy for English and Welsh universities will have on Scottish universities. [93738]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* Our White Paper, "The future of higher education" contains a section on cross-border issues. Paragraph 7.52 acknowledges the need to consider further the impact of our proposals for student and institutional funding on flows of students between UK countries. We will discuss these issues with all the devolved administrations.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his statement of 22 January, *Official Report*, columns 301–319, what impact he estimates his policy will have on Scottish universities' access to United Kingdom research council funding. [93739]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The Research Councils are funded by the Office of Science and Technology and allocate resources for research projects across the UK. Awards are made through competitive processes usually decided by peer review. The distribution of such funding to Scottish universities is unaffected by my Department's proposals set out in "The Future of Higher Education".

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when his Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94123]

Mr. Miliband: We have set out how we will deliver our Public Service Agreements in our document, "Delivering Results; A Strategy to 2006", which was updated in December 2002 to reflect targets agreed as part of Spending Review 2002. A copy is available from the Department's website, at www.dfes.gov.uk/delivering-results. Hard copies are available from DfES publications by calling 0845 60 222 60.

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many individuals have loans outstanding with the Student Loans Company; and how many are *(a)* compliant, *(b)* deferred, *(c)* overdue and *(d)* written off, broken down in each category according to current residence (i) in the United Kingdom, (ii) the European Union and EEA and (iii) elsewhere. [93292]

Margaret Hodge: At the end of the 2001–02 financial year there were 2,439,000 borrowers with student loans, either mortgage style or income contingent. Some

1,165,000 borrowers had accounts on which no repayments were due, either because they were still studying or had recently left higher education. Of the 1,319,000 borrowers with accounts in repayment status, some 601,000 had accounts on which they were either ahead or up to date with their repayments.

Some 588,000 borrowers with mortgage style loans had accounts on which they had taken up their entitlement to delay repayment until their income reached the repayment threshold and were, therefore, deferring their repayments or deferring their repayments with arrears; and 155,000 had accounts which were in arrears.

Most new entrants to higher education from September 1998 have income contingent loans where repayments are linked to income and collected through the tax system. This means that these loans do not go into arrears, nor do borrowers need to apply for deferment—no repayments are deducted from borrowers whose income falls below £10,000 per annum. In April 2005 the income repayment threshold will be raised to £15,000.

Individual borrowers may have both mortgage style and income contingent loans and also loan accounts in more than one status, in which case they are counted in each category.

Some 1,000 borrowers had accounts, either mortgage style or income contingent, which were written off during the financial year on the grounds of age, disability or death.

Data cannot be analysed by current residence of the borrower without incurring disproportionate costs.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills whether the qualification threshold for the minimum income earned by a graduate before they need to pay back their student loan be raised to £15,000 will apply to the whole of the United Kingdom. [93740]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* All graduates in the UK who repay their loans through their employers via the Inland Revenue will benefit from the increase in the repayment threshold.

Student Numbers

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assumptions are made about student numbers in figure 3 in the White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education". [93569]

Margaret Hodge: Figure 3 of "The Future of Higher Education" shows total publicly planned funding for Higher Education, and the unit funding, in real terms in each year from 1989–90 to 2003–04. The numbers of students which underpin the unit funding calculations are shown in the following table.

UK- and EU-domiciled students at English higher education institutions (full-time equivalent, thousand)

Year	*Number*
1989–90	567
1990–91	622
1991–92	695
1992–93	786
1993–94	876
1994–95	944
1995–96	989
1996–97	1,007
1997–98	1,019
1998–99	1,023
1999–2000	1,041
2000–01	1,064
2001–02	1,087
2002–03	1,101
2003–04	1,115

Teacher Vacancies (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many vacancies for teachers there are in the London borough of Wandsworth. [94760]

Mr. Miliband: There were 55 vacancies for full-time teachers in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools in Wandsworth in January 2002. This is the most recent date for which these data are available.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the Teaching and Learning Research programme, with particular reference to its *(a)* progress since its inception and *(b)* further development plans. [93294]

Margaret Hodge: The ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme funded at 25m (by HEFCE with contributions from the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly and DfES) supports 4 research networks in Phase I addressing inclusion, science, consulting students and workplace learning. Phase II has supported 9 projects focusing on aspects of schooling and post-compulsory education. Currently, the 46 shortlisted proposals on post-compulsory, workplace and lifelong teaching and learning in Phase III are being reviewed for selection. In addition, the programme is funding an initiative to develop capacity building in research, focusing on increasing high-quality research skills.

Significant differences in attainment between comparable groups of learners under different conditions have been reported by several of the projects. Priorities for science teaching have been identified by one project which has had an impact on the science curriculum.

Future plans include commissioning Phase III projects which will start later in 2002 and run up to 2008, extending the research capacity building strand and developing further collaborative links internationally. Consultation with other organisations is underway on detailed plans for the programme's outputs and impact.

Teaching Profession

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress among teachers. [93690]

Mr. Miliband: The Government do not collect separate statistics on the incidence of teacher occupational stress, but do collect information on teacher absences and ill-health retirements and has commissioned research into the causes of these. They do not show any significant incidence of teacher stress as the cause for these events. In 2001–02, for example, around 0.6 per cent. of teacher retirements occurred as a direct result of stress. Despite this, teaching is a demanding job and stress can be hidden by other health problems. The Government take very seriously the issue of stress in schools. We have concluded a national agreement with most teaching unions, the support staff unions and local authority employers over teacher workload; we have supported the setting-up of an independent 24-hour telephone counselling helpline for teachers, operated by the Teacher Support Network (formerly the Teachers' Benevolent Fund); and we are piloting with a number of LEAs a project aimed at spreading best practice in using support mechanisms to promote teacher health and welfare.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of English domiciled students in secondary education aged 18 from each local education authority were accepted through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to full-time undergraduate courses each year since 1994–95. [87298]

Margaret Hodge: The available information, showing the proportion of 18-year-olds from each LEA in England entering full-time undergraduate courses in the UK via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), is given in a table.

It should be noted that the proportions in the table, which has been placed in the Library, are based only on the number of 18-year-olds entering full-time HE. This is a different definition to the Department's main measures of HE participation: the Age Participation Index (API), which measures the proportion of 18–20-year-olds who enter full-time HE, and the Initial Entry Rate (IER) which measures the proportion of 18–30-year-olds who enter full or part-time HE. Neither the API nor the IER are calculated at LEA level.

University Funding

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how he intends to help universities to build up endowment funds, as announced in the Government's "The Future of Higher Education" White Paper; [94059]

(2) if he will be setting up a task force to encourage universities to increase their funds through endowments as announced in the Government's "The Future of Higher Education" White Paper. [94060]

Margaret Hodge: As set out in the White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education", the Government will help to build a culture in which donors and institutions make the most of the potential for endowments in the higher education sector. The Government will set up a task force to encourage institutions and potential donors to promote the existing incentives for individual and corporate donation and to encourage change i university and individual behaviour. The task force wi be composed of corporate donors, financial an fundraising experts from the public, private an voluntary sectors, and the higher education sector itsel as well as other key opinion formers.

The White Paper also says that the Government wi seek resources for a time limited, matched endowmer fund to incentivise university fundraising. Matche funds would be allocated to universities, taking int account their existing fundraising capacity.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State fo Education and Skills how many students he estimate will be eligible for the full £1,000 maintenance gran announced in the Government's "The Future of Highe Education" White Paper. [9405

Margaret Hodge: We estimate that on the curren student distribution, around 28 per cent. of studen would be eligible. We are currently reviewing the figur on the basis of new data we have available to us. A significant proportion of these are independen students, who may have given up work to return to ful time education, and most of whom have no means o support.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State fo Education and Skills what studies his Department ha undertaken with regard to the disincentive effects of deb on students considering a university education. [9406

Margaret Hodge: The Department has commissione and published a number of studies that hav investigated the barriers to participation in highe education. These have included:

"Social Class and Higher Education: Issues Affectin Participation by Lower Social Class groups" Connor, H. et DfEE Research Report No. 246 2001;

"For me or not for me—that is the question. A study of matu students' decision-making and higher education" Pat Davie Mike Osborne and Jenny Williams 2002 DfES Researc Report 297;

"Potential Mature Student Recruitment to HE" (2002 Ross, A. et al. DfES Research Report RR385

The potential disincentive effect of debt is one of th factors these studies haveconsidered. These studies, an the wider research literature, find that the decision t participate in higher education depends on man interdependent factors which are often shaped b the cultural, social, institutional and educatio backgrounds of individuals. The Department als commissions periodic surveys of students' income an expenditure. Amongst other things these provide a objective picture of students' financial position and ho this is changing over time. The Department has recentl commissioned a new survey of students' income an expenditure that will report later this year.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State fo Education and Skills what estimates he has made of ho many universities will charge the full fees available t them as announced in the Government's "The Future Higher Education" White Paper. [9406

Margaret Hodge: It is up to higher education institutions to decide whether to charge fees and if so for what courses and at what level.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what estimates he has made of the amount of debt that will be experienced by a university student on *(a)* a three year course, *(b)* a four year course and *(c)* a five year course following the reforms announced in the Government's The Future of Higher Education White Paper; [94069]

(2) what estimates he has made of the average time that it will take for graduates to pay back the tuition fees announced in the Government's The Future of Higher Education White Paper. [94070]

Margaret Hodge: The level of loan taken out by students will depend on their individual circumstances and choices, including the extent to which they work while in higher education. Students from lower income backgrounds will be eligible for fee remission and for the new HE grant. The level of maintenance loan will depend upon students' own choices and the level of maintenance loan to which they are entitled and whether they choose to live at home or study away. There are different maxima of maintenance loan dependent upon length of course and where the student lives e.g. more in London, less if they live at home. The level of loan taken out for fees will partly depend on the fee charged and partly on students' choices of whether to pay up front or to take advantage of the new policy to defer payment of fees which offer graduation.

The length of time to repay the loan after graduation will depend on the size of the loan taken out and on the salary the graduate is earning, it will also depend on whether the graduate makes any additional repayments from their own resources or from their employer.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to what extent students will be selected for university places on the basis of *(a)* parental income and *(b)* school performance. [94073]

Margaret Hodge: Universities are responsible for their own admissions criteria. The Government believe that admission should be on the basis of merit. We have set out in "The Future of Higher Education" a range of approaches taken by universities and elsewhere to ensure that students with the ability to succeed are selected.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what financial incentives the Government will offer students whose parents are receiving *(a)* benefits and *(b)* tax credits following the Government Higher Education White Paper. [94075]

Margaret Hodge: The Government will continue to meet the costs of fees up to £1,100 for those students whose family income falls below £20,000, and a proportion of that for those students whose family income is between £20,000 and £30,000.

All students will be able to defer fees. Those whose family income is below £10,000 will be eligible for a £1,000 grant, and those whose family income is between £10,000 and £20,000 will be eligible for a proportion of that.

Vocational Training

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps he is taking to ensure that pupils participating in vocational training schemes are guaranteed work placements with commercial employers. [94316]

Mr. Miliband: The Department is undertaking a number of initiatives to boost the range and volume of high quality vocational opportunities available to 14 to 19 year olds. These already include a £10 million programme to ensure that two weeks of work experience with employers or other organisations is available for all pupils in Key Stage 4; vocational courses under the £120 million Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 year olds programme; and the first round of 25 Pathfinders to test local delivery of innovative 14 to 19 provision in a range of settings, which are jointly funded by the Department and the Learning and Skills Council.

We have recently announced our proposals for further developments and have made it clear that we want to see access for all young people to short or longer-term employer placements with a wide variety of organisations, which are challenging, innovative and responsive to a range of individual needs.

Where schools offer pupils the opportunity to study NVQs as an alternative to the traditional academic route, whether at Key Stage 4 or post-16, the NVQ must be as rigorous as those offered elsewhere. The main characteristic of an NVQ is that it is work-based and pupils are trained and assessed in a relevant real-life work situation.

HEALTH

Alcohol Strategy

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy in the alcohol strategy to ensure that young people with underlying emotional or mental health problems are fully assessed and where necessary referred to tier 3 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. [93724]

Ms Blears: The Government is committed to implementing the national alcohol harm reduction strategy by 2004. The strategy will be prepared by the Cabinet Office strategy unit, who will consider a wide range of issues including health service needs and the needs of vulnerable young people. The strategy will be published in Summer 2003.

The capacity of the child and adolescent mental health services to respond to a range of needs, including those of young people whose alcohol problems have underlying emotional or mental health causes, is steadily improving. However, appropriate assessment and referral arrangements are for local services to determine.

Child Care

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the practice of placing grandchildren with their grandparents rather than in care in the event of a family crisis; and whether it is his policy that this practice is the first option looked at when examining the needs of a child. [93551]

Jacqui Smith: The Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities to promote the upbringing of children within their families. If a child cannot remain with birth parents then arrangements should be made for that child to live with a member of his wider family unless to do so would be impractical or inconsistent with the child's welfare. If the child is already in care there is the same duty to seek first to place the child within the wider family network.

Abortions

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many abortions have been performed on girls aged 12 and under in each of the last five years; at what age each girl having the abortion was; in which local area health authority each abortion was performed; in which NHS hospital or private clinic each abortion was performed; and at what stage of gestation each abortion was performed; [93214]

(2) how many abortions have been performed on girls aged *(a)* 13, *(b)* 14 and *(c)* 15 in each of the last five years; in which local area health authority each abortion was performed; and at what stage of gestation each abortion was performed. [93215]

Ms Blears: The information requested has been placed in the Library. In order to preserve the individuals' privacy, the data have been provided in three separate tables. For the same reason, the Department of Health does not publish data on place of termination; Open Government Code of Practice exemptions 11b, 12, 14a and 14c apply.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 13 January 2003 to the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley), *Official Report*, column 480W, on abortions, if he will disaggregate the figures for the Isle of Wight. [93833]

Ms Blears: The information requested is shown in the table.

NHS Funded abortions for Isle of Wight residents, 1997–2001

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	1,584	1,620	1,532	1,526	1,566
Isle of Wight only	181	194	166	195	227

Note:
1. Data for 1997 to 2000 are for the Health Authority of the Isle of Wight (equivalent to Isle of Wight Local Authority).
2. Data for 2001 are for the Local Authority of the Isle of Wight.

Source:
Prepared by Statistics Division 3G, Department of Health.

Accidents and Emergencies (Waiting Times)

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the target for a four-hour maximum accident and emergency waiting time by 2004 was set; what the baseline was for this target; and what figures he has collected on progress made towards meeting the target in each quarter since the target was set. [93697]

Mr. Lammy: The NHS Plan includes the target that no patient should spend more than four hours in accident and emergency (A&E) from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge by December 2004. When this target was set, the Department of Health did not collect data on total time in accident and emergency.

The Department of Health measures total waiting time in A&E from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge. This has been collected from August 2001.

The first full and validated data was published in Quarter 2, 2002–03. This showed that 77 per cent. of patients spend four hours or less in A&E.

Ambulances

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions an ambulance has been despatched to a 999 call at the request of a first responder vehicle in each of the last 12 months. [93782]

Mr. Lammy: This information is not collected centrally. Every time a first responder is tasked, the ambulance control room will despatch an ambulance.

Ambulances (Oswestry)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was of running ambulances for *(a)* elective and *(b)* non-elective cases from the Oswestry area to the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital in 2002. [93515]

Mr. Lammy: The information requested is not collected by the Department.

Care Homes

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress on the consultation exercise on National Minimum Standards for Care Homes for Older People and National Minimum Standards for Care Homes for Younger Adults (18–65) Proposed Amended Environmental Standards; and when he expects to announce his decisions arising out of this consultation. [94568]

Jacqui Smith: The consultation exercise ended on 8 November 2002. We have carefully considered all the comments we received. We will be making a formal announcement of our conclusions shortly and we will publish revised standards as soon as possible.

Child Deaths

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which agency has responsibility for overseeing the conduct of a Part 8 Review following the death of a child. [94090]

Jacqui Smith: In accordance with "Working Together to Safeguard Children (1999)", the area child protection committee (ACPC) for the area in which the child was normally resident should take lead responsibility for conducting any review.

The initial scoping of the review should identify those who should contribute, although it may emerge as information becomes available that the involvement of others would be useful. Each relevant service should undertake a separate management review of its involvement with the child and family. Each local authority with social services responsibility should take lead responsibility for the establishment and effective working of ACPCs.

The ACPC should commission an overview report which brings together and analyses the findings of the various reports from agencies and others who were involved with the child and family, and which makes recommendations for future action.

Fertility Rates

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 21 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 241W, on fertility rates, when the two studies into male fertility will be published. [94152]

Ms Blears: Work has been completed on two studies into male fertility and the data are currently being analysed. Project reports are due to be submitted to the Department at the end of March 2003. These will then be peer-reviewed before wider publication of the findings.

Genito-urinary Services

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment she has made of the requirement for more professional staff in genito-urinary services with special reference to drop-in centres; what measures are being taken to employ more such staff; and if he will make a statement. [92531]

Ms Blears: We are taking a number of measures to improve staffing in genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinics, including services where no appointment is necessary. First, we anticipate that by 2004 there will be an increase of around 35 trained specialists in GUM. This takes account of expected numbers of additional recruits and numbers leaving due to retirement.

In addition the sexual health and HIV strategy implementation plan includes a number of actions for GUM. We have invested over £5 million this year to improve access and to develop the role and increase the numbers of health advisers within GUM. We are also undertaking a review of skill mix, working practices and workforce planning assumptions and working with professional bodies on modernising services, setting standards and increasing capacity.

Health Protection Agency

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the long-term director posts in the Health Protection Agency will be openly advertised. [93638]

Ms Blears: The change management protocol governing the proposed establishment of the Health Protection Agency (HPA) provides that director level positions will initially be ring-fenced for staff transferring to the HPA. However, no individual will be slotted in without being subject to an appropriate assessment process, which will include as a minimum, a selection interview. The recognised trade unions will be consulted on those director level posts covered by this arrangement. Following these procedures, any remaining vacancies will be subject to open competition.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for health how many staff will be transferred to the HPA after 1 April; and how many staff employed by the component organisations of the HPA will not be transferring to it on 1 April. [90054]

Ms Blears: It is envisaged that approximately 2,500 staff will transfer to the Health Protection Agency (HPA) on 1 April 2003.

Consultation continues between the staff concerned and their current employers to identify any issues relating to the transfer of undertakings from 1 April 2003. Until these consultations are completed, it will not be possible to say precisely how many staff will or will not transfer to the HPA.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for health what contingency funds he is making available to cover unforeseen costs during the establishment of the HPA. [90058]

Ms Blears: All costs associated with the establishment of the Health Protection Agency will be met from existing allocations.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the responsibilities will be of the HPA in Wales; and what the relationship will be between the HPA and the Wales Centre for Health. [90061]

Ms Blears: Our plans for establishing the Health Protection Agency (HPA), set out in my reply to the hon. Member on 7 January, Official Report, col. 190–191W, were developed with input from the National Assembly for Wales. Proposals for the role the HPA should discharge in relation to the National Assembly were set out at paragraphs 4.18–21 of Health Protection: A consultation document on creating a health protection agency (June 2002).

The Wales centre for health (WCH) will have a different role as an independent training, advisory and research body. The WCH will not assume the functions of existing front-line providers, but it will work closely with bodies like the HPA and the National Public Health Service for Wales, in particular to support professional training and development.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes there have been to resignation rates from the component organisations of the HPA during each of the past 12 months. [90067]

Ms Blears: Records of staff turnover are not held centrally. However, information from each of the component organisations indicate that there have been no dramatic increases in the overall number of staff resignations.

The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) has indicated that there are above average resignations in a small number of management posts, potentially directly affected by the proposed changes. The Department will be working with the PHLS Board to address any business continuity issues that may arise as a consequence.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what proportion of his time Sir William Stewart is working for the Health Protection Agency; when he will decide on the constitution of the supervisory board of the Health Protection Agency; and when he will recruit members of the supervisory board of the Health Protection Agency. [90091]

Ms Blears: Subject to legislation, we aim to establish the Health Protection Agency (HPA) from 1 April 2003. The chair and non-executive members of the board will be appointed by Ministers. Advertisements for non-executive board posts appeared in the national and regional press from 5 January, with a closing date for applications of 31 January. It will be for the board itself to decide on the appointment of its executive members.

Sir William Stewart has been appointed consultant to the HPA implementation project, acting as shadow chairman, in the period leading up to the establishment of the Agency. This requires him to work for a minimum of three days a week.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what additional resources have been provided to the HPA Steering Group in response to the Report to the Steering Group. [90064]

Ms Blears: All costs associated with the establishment of the Health Protection Agency will be met from existing allocations up to 31 March 2003.

Funding from 1 April 2003 has yet to be finalised.

Health Provision (Budgets)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the budgets of the *(a)* Public Health Laboratory Service, *(b)* National Radiological Protection Board and *(c)* Microbiological Research Authority were for (i) 2002–03 and (ii) 2003–04; and what the budget will be of the Health Protection Agency for the first year it will be in operation, in current prices. [94954]

Ms Blears: The allocations for 2002–03 are shown in the table.

	£000
Public Health Laboratory Service	64,807
National Radiological Protection Board	6,547
Microbiological Research Authority	16,936

Decisions have not yet been made on the Department's central budget programme for 2003–04.

Hospital Nutrition Policy

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the work of the Hospital Nutrition Policy. [89355]

Ms Blears: In the NHS Plan, the Government made a commitment to reduce under-nutrition by developing a hospital nutrition policy to improve the outcome of care of patients by 2004. A number of measures and strategies are in place to manage, monitor and screen patients for under-nutrition in hospitals.

In February 2001, the Government released the essence of care toolkit, which includes best practice standards for the provision and delivery of food that meets the specific nutritional needs of patients. Standards, identified by patients and professionals, include the screening and assessment of nutritional needs, creating a suitable environment in which to eat, providing assistance required to eat and noting and evaluating what is eaten.

Nutritional screening is also recommended for the care of specific groups, such as those outlined in the national service framework for older people.

The Better Hospital Food programme is improving the ways in which meals are prepared and served through a programme developed by patients, chefs and national health service staff. This also sets nutritional standards for hospital foods. A 24-hour catering service with a new NHS menu was introduced in 2001. The menu covers continental breakfast, cold drinks, mid-morning and afternoon snacks, light lunchtime meals and an improved two-course evening dinner.

Half of all hospitals will have ward housekeepers by 2004 to ensure that meals meet patient needs and that patients, particularly elderly people, are helped to eat the meals on offer and that the service patients receive is round the clock.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many wards in hospital trusts were subject to restrictions on visiting due to hospital-acquired infections affecting patients during December 2002. [89925]

Ms Blears: These figures are not held centrally.

Industrial Action/Illness

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many working days have been lost in his Department due to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997. [93466]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* There have been no days lost owing to industrial action by staff in the Department of Health since 1997. Information requested on illness is shown in the table.

	Average[1] days lost per employee through sickness (per staff year)
1997	7.8
1998	[2]9.2
1999	6.6
2000	5.5
2001	6.5
2002	Not published

[1] Working days absences exclude weekends and Bank holidays for staff working a "Monday to Friday" week.

[2] Based on pre-audit data and methodology. In 1998 civil service departments and agencies undertook an audit of their monitoring systems following the 'Working Well Together' report. The re-worked figures were not submitted in time for publication of the 1998 report and unadjusted figures were published in this year.

Source:

Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service BMI Health Services report (1997 Table I, 1998 Table K), Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service BIOSS report Table H (1999), Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service BIOSS report table H (2000), Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service AON report table E (2001)

The statistics on days lost due to sickness absence within the Department of Health during the year 2002 will be available in due course.

Infection Control

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much of the additional funding announced in January 2001 for infection control has been spent. [91464]

Mr. Lammy: Of the £200 million allocated, the Department has assessed and approved some 101 schemes and has allocated £96 million towards improving Decontamination facilities. A further £20 million has so far been committed to schemes for release in the 2003–04 financial year, and an ongoing investment programme will continue to review business cases submitted from the National Health Service over the next year, and further allocations will follow. All resources have to be based on effective proposals for action to ensure value for money and value for the taxpayer.

Lancashire Teaching Hospitals Trust

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were waiting for inpatient treatment within the Lancashire Teaching Hospitals Trust for each of the last five years. [93701]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is shown in the table.

Patients waiting for elective admission

NHS Trust	*Month*	*Total waiting*
Preston Acute Hospitals NHS Trust & Chorley & South Ribble NHS Trust *	January 1999	10,155
Preston Acute Hospitals NHS Trust & Chorley & South Ribble NHS Trust	January 2000	9,617
Preston Acute Hospitals NHS Trust & Chorley & South Ribble NHS Trust	January 2001	8,981
Preston Acute Hospitals NHS Trust & Chorley & South Ribble NHS Trust	January 2002	8,791
Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust	January 2003	[1]8,474

[1] Projected figure

Note:

Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust was formed in August 2002

Source:

Department of Health form KH07 and Monthly Monitoring

Lung Cancer

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to fund, in conjunction with the Medical Research Council, screening trials for lung cancer, with particular reference to screening for the incident of lung cancer among those who are not currently smokers. [93656]

Ms Blears: The Department and the Medical Research Council, which receives its funding from the Department of Trade and Industry via the Office of Science and Technology, have no plans at present to fund screening trials for lung cancer, either with or without particular reference to non-smokers.

Mental Health

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the NHS budget has been spent on mental health in each year since 1997. [94417]

Jacqui Smith: Expenditure on mental illness as a percentage of total national health service spend from 1997 until 2000–01 is shown in the table. Figures for expenditure in 2001–02 will not be available until August 2003.

Gross expenditure on services for people with mental illness, under hospital and community health service (HCHS)

£ million

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Total expenditure, 2000–01 prices[1,2]	26,975	27,760	28,793	30,099
Expenditure on people with mental illness	3,274	3,322	3,554	3,826
Percentage of total expenditure	12.1	12.0	12.3	12.7

[1] Adjusted to 1999–2000 prices using HCHS deflator for NHS expenditure. Figures shown for 1999–2000 are not directly comparable with previous years due to estimations used and changes to the calculation methods.

[2] The HCHS expenditure information is based on profiles of expenditure provided by trusts but scaled to match health authorities' total expenditure. Thus, there is a possibility that the figures under estimate the expenditure on services purchased by health authorities from the private and voluntary sectors. It may be the case that hospital expenditure is over estimated and community expenditure is under estimated. These figures exclude health authority overheads.

Notes:

1. Includes administrative and clerical overheads.
2. Adults aged 16–64. Excludes expenditure on mental health provision for children which cannot be separately identified.

Source:

Health Select Committee (FPA-PES) and R03 return (PSS EX1 from 2000–01)

MMR

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the availability is of the individual measles, mumps and rubella vaccines in each local health authority in England. [93415]

Ms Blears: Information about the amount of vaccines held in each health authority is not routinely collected.

Only single rubella vaccine is used by the national health service. This is offered to women of child-bearing age to protect them against rubella. The Department maintains sufficient supply of this vaccine for use by the NHS.

Single measles and mumps vaccines are not recommended in the schedule and are therefore not supplied. Any single measles and mumps vaccines that are administered are imported and therefore are unlicensed.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people are *(a)* vaccinated against and *(b)* not vaccinated against (i) measles, (ii) mumps and (iii) rubella in each health authority in England; [93417]

(2) how many people received *(a)* the single MMR vaccine and *(b)* the separate measles, mumps and rubella vaccines, in each health authority in England, in each of the last five years. [93416]

Ms Blears: Information about the number of children receiving measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccinations by their second birthday and by their fifth birthday, together with percentage uptake figures, for each health authority has been placed in the Library. The information is contained in the Statistical Bulletin, "NHS Immunisation Statistics, England: 2001–02", and can also be found on the Department's website at

Information on the uptake of single measles, mumps and rubella vaccines is not routinely collected by the Department.

Mobile Dental Services

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use of mobile dental services; and what plans he has to expand such services. [93969]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 29 January 2003]*: In the right circumstances, mobile dental surgeries have a positive part to play in the provision of National Health Service dental services in both the general dental service and the community dental service.

There are no current plans to expand the use of mobile dental services.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risks associated with non-ionising electromagnetic radiation emanating from mobile telephone masts. [93375]

Ms Blears: Mobile telecommunications systems should comply with the exposure guidelines of the International Commission on non-ionizing radiation, as set out in European Council Recommendation EC/519/1999.

In this country, the public health implications of mobile phone base stations were assessed by the independent expert group on mobile phones (IEGMP). Their report, the Stewart Report, published in May 2000, concluded that:

> "The balance of evidence indicates that there is no general risk to the health of people living near to base stations on the basis that exposures are expected to be small fractions of guidelines."

Measurements undertaken by the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) and the Radiocommunications Agency have confirmed that public exposures are very much lower than the international guidelines. These results are available to the public from these organisations' websites, www.nrpb.org and www.radio.gov.uk. Network operators have undertaken to ensure that all base stations will be designed and sited so that members of the public will not be exposed to levels of electromagnetic radiation in excess of the recommended basic restriction.

The IEGMP recommended that the issue of possible health effects from mobile phone technology should be the subject of a further review in three years time or earlier if circumstances demand it. The NRPB's independent advisory group on non-ionising radiation is currently undertaking this review. A report is expected towards the end of 2003. The World Health Organization is co-ordinating a review of the multinational research effort, www.who.int/emf and is planning to produce a health risk assessment in 2007.

NHS Dentists

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of people in *(a)* England, *(b)* each NHS region, *(c)* each strategic health authority and *(d)* each primary care trust were registered with an NHS dentist as at 30 September 2002. [91368]

Mr. Lammy: 47.9 per cent. of people were registered with a general dental service (CDS) dentist in *(a)* England at 30 September 2002.

Tables showing the registration rates for each national health service region, each strategic health authority area and each primary care trust area have been placed in the Library.

Registrations lapse if patients do not return to their dentists within 15 months. Registration rates will exclude patients who haven't been to their CDS dentist within the past 15 months and patients who receive dental treatment from other NHS dental services.

Registrations are included in the area of the dentist. The registration rates for some areas may be affected by some patients receiving their dental treatment in a different area from the one in which they live.

Patients can obtain details of NHS dental services in their area by calling NHS Direct. Those who cannot or do not wish to be registered can be seen under occasional treatment arrangements introduced last year.

In this session of Parliament, the Government propose to legislate for far-reaching reform of NHS dental services. The Government have been working closely with the dentistry profession to bring forward proposals. The current system has developed over a period of 50 years and it will be necessary to test a variety of new models to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. New ways of delivering NHS dentistry are about to be tested following the publication last year of the "Options for Change" report about the future of NHS dentistry.

NHS Direct

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how he intends to fund the expansion of NHS Direct to start handling out-of-hours calls for GPs throughout the country from 2004. [93513]

Mr. Lammy: NHS Direct is committed to achieving targets for integrating with out-of-hours providers. A strategy document detailing plans covering funding and capacity for the next three years will be published shortly.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to abolish double triage at NHS Direct. [93516]

Mr. Lammy: NHS Direct is keen to work with out-of-hours providers to ensure the seamless referral of patients needing out-of-hours medical care to the relevant provider.

In schemes in a number of parts of the country patients are referred with double triage directly to a home visit or primary care service appointments. NHS Direct will continue to work with out-of-hours providers to ensure this model is adopted more widely and the double triage is eliminated.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what feedback individual nurses employed by NHS Direct receive about their decision making. [93517]

Mr. Lammy: The NHS Direct performance framework requires that on their performance all nurses have one-to-one sessions on operational/clinical performance on a regular basis.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how often NHS Direct has to call on GP cooperatives to assist when it gets busy; and what will be done in the event that GP cooperatives are no longer able to assist in this way. [93518]

Mr. Lammy: As part of integrated working, NHS Direct and providers of out-of-hours primary care have agreed a range of shared emergency arrangements for managing the total demand on the service. It is expected that these will evolve as part of the development of the integrated service.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in which regions of the United Kingdom NHS Direct helplines are operating; and if he will make a statement. [93922]

Mr. Lammy: NHS Direct is operational throughout the whole of England and Wales. NHS 24 is operational in north and west Scotland, and offers similar services to NHS Direct.

NHS Modernisation Agency

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the annual budget of the NHS Modernisation Agency. [93635]

Ms Blears: The delegated revenue budget for the National Health Service Modernisation Agency for 2002–03 is £106.5 million.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many clinical staff are employed by the NHS Modernisation Agency. [93636]

Ms Blears: At 30 December 2002, there were 670 staff employed by the National Health Service Modernisation Agency, of which 216 have professional clinical qualifications. 371 of the agency staff are working directly with clinical teams and four retain a responsibility for the delivery of clinical care as part of their role with the agency.

Primary Care (Portsmouth)

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funds have been received by the Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust from his Department other than those paid through primary care trusts. [93202]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* No other funds have been provided to the Portsmouth National Health Service Trust from my Department other than those paid through primary care trusts (PCTs).

Capital is allocated directly to NHS trusts rather than via PCTs. To date, Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust has been allocated the following capital resources in 2002–03.

£000

Budget	*Amount*
Underspends from 2001–02	1,601
General capital allocation	5,969
Cancer	1,337
Maternity	1,169
Decontamination —CJD	150
Decontamination—mobile	10

£000

Budget	Amount
Waiting—action on	273
On-site nurseries	576
Junior doctors	20
Pharmaceutical	24
ACADs/DTC	250
Total	11,379

Prisons

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what health provision his Department provides to prisons in Greater London; and if he will make a statement. [94320]

Jacqui Smith: The Department of Health and the Prison Service have been working together to bring about a significant improvement in standards of prison health care. Under partnership arrangements introduced in April 2000, the Prison Service meets the costs of providing primary health care services to prisoners, while the National Health Service meets the costs of any secondary or tertiary health services they may need. The London prisons have already benefited from this partnership approach, which has, for example, led to NHS-funded, mental health in-reach teams being introduced in the seven closed Prison Service establishments in London.

We shall continue to promote the reform of health services for prisoners, which, over the next few years, will become part of the NHS. Funding responsibility for prison health services in England is being transferred from the Home Office to the Department of Health with effect from 1 April 2003.

Public Health Laboratory Service

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risk that those public health laboratories transferring to NHS trusts will lose accommodation currently used for public health purposes; and what action has been taken to minimise these risks. [90095]

Ms Blears: We do not anticipate any of the laboratories losing their accommodation, as the appropriate level of funding will be transferred with the laboratories.

The chief executive of the National Health Service has written to the chief executives of all the NHS trusts receiving Public Health Laboratory Service laboratories, saying that he is sure they will embrace the services into the pathology service organisation.

It has been made clear to the chief executives of the NHS trusts concerned or their nominated lead that all the current resources of the transferring laboratories are to be protected.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the media production operations of the Public Health Laboratory Service once legislation is passed to wind up the organisation. [93642]

Ms Blears: The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) will be wound up only when the necessary primary legislation is in place. We are aware of the importance of a continued supply of microbiological media, of an appropriate quality, to the protection of public health from communicable diseases.

During 2003, we will be carrying out a review of the media supply operations currently performed by PHLS to identify the most appropriate management option and will be taking suitable measures to ensure this supply following the outcome of the review.

Public Health Laboratory Service

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for health what the status will be of the PHLS's current liabilities after 1 April; and what proportion of the liabilities will be transferred to the HPA on 1 April. [90049]

Ms Blears: The precise accounting arrangements for the residual Public Health Laboratory Service have yet to be decided.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to create a replacement for the vaccine development programme conducted by the PHLS. [90077]

Ms Blears: We do not anticipate any changes to the Department's vaccine research and development programme, which includes activities of the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS), the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control, the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, the Institute for Child Health and is presently co-ordinated by the PHLS.

Public Health Workers

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many public sector workers have in-house occupational health care. [93643]

Mr. Lammy: Statistics for the number of public sector workers who have access to in-house occupational health care are not held centrally. It is for individual public sector organisations to keep their own records. Research funded by the Department of Health in 1999, the last year for which figures are available, show that 96 per cent. of national health service staff have in-house occupational health care. The NHS is not, however, responsible for occupational health care of other public sector workers. The responsibility lies with individual employers.

Secure Hospitals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female inmates are being held in Rampton and Broadmoor secure hospitals; and if he will make a statement. [94318]

Jacqui Smith: There are currently 280 male and 52 female patients in Broadmoor Hospital and 326 male and 46 female patients in Rampton Hospital.

Telemedicine

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will introduce telemedicine to the NHS; and what development work he has done in this area. [88741]

Ms Blears: As set out in the Government's strategy document, "Delivering 21st Century IT Support for the NHS", our vision for information and information technology is to connect delivery of the NHS Plan with the capabilities of modern information technologies.

In 2006–07, it is planned to introduce telemedicine in general practitioners' surgeries for electrocardiograms and skin disease, ambulance telemonitoring in 20 per cent. of all emergency response vehicles and to make home telemonitoring available in 20 per cent. of homes requiring it.

There is considerable activity already taking place. A notable example is the Cornwall electronic patient record pilot that has implemented a successful use of telemedicine to support minor injuries units and there is fairly widespread take-up of teledermatology services. The recent national health service digital television pilots explored the potential for telehealth through a range of services.

Waiting Time Standard (NHS)

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations his Department undertook before adopting the two-week waiting time standard as set out in The New NHS-Modern Dependable. [89653]

Ms Blears: The New NHS was published in December 1997 (Cm 3807). A cancer waiting times multi-disciplinary working group was established and met in 1997. The group made recommendations to improve access to cancer services including the need to set specific waiting time targets for all stages of the patient journey. A copy of the working group report is available in the Library.

The group made the recommendation that targets should be set to reduce cancer waiting times. The advice was taken into account in setting the two week outpatient waiting times standard. The NHS Cancer Plan introduced further targets to reduce the time patients have to wait for diagnosis and treatment.

Worcestershire Acute Hopitals Trust

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Commission for Health Improvement will publish its report on the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trusts; and what arrangements will be made to ensure honourable Members representing Worcestershire constituencies have access to the report at the time of publication. [93789]

Mr. Lammy: The Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) plans to publish its report of its clinical governance review of Worcestershire Acute Hospitals National Health Service Trust in the week commencing 24 February 2003.

Hon. Members representing Worcestershire constituencies will be sent a copy of their local trust's CHI clinical governance review report on the day of or after publication of the report. CHI's clinical governance review reports are published freely on CHI's website at www.chi.nhs.uk/enq/index.shtml

WRVS

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for health what contracts his Department has entered into for the provision of services by the Women's Royal Voluntary Service; what is the *(a)* value and *(b)* duration of each contract; what mechanisms of (i) accountability and (ii) transparency are monitoring these contracts; and what pre-conditions have been attached to these contracts which might affect the remit of the Women's Royal Voluntary Service. [94079]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Asbestos Testing

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to issue guidance on the frequency of air tests in buildings containing asbestos where construction or repair work is being undertaken; and if he will make a statement. [92942]

Mr. Pearson: The requirement to carry out such air tests is contained in the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988. This requirement will be retained in the new Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 which will come into effect by March this year. Clear guidance on the new regulations will be provided by three comprehensive Approved Codes of Practice. However, the actual frequency of air tests is not prescribed as this will depend upon an assessment of each individual situation by the person or persons in control of the work. HSENI will be spearheading an awareness campaign on the requirements of the new regulations during 2003–04.

Care Packages

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* nursing care packages and *(b)* residential care packages have been awarded in respect of applications made since 1 April 2002 in the Homefirst Trust area. [93985]

Mr. Browne: Homefirst Community HSS Trust has provided 258 nursing home packages and 191 residential care home packages in response to applications made for community care services in the period from 1 April 2002 until 31 December 2002.

Civil Servants (Community Origin)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the numerical and percentage breakdown by perceived community origin of staff employed by *(a)* the Ministry of Defence, *(b)* the Inland Revenue, *(c)* HM Customs and Excise and *(d)* the Northern Ireland Civil Service. [94421]

Mr. Pearson: At 1 January 2002, there were 15,928 (54 per cent.) staff employed in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) from a Protestant community background, 12,517 (42.5 per cent.) from a Roman Catholic community background and 1,035 (3.5 per cent.) whose community background was not determined.

The other bodies, for which staffing information has been sought, are not the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Consumer Strategy

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in implementing a new consumer strategy for Northern Ireland. [93929]

Mr. Pearson: The Consumer Strategy for Northern Ireland was published in June 2002, and substantial progress has already been made under its six key themes.

The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland has initiated a major consumer education project, "Consumer Skills for All", and is further developing its website, "Consumerline". The Council led Consumer Support Network, which brings a joined-up approach to consumer advice, has met twice.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is on schedule to go live with a pilot telephone helpline for Northern Ireland consumers by 30 June 2003. Recommendations about the delivery of a money/debt advice service are expected to be submitted by 31 August 2003.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Business Support Partnership (BSP) has been established to provide a forum within which regulators and businesses can work together to promote fair trading, legal compliance, business success and consumer satisfaction. The Trading Standards Service has already "signed up" to an Enforcement Concordat to promote fairness and openness in enforcement practices. DETI, through the BSP, is actively encouraging all Northern Ireland regulatory bodies to adopt its principles.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether, since suspension of the Assembly, the Northern Ireland Office has adhered to the financial proposals made by the Northern Ireland Executive in its agreed budget proposals in respect of those areas under the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. [92887]

Mr. Pearson: The Budget agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive for 2002–03 has not been changed by Northern Ireland Office Ministers other than by the routine reallocation of resources that have become available during monitoring rounds. For future years, the Budget 2002 proposals announced in December 2002, which cover three years from 2003–04, were developed from the Executive's Draft Budget published in September 2002. In the case of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the revised Budget for each year represents an increase on the position in the Executive's Draft Budget.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people claimed disability living allowance in each of the last three years; how many DLA appeals were heard; and what the average length of time was that individuals had to wait for these appeals to be heard. [93989]

Mr. Browne: The figures are listed in the table.

Number of disablility living allowance claims received, appeals received, appeals heard and their average waiting time

Tax year	*New claims*	*Appeals received*	*Appeals heard*[1]	*Average time taken to arrange first hearing (weeks)*
2000–01	23,096	5,051	9,832	32
2001–02	23,604	3,992	15,411	36
April 2002—December 2002	17,558	3,225	11,793	30

[1] A single case may have more than one appeal element, so the number of appeals heard is higher than the number of appeal letters received

Dry Homes Scheme

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to implement a dry homes scheme, in parallel with the Warm Homes Scheme delivered by the EAGA Partnership, to low income households in Northern Ireland. [92095]

Mr. Browne: The Warm Homes Scheme offers a range of heating, draught proofing and energy efficiency measures to vulnerable people who own their home or rent from a private landlord. The homes of eligible people are surveyed by staff of the Eaga Partnership, and if it appears that works are required to repair or weather-proof the building, clients are advised to contact the Northern Ireland Housing Executive about its private sector grants scheme. There are currently no plans to implement further dry homes measures in parallel with the Warm Homes Scheme.

Home Start/Sure Start

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* Home Start and *(b)* Sure Start projects supported by departmental or trust funding were provided in 2002–03 in each district council area of Northern Ireland; and at what cost. [93923]

Mr. Paul Murphy: With regard to Sure Start projects, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not provide funding directly to the individual 23 Sure Start projects but to the four Childcare Partnerships through the appropriate Health and Social Services Board. For financial year 2002–03, the Department allocated a total of £6.6 million across the four Childcare Partnerships. Information regarding allocations to each district council area is not available.

Information on resources allocated by trusts for Home-Start schemes is also not available on a district council basis. Details of allocations by trust area are set out in the table.

£

Home-Start scheme	H&SS Trust	Funding secured by HSS Trust[1]
East Belfast	South and East Belfast	32,764
North Belfast	North and West Belfast	35,125
North Down	Ulster Community and Hospitals	45,000
Newry and Mourne	Newry and Mourne	40,656
Causeway	Causeway	36,550
Colin	Down Lisburn	17,500
Lisburn	Down Lisburn	17,500
Down District (includes Newcastle and Ballynahinch)	Down Lisburn	79,000
Armagh and Dungannon	Armagh and Dungannon	41,985
West Tyrone	Sperrin Lakeland	21,525
Antrim District	Homefirst	42,206
Carrickfergus	Homefirst	19,655

[1] 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003

Hospitals (Trolley Waits)

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the average trolley waits were in all hospitals in *(a)* November and *(b)* December 2002; and if he will make a statement. [93933]

Mr. Browne: Trolley wait information is collected by time band. It is therefore not possible to calculate the arithmetic mean length of trolley wait. It is however possible to identify the median or mid point trolley wait.

The median length of trolley waits by hospital are provided in the following table:

	November		December	
	Median hours waiting	Total monthly trolley waits	Median hours waiting	Total monthly trolley waits
Altnagelvin	3–4	1	0	0
Antrim	10–11	195	9–10	134
Belfast City	8–9	108	4–5	7
Causeway	12–13	120	16–17	93
Craigavon	16–17	329	16–17	215
Down	1–2	4	0	0
Lagan Valley	10–11	45	8–9	61
Mater	13–14	161	11–12	136
Mid Ulster	4–5	16	8–9	6
Royal Group	10–11	133	9–10	24
Sperrin Lakeland	0	0	6–7	1
Ulster	10–11	319	11–12	238

I am very aware of recent pressures on hospitals and the number of patients who have had to wait on trolleys before they can be admitted. A significant amount of planning was undertaken to ensure that additional services were available to help meet extra demand on services during winter and an additional £4.5 million was allocated for this. A wide range of primary and community care measures is also being taken to minimise the number of potential hospital admissions.

Capacity is also being expanded at key hospitals. An additional 20 beds opened at the Ulster Hospital in December and extra beds are planned for Antrim, Craigavon and the Mater. I recently announced an extra £17.4 million for hospital services next year, which will support this development and provide for further improvements in critical services such as cardiac surgery, renal dialysis, cancer and intensive care. An additional £6 million will also be allocated next year to pay for more than 500 extra community care packages, which will help to maintain people in their own homes and communities and reduce unnecessary hospital admissions.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps were taken to prevent patients having to wait on trolleys in accident and emergency departments at *(a)* the Ulster, *(b)* Belfast City, *(c)* Antrim Area and *(d)* Craigavon Area hospitals on Wednesday 15 January. [93934]

Mr. Browne: A number of steps were taken by these hospitals to alleviate pressures on accident and emergency departments. In the Ulster Hospital, the hospital discharge team resettled 15 people on a fast-track basis to community care accommodation to make room for patients being admitted; they also utilised beds in Ards and Bangor Community Hospitals. At Belfast City Hospital, a 16-bed emergency receiving unit, which operates alongside the A&E department, was utilised to deal with emergency admissions and ensure that patients were admitted to the most appropriate wards. Antrim Area Hospital used its day surgery unit on a 24-hour basis to alleviate pressure and ensured as far as possible that patients were waiting on proper hospital beds rather than trolleys. In Craigavon Area Hospital, additional nursing staff were brought in to provide nursing care for patients on trolleys and the hospital also had a team of senior doctors assessing patients before admission.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many patients have been on hospital waiting lists in Northern Ireland for *(a)* more than 12 months and *(b)* more than 18 months. [93987]

Mr. Browne: The most recent waiting list figures available reflect the position at 30 September 2002.

At 30 September 2002 there were 14,890 patients waiting more than 12 months, and 9,108 patients waiting over 18 months for inpatient treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland. 27,949 patients were waiting more than 12 months, and 16,107 patients were waiting more than 18 months for a first outpatient appointment in Northern Ireland at 30 September 2002.

Hub Arts Centre

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much the preferred developer will be paid for the Hub Arts Centre; and how the Government will ensure value for money. [92928]

Angela Smith: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is currently finalising a business case including an economic appraisal of options for a new purpose built arts centre in Belfast city centre. There is no preferred developer for the proposed arts centre: the amount the developer will be paid cannot therefore be determined. The issue of the appropriate procurement route for the project will be addressed in the business case commissioned by the Arts Council.

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether a preferred developer has been appointed for the Hub Arts Centre in the Cathedral Quarter; and what process is followed for making such an appointment. [92929]

Angela Smith: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is currently finalising a business case, including an economic appraisal of options for a new purpose built arts centre in Belfast city centre. There is no preferred developer for the proposed arts centre: the issue of the appropriate procurement route for the project will be addressed in the business case commissioned by the Arts Council.

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the proposals for the Hub Arts Centre in the Cathedral Quarter; what partnerships are envisaged to deliver the proposals; what the cost of delivery is; and what the completion date is. [92938]

Angela Smith: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is currently finalising a business case including an economic appraisal of options for a new purpose built arts centre in Belfast city centre. The issue of the partnerships required to deliver the proposed project will be addressed in the business case commissioned by the Arts Council. As plans for the proposed project have not been finalised, it is not yet possible to determine the cost of delivery and the completion date.

Into The West Scheme

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether individuals will face disciplinary procedures following the departmental investigations regarding the Into The West scheme. [93927]

Mr. Pearson: Investigations are currently being finalised and should any disciplinary action be necessary this will be considered as appropriate when these investigations are complete.

Landfill Directive

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much the Government spent on rural regeneration in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years. [92271]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The figures outlined in the table relate to funding for rural regeneration by Government in Northern Ireland for the last three financial years.

	£ million
1999–2000	80
2000–01	81.8
2001–02	53

The figures show expenditure across a range of activities including LEADER II Programmes INTERREG Programmes; Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation; PEACE II, PESCA; the Single Programme; the Rural Stress Project; Community Regeneration and Improvement Special Programme etc.

The figures include expenditure for areas outside Belfast and Londonderry by the predecessor agencies of Invest Northern Ireland (Industrial Development Board, Local Enterprise Development Unit and the Industrial Research and Technology Unit) and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The decrease in expenditure in 2001–02 is primarily attributable to changes in the number and characteristics of IDB projects.

Motorcycle Road Races

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to secure the future running of the annual motorcycle road races at the North West 200 at Portrush and the Ulster Grand Prix at Dundrod. [92931]

Angela Smith: The Northern Ireland Events Company are continuing discussions with the North West 200 organising committee following the huge success of last years event. A formal application has been received under the NIEC Major International Events Fund, and will be processed in line with NIEC procedures. A recommendation will be presented to the NIEC Board for a decision in February 2003.

An Ulster Grand Prix application has also been received for funding under the new Events Growth Fund and will be processed in line with the criteria for that fund. NIEC expect to take a decision for that particular tranche of funding in early June 2003.

Giant's Causeway

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much grant aid is being offered to Moyle district council to help it rebuild its visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim. [94081]

Mr. Pearson: The Government have not been approached formally by Moyle district council relative to the issue of grant assistance for the rebuilding of its visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway.

NHS Direct

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the operation of the NHS Direct helpline and when it will be provided in Northern Ireland. [93986]

Mr. Browne: An evaluation of NHS Direct published in 2000 indicated that the scheme offered benefits to service users. Specific funding was made available in England for this project. Different arrangements

operate in Northern Ireland and bids for additional funding needed to introduce an NHS Direct Scheme here have not been successful.

Planning Policy

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if it is his policy that no change should be made to planning policy for the Down District Council area pending the outcome of the public inquiry into the Ards/Down Area Plan and consideration of submissions thereto. [92778]

Angela Smith: The publication of the Draft Ards and Down Area Plan will inevitably change planning policy for the Down District Council area.

In line with current policy, the Draft Ards and Down Plan published on 10 December 2002 constitutes a material consideration in determining planning applications received ahead of any future Public Inquiry. The weight the Department attaches to the policies and proposals in the draft plan will depend on the nature of development proposals under consideration and if objections have been lodged in respect of specific policies or proposals.

Where no objections have been lodged to relevant policies in the draft plan, then considerable weight may be attached to those policies because of the strong possibility that they will be adopted and replace those in the existing plan. The converse may apply if there have been objections to relevant policies. However, much will depend on the nature of those objections and also whether there are representations in support of particular policies.

It may also be justifiable, in some circumstances to refuse planning permission on the grounds of prematurity. This may be appropriate in respect of development proposals which are individually so substantial or whose cumulative effect would be so significant, that to grant planning permission would prejudice the outcome of the plan process.

Public Housing

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the Department of Social Development's estimates were for the amount of public sector housing to be built in Northern Ireland in each year since 1999. [93924]

Mr. Browne: The Department's initial targets for new build programme starts are set before the funding to the various elements of the housing budget are allocated and are adjusted in-year to take account of priorities. The initial targets were as follows:

Year	*Number of houses*
1998–99	2,100
1999–2000	2,200
2000–01	1,700
2001–02	1,200

In each year the housing budget was spent in full.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many public sector housing completions there were in each year since 1999. [93925]

Mr. Browne: Within the budget available, having taken into account other housing priorities such as NIHE funding, revenue support for vulnerable people and funding for the Northern Ireland Co-ownership scheme the following social units were completed:

Year	
1998–99	1,739
1999–2000	1,557
2000–01	1,342
2001–02	1,763

In each year the budget was spent in full.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reasons the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is no longer permitted to build public sector housing; and in what circumstances the NIHE would recommence building public sector housing. [93926]

Mr. Browne: Following the 1996 Housing Policy Review, housing associations took over responsibility for all new build social housing under the strategic direction of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). There were two main reasons for this: firstly, under HM Treasury Rules any private funding provided to the NIHE, as an Non-Departmental Public Body, scores in public expenditure terms, whereas housing associations can lever in private finance; and, secondly, housing associations had demonstrated their ability to deliver the social housing programme. The NIHE, however, still retains new build powers, for instance, when housing associations are unable to undertake particular schemes. NIHE's role is to gauge demand, the type of dwellings required to satisfy the particular needs of the community and the identification of where new social houses need to be built.

The advantage in housing associations taking on the new build role is that by levering in private finance more social houses can be built for the same level of public money. The new build programme undertaken by housing associations is currently operating with approximately 70 per cent. public subsidy and 30 per cent. private finance. Since 1991, housing associations have attracted some £190 million into the building programme. Without this additional funding either fewer houses would be built or other programmes would have to be cut in order to sustain the same level of new build.

School Transport

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on funding for transport for pupils living in rural areas of Northern Ireland. [91858]

Jane Kennedy: The current school transport arrangements cost £54 million. They restrict free transport provision to pupils who have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance of their home (three miles for secondary and two miles for primary school age pupils).

The arrangements are the subject of regular review to ensure that they remain appropriate and effective and that they provide value for money.

Railways

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what his plans are for the future of the railway lines north of Ballymena. [94949]

Angela Smith: I can confirm that the plans for the retention of services on the railway line north of Ballymena are set out in the "Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002–2012" (RTS). The intention is to retain services on this line, subject to successful results from the introduction of new trains and improved infrastructure on the "core" network in the early stages of implementing the RTS. Hence, for the foreseeable future services will be retained on the railway line north of Ballymena, subject to safety procedures. However, no major improvements will be carried out until the assessments referred to above are concluded.

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland will approve for those deemed medically appropriate new drug treatment for severe rheumatoid arthritis; and what assessment he has made of research from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Health Technology Board for Scotland on drugs for this condition. [93920]

Mr. Browne: The drugs Enbrel (Etanercept) and Remicade (Infliximab) have been available, where medically appropriate, in Northern Ireland since November 1999, for a number of patients with severe rheumatoid arthritis who have failed to respond to existing drug therapies. The subsequent technology appraisal guidance issued in 2002 by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommending selective use of these therapies, and its endorsement by the then Health Technology Board for Scotland, relate only to treatment with these drugs in England, Wales and Scotland respectively. Although Northern Ireland has no formal arrangement with NICE, the approach adopted to making these therapies available is broadly in line with NICE recommendations. It is my intention to make additional funds available in 2003–04 for expensive drug therapies.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the list for consultation with the arthritis consultant in the Northern Health and Social Service Board area was closed; and when additional resources will be allocated to re-open the list. [93984]

Mr. Browne: The waiting list for new consultations in rheumatology in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area was closed in March 2000. The Board is currently considering the scope for developing rheumatology services as one of its priorities in plans for the coming financial year. Until that planning process is complete at the end of March, it is not possible to say what funding will be made available for rheumatology services. Rheumatology referrals in the meantime are going to a number of hospitals in the adjacent Eastern Health and Social Services Board area.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what funding was allocated during 2002–03 for new drug treatment for severe rheumatoid arthritis; and how much has been spent to date. [93988]

Mr. Browne: Within their initial allocation for 2002–03, Health and Social Services Boards set aside £1,140,000 to meet the costs of new drug treatments for severe rheumatoid arthritis. As part of the funding disbursed following June Monitoring, the Department allocated an additional £3,000,000 to meet the costs of expensive hospital drugs. I understand that, of this sum, the boards have committed £286,000 to provide for the anti-TNF treatment of severe rheumatoid arthritis.

The 2002–03 in-year expenditure in this area will depend on when the various patients commenced their courses of treatment. Information on that point is not available centrally.

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many individuals in Northern Ireland *(a)* suffer from rheumatoid arthritis and *(b)* are receiving Beta Interferon to treat this condition. [94960]

Mr. Browne: Beta interferon products and glatiramer are used in the treatment of Multiple Sclerosis sufferers who meet criteria specified by the Association of British Neurologists. In Northern Ireland approximately 460 people, representing around 15 per cent. of those who suffer from Multiple Sclerosis, are being treated with beta interferon under closely monitored conditions to determine the effectiveness of this form of therapy. This represents a treatment rate some five times higher than in the rest of the UK.

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many patients in Northern Ireland are being treated for rheumatoid arthritis with *(a)* Enbrel and *(b)* Remicade. [94961]

Mr. Browne: As of December 2002, around 100 patients were receiving treatment for rheumatoid arthritis with these drugs. Approximately one third of these are being treated with Enbrel but it is not possible to give precise figures as patients' treatments are stopped, suspended and re-started for a variety of clinical reasons on an ongoing basis.

Rogue Traders

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to protect consumers in Northern Ireland from the activities of rogue traders. [93930]

Mr. Pearson: In Northern Ireland existing consumer protection legislation protects consumers from a range of trading malpractices. In particular, consumers are protected from those businesses who falsely describe or give misleading prices for goods or services, trade in counterfeit goods or unclassified video works (adult movies).

Furthermore the recently enacted Enterprise Act 2002 will extend the Stop Now Orders regime (the use of injunctive powers to stop traders continuing activities

detrimental to consumers interests) to protect consumers from traders who do not meet their legal obligations.

The Trading Standards Service of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment enforces this legislation. The service also raises public awareness through the press.

Small Business

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to reduce the burden of bureaucracy on small businesses in Northern Ireland. [93931]

Mr. Pearson: In December 2001 the NI Executive approved the introduction of the Northern Ireland Better Regulation Strategy. The Strategy, which actively seeks to reduce the regulatory burden on business, includes revised arrangements on Regulatory Impact Assessments and the introduction of a micro business test to assess the impact of any proposed legislation on businesses with less than 5 employees. It also requires Northern Ireland Departments to advise business at least 12 weeks in advance of any legislation, which may affect it, and to provide appropriate guidance relating to implementation.

Tourism

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what Northern Ireland's total tourism budget is for 2002–03; how much of it is spent by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board; and how much is spent through Tourism Ireland. [92303]

Mr. Pearson: In 2002–03, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has a total Public Expenditure provision of £20.750 million for tourism. Of this amount, 9.204 million will be spent by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and £8.256 million by Tourism Ireland Ltd.

Ulster Scots Agency

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made by the Ulster Scots Agency to appoint a chief executive; and when the successful candidate will be announced. [92937]

Angela Smith: Interviews for the post of Chief Executive of the Ulster Scots Agency were held on 3 and 6 January 2003. The announcement of the appointment of the chief executive of the agency will be made following the appointment of the new board of the North/South Language Body and the completion of the necessary approvals.

Wind Farms

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much was given to *(a)* wind energy projects and *(b)* all renewable energy projects in Northern Ireland in (i) 2001 and (ii) 2002. [92273]

Mr. Pearson: Public funds are dispersed on a financial year basis and the information requested is as follows.

£

Projects	*Amount*
2001–02	
(a) Wind energy projects	[1]183,718
(b) All renewable projects	881,797
2002–03	
(a) Wind energy projects	[1]122,071
(b) All renewable projects	192,601

[1] Included in *(b)* for each year

Work Permits

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reason the issue of work permits was returned to the Home Office. [93681]

Jane Kennedy: In June 2001 responsibility for work permits was transferred from the Department for Education and Employment to the Home Office in order to integrate that function more closely into the wider immigration control administration. The Department for Employment and Learning had been issuing work permits to Northern Ireland employers under an administrative arrangement with DfEE. It was appropriate for that work also to be transferred to the Home Office and this was implemented as from 1 September 2002.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Data Protection

Bob Russell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations she has received about companies claiming status as specialist registration agencies for implementation of the Data Protection Act 1998; and what action she is taking to ensure that those who need to register do so through approved channels. [91141]

Yvette Cooper: I have received representations from a number of right hon. and hon. Members on this matter. The Information Commissioner, who carries out his duties independently of Government, has a statutory duty to disseminate information about the operation of the Data Protection Act 1998. The previous Commissioner launched a public information campaign last year to alert organisations to the fact that while they may need to be on the register of data controllers, they should not be misled by businesses who have no statutory powers to maintain the register.

A warning that organisations which falsely imply that they have official status for data protection registration services are exploiting small businesses and causing problems for the Commissioner has been placed on his website at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk. This advises anyone visited by the representatives of these businesses to notify the local police and anyone who wishes to complain about correspondence received from them to contact their local Trading Standards Office. There is a link to the Commissioner's warning notice on the Lord Chancellor's Department website at www.lcd.gov.uk.

I understand that the new Commissioner is also cooperating with other relevant authorities, who are exploring what action might be taken. I am aware that the Office of Fair Trading has already taken action against a number of these businesses under the Control of Misleading Advertisements Regulations 1988.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, (1) whether the Lord Chancellor's Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy statement on revitalising health and safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards; [89499]

(2) what information the Lord Chancellor has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the revitalising health and safety strategy statement; and if he will make a statement; [89501]

(3) which senior officials within the Lord Chancellor's Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89500]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister for Work on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 85W.

Occupational Stress

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress among officials in the Magistrates' Court Service. [93688]

Yvette Cooper: None. Magistrates' Courts are locally managed by independent Magistrates' Courts Committees (MCCs). The Committees act as the strategic body responsible for determining policy in relation to the provision of services for court users, including the recruitment of staff and matters relating to their welfare.

Representative organisations of the Magistrates' Court Service are pursuing the possibility of conducting a stress audit for Magistrates' Court Staff.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how many press releases have been issued by her Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92431]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The number of press releases issued by my Department is:

Year	
1995	335
1996	354
1997	310
1998	386
1999	387
2000	452
2001	463
2002	435
2003	[1]16

[1] As at 20 January 2003

Quarterly figures since 1995 could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Living Allowance

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what assistance his Department provides for people whose main disabling condition is deafness when requesting help with the disability living allowance application forms; and what the *(a)* targets and *(b)* performance figures for these services are for each year since 1997; [94933]

(2) what methods of providing information on benefits, with specific regard to disability living allowance, to deaf people *(a)* have been introduced since 1997 and *(b)* are planned. [95031]

Maria Eagle: The Disability and Carers Service provides assistance for customers who require help completing claim packs. For deaf and hard of hearing customers this can be provided via text phone or face to face at a public counter facility, or, exceptionally, by appointment at the customer's home. Customers calling the Disability Living Allowance/Attendance Allowance Helpline can arrange a call back via textphone at an agreed time to assist with forms completion. Textphone numbers are published on all correspondence. Typetalk and Textdirect can also be used.

All Disability and Carer Service public counter facilities are fitted with induction loop systems and portable induction loops are available for home visits. For customers who require a British Sign Language Interpreter for either public counter or home appointments, advance appointments are made depending upon the availability of an interpreter.

The Department also provides a range of information about Disability Living Allowance in accessible formats. A large number of leaflets contain information, including SD1 Sick or disabled which is available from social security offices, Jobcentre Plus offices and most main post offices. Information is also available on the Department's website.

Information about Disability Living Allowance, along with the rest of the Department's benefit and pension information, is currently being reviewed across the Department for Work and Pensions. The review will inform the new corporate communication standards for the production of information in accessible formats.

The statistical information requested is unavailable.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans there are subsequent to the activities for managing life system trials to bring people

whose main disabling condition is deafness who have high communication technology costs but relatively low support needs into DLA entitlement. [95131]

Maria Eagle: There are no current plans to alter the entitlement conditions to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to reflect the costs of communication technology for people whose main disabling condition is deafness. Entitlement to DLA is based on the extent to which a severely disabled person requires attention, supervision or watching over by another person and/or has walking difficulties as a result of their disabilities. Activities for Managing Life (AMLs) is a model for a possible new way of assessing those requirements and difficulties but would not affect the fundamental rule that entitlement depends on each individual's personal care and mobility needs.

New Deal

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many participants left the New Deal programmes in each year since their establishment; and of those, what proportion obtained sustained jobs; [91613]

(2) if he will make a statement on the sustained job entry rate of the New Deal. [91617]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The available information is in the tables.

New Deal for Young People (from January 1998)

	Total number of programme leavers	*Proportion entering unsubsidised, sustained employment (percentage)* [1]
1998	78,200	47.0
1999	196,300	40.3
2000	198,600	39.4
2001	176,600	38.3
2002[2]	137,800	36.2

[1] A sustained job is defined as one lasting for more than 13 weeks.
[2] Up to September.

New Deal 25 plus (from July 1998) [1]

	Total number of programme leavers	*Proportion entering unsubsidised, sustained employment (percentage)* [2]
1998	13,700	22.6
1999	124,400	13.3
2000	132,600	13.4
2001	115,200	18.7
2002[3]	87,000	25.1

[1] In April 2001, New Deal 25 plus was re-engineered to provide a flexible, more individually-tailored service to help more people get jobs and remain in them.
[2] A sustained job is defined as one lasting for more than 13 weeks.
[3] Up to September.

Information on the number of leavers from New Deal for Disabled People is not available.

The following table shows the number of participants moving into jobs and sustained jobs since the programme was launched nationally in July 2001. A sustained job in the New Deal for Disabled People is defined as one lasting 26 weeks out of a 39-week period. Therefore, a number of people who have already moved into jobs have not yet reached the point at which that job can be regarded as sustained.

New Deal for Disabled People (from July 2001)

	Total number of people entering employment	*Total number of people entering sustained employment*
2001	2,304	245
2002[1]	5,677	1,745

[1] Up to November.

Information on the number of people moving into sustained jobs through the New Deal for Lone Parents is not available. The following table shows the number of programme leavers and the proportion of leavers who move into work.

New Deal for Lone Parents (from October 1998)

	Total number of programme leavers	*Proportion entering employment (percentage)*
1998	1,520	47.4
1999	59,460	44.3
2000	86,510	52.0
2001	102,890	49.7
2002[1]	72,360	56.8

[1] Up to September.

Information on the number of leavers and people entering sustained employment through New Deal 50 plus and the New Deal for Partners is not available. However, many of those helped into work through these programmes will have entered sustained jobs.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make arrangements to refer calls to the Benefit Fraud hotline and the Targeting Fraud website, which relate to Asylum Support Fraud, to NASS fraud investigations. [95129]

Malcolm Wicks: Referrals to the Benefit Fraud hotline and the Targeting Fraud website relating to asylum seekers are already checked against departmental records to establish if a benefit is in payment. If a benefit is in payment, the allegation is passed to the local Counter-Fraud Investigation Service team who, in turn, notify the Immigration Service and the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). If benefit is not in payment, the allegation is passed directly to the Immigration Service and NASS.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 4 February 2003

SCOTLAND

Employment Policy

5. **Mr. Davidson**: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last met the Scottish Trade Union Congress to discuss implementation of Government policy on employment. [94189]

Mrs. McGuire: My right hon. Friend last met with representatives of the STUC on 2 December to discuss a wide range of issues.

Devolution

6. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she intends to respond to the Second Report of the House of Lords Constitution Committee, on devolution, HL 28, Session 2002–03, as it relates to Scotland. [94190]

Mrs. Liddell: The Select Committee's report was published on 15 January. The Government expect to respond to it in due course.

Broadband

7. **Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to ensure that rural areas of Scotland have access to broadband services on equal terms. [94191]

Mrs. McGuire: The Government aim to stimulate broadband connectivity and take-up across the UK.

Access to broadband services in rural communities and the remote areas of Scotland is a strategic priority for the Scottish Executive. The Executive represents Scottish interests on the UK Broadband Taskforce and has already announced a £24 million economic development initiative to accelerate and extend the reach of broadband services.

Fisheries

8. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations she has received on the recent fisheries reforms; and if she will make a statement. [94193]

Mrs. Liddell: I took part in a meeting on 28 January at which fishing industry representatives presented their views to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and other Ministers.

Rural Communities

9. **Mr. Liddell-Grainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on UK Government help for rural communities. [94194]

Mrs. McGuire: The Government are committed to ensuring the rural dimension is taken into account when developing policy and sets specific targets to measure progress on rural issues. Policy on rural development in Scotland is a devolved responsibility.

Scotland Act

10. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she plans to establish a commission to consider the consequences of amending the Scotland Act 1998; and if she will make a statement. [94195]

Mrs. Liddell: As announced in my statement to Parliament on 18 December 2002, I expect that the new commission to consider issues caused by different boundaries for Westminster and Holyrood constituencies will be established after the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections.

Pensioners

11. **Bob Spink:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action she is taking to improve the standard of living of pensioners. [94196]

Mrs. McGuire: This Government is spending around £6 billion extra in real terms on pensioners in 2002/03 as a result of policies introduced since 1997. We have introduced the Minimum Income Guarantee for poorer pensioners; Winter Fuel Payments for people aged 60 and over; free TV licences for the over 75s; and are introducing the new Pension Credit later this year, rewarding pensioners who save.

Members of Parliament (Scotland)

12. **Mr. John Baron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what her policy is on how many Scottish honourable Members should be returned at the next general election. [94197]

Mrs. Liddell: Future representation for parliamentary constituencies in Scotland is dealt with in the Scotland Act 1998, which repealed the guarantee of 71 Scottish seats at Westminster and requires the Boundary Commission for Scotland to determine the level of Scottish representation by applying the same electoral quota as in England. The Commission is required to submit its report to me before December 2006. It is a matter for the Commission when, within that time scale, it does so.

Winter Fuel Payments

13. **Mrs. Irene Adams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many pensioners in Scotland are benefiting from the £200 winter fuel payments. [94198]

Mrs. McGuire: For winter 2001–02, around 996,000 people in Scotland received Winter Fuel Payments, producing a total payout of £152 million.

Citizens Advice Scotland

14. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement about her recent discussions with Citizens Advice Scotland about its work. [94199]

Mrs. McGuire: I met Citizens Advice Scotland yesterday. The Government greatly values the work they and individual Citizens Advice Bureaux carry out in major areas such as debt, welfare rights and employment.

Rural Post Offices (Scotland)

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what support is being made available to protect the rural post office network in Scotland. [94192]

Mrs. McGuire: The Government has emphasised its commitment to the UK rural post office network by making 450 million available to Post Office Ltd over the next three years. The funding will directly support rural post offices and give the company freedom to pilot new and innovative ways of providing rural services. Post Office Ltd will administer the fund within guidelines and parameters set by the Government and, as such, no specific figures in relation to Scotland are available at this time.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Devolution

18. **Miss Anne McIntosh:** To ask the Advocate General what devolution issues she has advised on since 7 January 2003. [94184]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mr Reid) on 4 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 135.

PRIVY COUNCIL

House Timetable

35. **Sir Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the President of the Council what further changes to the standard timetable of the House he plans in 2003. [95360]

Mr. Robin Cook: I have no plans for further changes. I shall, of course, give careful consideration to any recommendations which the Procedure Committee may make following its current wide-ranging inquiry.

The House will not need to review the changes before the end of the Parliament. The resolution lapses at the end of this Parliament, but it would surely be right to leave the decision on the hours of the next Parliament to its Members.

Sitting Hours

36. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment he has made of the impact of the House's new hours on scrutiny of Government business. [95361]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend's assessment is that the House's new sitting hours, taken with other modernisation changes (opportunities for debate and cross-cutting questions in Westminster Hall, for example, and more topical questions in the main Chamber) have had a positive impact on the scrutiny of Government business.

Pre-legislative Scrutiny

37. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the President of the Council what representations he has made to ministerial colleagues on pre-legislative scrutiny during the present session. [95362]

Mr. Bradshaw: In the course of discussions on the legislative programme, my right hon. Friend has encouraged ministerial colleagues to proceed on the presumption that Bills will be published in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny unless there is good reason otherwise.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Parliamentary Visitors Centre

34. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission what progress has been made with proposals for a parliamentary visitors' centre. [95359]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: As the House will be aware, following the Modernisation Committee's recommendation, the Commission asked for a feasibility study from specialist consultants. We are well aware of the sensitivities about the option off Westminster Hall which they recommended, and have asked that sites outside the precincts should be examined as well. We are consulting widely, and hope to consider the matter again in April in the light of the views expressed. The way forward will need to be agreed with the authorities of the House of Lords.

Line of Route

38. **Mr. Andrew Turner:** To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission if he will make a statement on access for schoolchildren to the line of route. [95363]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: Special provision for schoolchildren to visit Parliament for educational programmes, including a tour, can be made through the Parliamentary Education Unit which represents both Houses of Parliament. Last year the unit sponsored about 10,000 students taking part in three different visits programmes and a number of special events. However, the majority of schoolchildren visit Westminster as constituents on tours sponsored by Members.

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

David Winnick: To ask the honourable Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission what procedure the House of Commons Commission has established to enable hon. Members to find out the current number of cases which are being dealt with by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. [95568]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: This is not a matter for the Commission, which is not responsible for the way in which the Commissioner exercises his independent role. The Commissioner reports regularly to the Committee on Standards and Privileges on such matters.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Retail Crime

23. **Ms Coffey:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent steps the Department has taken to develop magistrates' understanding of the consequences of retail crime. [95368]

Yvette Cooper: The level and type of crime in each MCC differs and it is for each committee to determine and provide training to suit their local needs. Information is available centrally from the Home Office, which has published a business and retail crime toolkit on the Crime Reduction Website. This provides an overview of the problem, statistical information about the nature and extent of retail crime, examples of best practice and tools to help reduce it. The toolkit also contains links to other useful sources of information on retail crime.

Asylum Appeals

24. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how long on average the delay was between lodging an appeal against the grant of asylum and the hearing of the appeal in the last quarter for which figures are available; and what his assessment is of the cause of these delays. [95369]

Ms Rosie Winterton: During the period October-December 2002 there were 19,343 substantive asylum hearings by adjudicators and the average length of time between lodging an appeal and substantive hearing was 34.09 weeks.

Of those cases heard substantively during the period 12,240 related to an appeal lodged after 1 April 2002. For these cases the average length of time between lodging an appeal and the substantive hearing of that appeal was 17.12 weeks.

The primary reason for delays has been the need to manage a significant backlog of work through the appeal system. However, these figures demonstrate that the recent streamlining and increased capacity of the asylum appeals system are already delivering a significant reduction in waiting times.

Child Contact Centres

25. **Margaret Moran:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor's Department has to provide Child Contact Centres. [95370]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Child Contact Centres are run by the voluntary sector. My Department does not directly provide child contact centres but we work closely with service providers to develop national definitions of contact services, service standards and to map service provision. The LCD has provided funds this financial year to 71 NACCC affiliated child contact centres to help sustain existing services. The Government also part-funded the Coram Supervised Contact Consultancy Service, launched last September.

Court Closures (Ceredigion)

26. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Department will make its decision on the appeal from Ceredigion county council relating to court closures in Ceredigion. [95371]

Yvette Cooper: The discussions between the parties are continuing, as required by the appeal process. Once both parties have confirmed that they do not wish to add to their evidence further, I will consider the matter as soon as practicable.

Harrow Magistrates Court

27. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many recent representations he has received about the future of Harrow magistrates court. [95372]

Yvette Cooper: My predecessor, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) received a representation from my hon. Friend for Harrow East, voicing his concern at the possible closure of the Harrow magistrates court.

Regional Assemblies

28. **Mr. George Osborne:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent discussions the Lord Chancellor's Department has had with the Electoral Commission on the proposed referendums on English regional assemblies. [95373]

Yvette Cooper: My Department is a member of the Electoral Commission's Regional Referendums Working Group, which has met five times since August 2002 to consider the primary and secondary legislation necessary for the effective conduct of regional referendums.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when *(a)* Her Majesty's Land Registry's and *(b)* the Public Records Office's service delivery agreements for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94113]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The information is as follows:

(a) Her Majesty's Land Registry intends to publish its Service Delivery Agreement for 2003 to 2006 in March 2003.

(b) The Public Record Office is in the process of joining up with the Historical Manuscripts Commission, a non-departmental public body sponsored by DCMS, to form the National Archives in April 2003. The National Archives will be a Government Department and Executive Agency under the Lord Chancellor. The National Archives intends to publish its Service Delivery Agreement for 2003 to 2006 in March 2003.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

National Audit Office

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission how many specialist staff with expertise in nuclear liabilities are employed by the National Audit Office. [94818]

Mr. Alan Williams: The National Audit Office is staffed mainly with qualified accountants, several of whom have had experience in auditing estimates of costs associated with nuclear liabilities. In the event of any need for more detailed knowledge of nuclear matters, the National Audit Office has the capacity to contract-in persons with appropriate specialist skills—as it does routinely for its value-for-money reports.

TRANSPORT

A63

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many drivers have broken the speed limit as detected by speed cameras at the A63 Melton junction in each year since they were introduced. [94302]

Mr. Spellar: This information is not held centrally.

Central Railway

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 509W, on Central Railway, whether he will give equal weight to those of the representations to which he refers made by foreign governments and to those made by the elected representatives of the communities affected by the proposed railway; and when he expects to be in a position to make an announcement about Government support for a Hybrid Bill to promote the project. [95125]

Mr. Jamieson: Following receipt of the SRA's advice, we are considering carefully the company's proposals and will respond in due course. We are aware of the keen interest in Central Railway's proposals, especially among residents and businesses along the proposed route. We will give due weight to all representations made.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what further work he has commissioned from the Strategic Rail Authority about the Central Railway Project; [95303]

(2) what discussions have taken place in the last four months about the Central Railway Project between *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* special advisers and *(c)* other officials, and representatives of (i) Central Railway plc and (ii) Weber Shandwick; and if he will make a statement. [95302]

Mr. Jamieson: The SRA's detailed review of Central Railway's proposals included an assessment of the company's funding of the scheme. Following receipt of the SRA's advice in September 2002, the Minister for Transport has met with Central Railway to discuss its findings. Officials in the Strategic Rail Authority and my Department have held a number of other discussions with Central Railway. This includes further consideration of the strategic fit of Central Railway's proposals. There have been no discussions with representatives of Weber Shandwick.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the financial status of Central Railways Group and of its ability to fund the proposed Central Railway; and if he will make a statement. [95630]

Mr. Jamieson: The SRA detailed review of Central Railway's proposals included an assessment of the company's funding of the scheme. Following receipt of the SRA's advice in September, the Minister for Transport has met with Central Railway to discuss its findings. Officials in the Strategic Rail Authority and my Department and have held a number of other discussions with Central Railway. This includes further consideration of the strategic fit of Central Railway's proposals. There have been no discussions with representatives of Weber Shandwick.

Channel Tunnel

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the maximum number of trains is that can use the Channel Tunnel *(a)* every hour, *(b)* in a 24-hour period and *(c)* in a week. [94889]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The traffic capacity through the Channel Tunnel is calculated as the number of trains running at a nominal 140 kph (the speed of Eurotunnel's Shuttles) that can pass through the Channel Tunnel per hour. On this basis, at present, the capacity of the Channel Tunnel is 20 standard train paths per hour in each direction.

The 20 standard train paths are available at all times, with the exception of a few hours on the three low demand nights at each weekend when part of the Channel Tunnel structure is closed for essential maintenance.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the maximum *(a)* width and *(b)* length of rolling stock that can use the Channel Tunnel is. [94890]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The answer is as follows: *(a)* The maximum width is 4.168 metres; *(b)* the maximum length is 800 metres.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the maximum level of heat released by a train that can be handled by the Channel Tunnel air conditioning plant is. [94891]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* A Tourist Shuttle releases about 9 MW of heat, which is more than any other train using the Channel Tunnel system. About 15 per cent. to 20 per cent. of heat dissipates naturally, and the remainder is removed by a cooling system based on chilled water.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the maximum amount is of electric power available within the Channel Tunnel. [94892]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The Channel Tunnel traction electrical network is fed from four 75 MVA transformers on the French side, and four

100 MVA transformers on the UK side. This supply arrangement allows the catenary to supply 1,200 A at 25kV.

Coach Passenger Seat Belts

Mr. Michael Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) pursuant to his answer of 23 January, ref 91765, what response his Department has given to the proposals for a directive on seat belts for coach passengers; [94473]

(2) when he estimates that the EU directive on seat belts for coach passengers will take effect in the UK. [94437]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department supports the proposals for seat belt wearing in coaches. The new Directive, which updates the existing EU Directive 671/91, is presently being considered by the European Parliament as part of the co-decision process. If the Directive is adopted, it is expected to come into force later this year and that UK legislation will be implemented as soon as is practicable thereafter. No timetable has been set for that yet.

Cycling

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to *(a)* encourage cyclists and *(b)* improve the cycling infrastructure in the UK. [94738]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government are committed to seeing an increase in cycling.

The National Cycling Strategy Board for England, chaired by Steve Norris, has been established to advise on how to increase cycling. It combines unrivalled expertise on transport engineering, marketing, local government and research. The Board has established an English Regions Cycling Development Team responsible for promoting and monitoring cycling to bring about an improvement in conditions for cycling. Their work includes an audit of local authority provision for cycling; assessment of local authority cycling strategies in Local Transport Plans; and monitoring Cycling Project Fund schemes.

We have just launched the second round of the Cycling Projects Fund. The Fund is open to any organisation, with the exception of local highway authorities, for projects that will increase cycling. More than £3 million has been made available in total. Any project that could be expected to lead to an increase in cycling, such as cycle parking, routes, cycle training or elements within a travel plan may be eligible.

Improved facilities for cyclists are largely funded through Local Transport Plan funds. Highway authorities are asked to develop a local cycling strategy as part of these plans. This must identify gaps in the local infrastructure and potential improvements to the cycling network.

East London Line

Richard Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what progress is being made in bringing the East London Line to Croydon. [95050]

Mr. Jamieson: The SRA is continuing to fund development of this project.

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92386]

Mr. Jamieson: The costs of entertainment incurred were:

1994–95—£24,000 (Department of Transport);

1995–96—£24,000 (Department of Transport);

1996–97—£31,000 (Department of Transport);

and the estimated cost for:

2002–03 for the Department for Transport is £25,000.

From 1997–98 to 2001–02 Transport formed part of the DETR and DTLR. Transport specific information is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

London Underground

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what reports he has received in the last fortnight relating to the standard of maintenance and safety of London Underground track; and if he will make a statement. [95576]

Mr. Jamieson: Since the derailment at Chancery Lane on 25 January, London Underground has kept the Secretary of State informed of developments. We still await the outcome of inquiries by the independent Health and Safety Executive and London Underground.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what criteria must be satisfied before foreign seafarers serving on UK-registered vessels trading in UK waters are covered by the national minimum wage. [95675]

Mr. Jamieson: Foreign seafarers serving on UK-registered vessels trading in UK waters, qualify for the national minimum wage under Section 1(2) of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998.

No-fly Zone (Scotland)

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 269W, on no-fly zone (Scotland), (1) if emergency measures will be introduced to increase no-fly zones over the *(a)* Dounreay and Chapelcross facilities, *(b)* Faslane and Rosyth facilities and *(c)* petrochemical plants if the United Kingdom becomes involved in a war against Iraq; [95043]

(2) what the reason was for the delay in applying temporary flying restrictions over the Hunterston and Torness Power Stations; and for what reasons no flying restrictions were applied over petrochemical facilities in Scotland after 12 September 2001; [95044]

(3) what plans he has to introduce an increased no-fly zone over *(a)* Dounreay and Chapelcross, *(b)* Faslane *(c)* Rosyth and *(d)* petrochemical facilities in Scotland. [95042]

Mr. Jamieson: The original purpose of establishing no fly zones over nuclear sites was to secure the safety of aviation by ensuring that an aircraft suffering engine failure had sufficient height to land clear of the site. A no fly zone does not, on its own, make a significant contribution to the security of the site.

The overflying restrictions imposed on 3 November 2001 over a number of nuclear installations were part of a review of the measures designed to maintain safety and security.

In determining whether and where a no fly zone may be needed on security grounds, the Government would consider whether a specific threat had been made, the nature of such a threat, the most effective response to it, and the part—if any—which a no fly zone could play in that response.

Rail Passengers Council

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the role is of the SRA Director of Media Relations in regard to the Rail Passengers Council. [94842]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority's Executive Director of Communications has no specific role in regard to the Rail Passengers Council. Liaison with the Council is the responsibility of the Authority's Executive Director of Corporate Affairs.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library copies of the correspondence between the Strategic Rail Authority and the Rail Passengers Council and the regional rail passenger committees about the potential for reductions in subsidy for rail franchises. [94843]

Mr. Jamieson: This is a matter for the Strategic Rail Authority. I have asked the authority to contact the hon. Member directly about the information he seeks.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether the Rail Passengers Council is independent of the Strategic Rail Authority. [94861]

Mr. Jamieson: Yes. The Secretary of State's directions and guidance to the Strategic Rail Authority requires the Rail Passengers Council and the Rail Passengers Committees to "remain clearly independent of the Authority".

Railways

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the Government's commitment to increasing rail passenger use by 50 per cent. [95589]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government published a report on its targets and progress in meeting them in relation to the 10-year Plan on 17 December 2002. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

Regional Air Services

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to the oral statement of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State on 29 October 2002, *Official Report*, columns 203–04WH, on committing public funds to regional air services, if he will make a statement on state aid provisions under European law in respect of public service obligations. [95553]

Mr. Jamieson: In its 1994 guidelines on the application of state aid rules to the aviation sector (94/C 350/07), the European Commission has stated that direct operational subsidisation of air routes can in principle be accepted in the case of public service obligations (as defined in Council Regulation (EEC) No 2408/92). The Commission considers that compensation for public service obligations does not involve aid, provided that the carrier has been correctly selected through a call to tender, on the basis of the limitation of access to the route to one single carrier, and the maximum level of compensation does not exceed the amount of deficit as laid down in the bid.

Road Safety

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to increase safety on rural roads. [94735]

Mr. Jamieson: In October 2002 the Government produced their response to the Transport Select Committee Report on Road Traffic Speed. The response included work currently being undertaken and also that planned for the future to improve safety on rural roads. A copy of the response is available in the House of Commons Library or the Department for Transport's website at *www.roads.dft.gov.uk/roadsafetv/index.htm.*

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many people have been killed on rural roads in the last four years in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* the West Midlands and *(c)* the Coventry area. [94736]

Mr. Jamieson: The following table shows the number of people killed in 2001 and each of the previous three years in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* the West Midlands metropolitan area, and *(c)* the city of Coventry, on non built-up roads with a speed limit of over 40mph.

Fatalities on non built-up roads[1] GB 1998—2001

Casualties

Area	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
United Kingdom[2]	1,975	1,929	1,925	1,946
West Midlands metropolitan area	7	7	4	12
City of Coventry	0	1	2	1

[1] Non built-up roads with a speed limit over 40mph.
[2] Includes data from Police Service Northern Ireland.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what further steps he will take to reduce speeding traffic in rural areas. [94737]

Mr. Jamieson: Full details of the Department's work in combating the effects of excessive and inappropriate speed in rural areas can be found in the Government's response to the Transport Select Committee Report on Road Traffic Speed, published in October 2002. Copies of which can be found in the Libraries of the House.

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92456]

Mr. Jamieson: On special advisers, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 31 January.

As regards press officers, detailed information on the numbers of permanent press officers employed in departmental press offices, including the former Department of Transport, during the financial year 1996–97 was provided in a memorandum dated 16 June 1998 to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report on the Government Information and Communication Service (HC 770) in July 1998. A copy is in the Library of the House.

Details of costs for these years or information related to 1994–96, and the period between 1997 and 2002 when the Department for Transport was reformed could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

There are 18.8 permanent Press Officers (full time equivalent) currently employed in the DfT press office.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the annual salary is of the Strategic Rail Authority's Director of Media Relations. [94839]

Mr. Jamieson: The salaries of all the Strategic Rail Authority's Executive Directors, including the Executive Director of Communications, will be published in their next Annual Report, a copy of which will placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how much the Strategic Rail Authority awarded in additional franchise payments above and beyond the franchise payments which were part of the original franchise contracts in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02; and what the forecast additional franchise payments are for (i) 2002–03, *(b)* 2003–04 and (iii) 2004–05; [94841]

(2) how much subsidy *(a)* the Strategic Rail Authority and *(b)* the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising have awarded to Virgin Trains since franchising began; and what proportion of that is additional subsidy payments not included in the original franchise agreements. [94840]

Mr. Jamieson: The contracted commitments for payments to all franchised train operators are set out by year until the end of each franchise in a table in the Strategic Rail Authority's annual reports, the latest being for 2001–02, copies of which are in the Library of the House. The SRA announced on 19 July 2002 that an additional £106 million in franchise payments was being made available to the Virgin group in the period until the end of March 2003 to cover the shortfall in revenue and additional costs incurred because of the delays in the upgrading of the west coast main line. To date £37 million has been drawn down from this facility. The SRA also announced an additional franchise payment of £58 million to Connex on 11 December 2002 to stabilise their loss making franchise during 2003.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether the Strategic Rail Authority evaluated the costs and benefits of operating franchises in-house before increasing subsidies to existing passenger franchise holders. [94857]

Mr. Jamieson: Before increasing subsidies in re-negotiation of existing passenger franchises the SRA has satisfied itself that the costs of any alternative scenario would at least be equal to or greater than the proposed subsidy increase.

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proportion of the Strategic Rail Authority budget for 2003–04 has been allocated to rail freight improvements. [95306]

Mr. Jamieson: The detail of the Strategic Rail Authority's budget for the next financial year is still being finalised.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89890]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department was formed on 29 May 2002. Losses between May and December 2002 due to theft and fraud are as follows:

£

	Losses
Department	1,011
Agencies	19,115
NDPBs	2,447

Assets have been valued at cost, net book value or replacement cost depending on the circumstances of the individual case. Recoveries from perpetrators or others, e.g. insurance claims, have been netted off. Some incidents are still under investigation and final values may change.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

20-day Standstill Rule

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many cases of breaches of the 20-day standstill rule are being investigated by Trading Standards Officers. [93725]

Mr. Morley: Enforcement of breaches of the interim movements arrangements for livestock, including those under the 20-day standstill rule, is the responsibility of the relevant local authority. To date there is no central system for recording on-going investigations. This information is held locally by some 200 local authorities involved in animal movement controls.

As part of the trial of the framework agreement with the local authorities, Defra is developing a national system to record enforcement data. The pilot group of

24 authorities represents approximately 50 per cent. of all animal movements in England and Wales. Details of breaches of the 20-day standstill rule recorded between 6 December 2002 and 29 January 2003 are as follows:

cattle—19; and

sheep and goats—60.

Of these:

two prosecutions have been initiated;

one has received a Home Office caution;

34 are the subject of written warnings;

14 have received written advice/formal notice;

seven have been dealt with by oral advice/warning;

four required no further enforcement action; and

17 are under further investigation.

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the outcome was of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 20–21 January; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including their voting record; and if she will make a statement. [93155]

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the outcome was of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 27 to 28 January; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including their voting record; and if she will make a statement. [95003]

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friends the Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State (Lords) and (Commons) and I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Brussels on 27–28 January 2003. Ministers with agriculture and fisheries responsibilities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales also attended.

The Greek Presidency outlined its priorities and planned work programme for the period ahead.

The Commission formally presented draft legislative proposals that would give effect to the Common Agricultural Policy reforms outlined in its paper of July 2002; member states gave their initial reactions. I emphasised the need for a sustainable CAP and welcomed the general direction of the proposals and the benefits they would bring EU farmers. I noted, however, that the current proposals for modulation of direct payments to farmers put a disproportionate burden on larger and more efficient farms. I argued for a simpler and more equitable model. I also urged a faster and more substantial transfer of funds to rural development spending than the Commission had proposed. Detailed consideration of the proposals will now take place at official level.

Over dinner, Ministers discussed the WTO agriculture negotiations. I welcomed the agreement that had been reached on a modalities paper for submission to the negotiations in Geneva and supported the Commission in stressing that the EU would need to be flexible if it were to reach a satisfactory outcome.

The Commission presented a proposal for revision of EU measures to control and eradicate foot and mouth disease. We welcomed the opportunity to update the rules, while recognising that careful consideration would be needed in many areas before new strategies could be put in place.

The Commission presented a proposal for the individual identification of sheep and goats. We stressed the need for practical requirements that took account of the structure of the UK industry and the high number of animal movements associated with it.

The Council unanimously agreed to ban the import of eggs and poultry from three US states where an outbreak of Newcastle disease has occurred.

The Commission gave its regular report on BSE-related developments. It was noteworthy that there had been a significant increase in testing in 2002 but the total of cases identified was similar to that in 2001.

Under other business, several delegations urged the Commission to keep the case of processed poultry imports under review to ensure that there was no unfair exploitation of the discounted duty rates that apply. On GMOs, there was an exchange of views regarding the co-existence of GM and non-GM agriculture. We supported the case for fuller discussion but warned against attempts to impose a de facto moratorium on GM approvals. Separately the Commission indicated that existing rules would continue to govern the approval of new GM products. New rules, following Council agreement of principle last November, were still under preparation and could not apply immediately.

On fisheries, the Council adopted conclusions welcoming the Commission's communication on the integration of environmental protection with the common fisheries policy and the future actions envisaged in it. We underlined in particular the importance of taking forward action to minimise the by-catch of cetaceans in fishing nets.

The Council similarly adopted conclusions welcoming the Commission's strategy for the sustainable development of aquaculture.

The Commissioner gave initial presentations on his communication on an integrated framework for fisheries partnerships with third countries, and his proposed draft regulation on the conservation of fishery resources through technical measures for the protection of juveniles of marine organisms (which would consolidate and update the Community's technical conservation requirements). Work will continue on these in coming weeks.

Under any other business, Ireland expressed concerns about the Commission's proposals concerning access rules in western Community waters (which are for discussion in coming months) and the Commission expressed its determination to dispel legal uncertainty.

Animal Movement Restrictions

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will set out the reasons for changing the 20 Day Movement Rule. [94146]

Mr. Morley: The reasons for the change were summarised in the Written Statement made on 23 January 2004, *Official Report*, column 20WS.

A supporting document explaining our decision in more detail has been placed in the Library and published on the Defra website.

Bioterrorism

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what advice is available for pet owners in the event of bio-terrorist attacks. [92522]

Mr. Morley: In drawing up contingency plans, consideration has been given to the handling of pets following the deliberate release of biological agents, including infectious diseases that affect animals. The handling of pets would depend very much on the particular circumstances of the incident. Whatever action is necessary, the authorities would take steps to ensure the risks to pets along with all susceptible livestock are minimal.

BNFL

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) when she will reply to the letter of Mr. Ron Hanas dated 11 November 2002, concerning environmental legislation and regulations by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd.; and what action she proposes to take; [92952]

(2) when the Environment Agency will reply to the letter from Mr. Ron Hanas to the chief executive, of 11 November 2002 on BNFL; and what action the agency has taken. [92951]

Margaret Beckett: The letters from Mr. Ron Hanas dated 11 November 2002 reached the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 8 January 2003 and the Environment Agency on 7 January 2003. I have asked the Environment Agency for a report on the issues raised by Mr. Hanas. A letter of acknowledgement was sent by the Environment Agency to Mr. Hanas on 7 January 2003. Full responses will be made to Mr. Hanas as soon as possible.

Cockle Beds (Boston and Skegness)

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures are being taken to compensate those affected by loss of earnings caused by the closure by the Food Standards Agency of cockle beds in Boston and Skegness. [94222]

Mr. Morley: This Department does not operate any schemes of compensation for workers in the shellfish industry.

Committee of Investigation for Great Britain

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the purpose of the Committee of Investigation for Great Britain. [93711]

Mr. Morley: The Committee of Investigation last met 11 years ago and we are currently seeking ways to abolish it. It used to consider and report to Ministers on specific complaints referred to it about the operation of agriculture marketing schemes made under the Agricultural Marketing Act 1958. As the number of marketing schemes reduced, the responsibility of the Committee declined and its continued maintenance no longer represented a good use of public resources. In March 2000 an announcement was made in Parliament to leave the Committee in abeyance and not re-appoint members, 28 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 83W.

Correspondence

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to her answer of 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 541W, when she plans to answer the letter of Mr. D. Parton of Lymington, dated 8 October 2002, regarding composted green waste. [91859]

Alun Michael: A thorough search has been made in the Department for the letter referred to by the hon. Member but I regret that there is no record of it having been received. If the hon. Member will supply me with a copy I shall ensure that it is dealt with speedily.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of whether the price assumptions used in developing Government Energy Efficiency initiatives are sustainable and adequate to allow expansion in capacity required to meet Government targets. [90809]

Mr. Morley: Government energy efficiency initiatives and programmes are continually reviewed and evaluated, to assess the impact on carbon abatement, social and environmental issues, as well as the impact on the market and the relevant industry sectors. In addition Government keeps in close contact with the industry to ensure that any assumptions made are as up-to-date and realistic as possible. The capacity of particular energy efficiency industries is an important consideration in the development of new initiatives.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what standards of thermal performance are indicated under the definition of a decent home in the building regulations of England and Wales Approved Document L1. [90812]

Mr. McNulty: I have been asked to reply.

Decent homes standards are set separately from the building regulations. Both include thermal performance standards, but it would be too cumbersome to repeat them here.

The thermal performance criterion in the decent homes standard is that a home should provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort provided by effective insulation and efficient heating. The detail of the standard was published in March 2002 and it can be found on the Office of the Deputy Prime Ministers website at: http://www.housing.odpm.gov.uk/information/dhg/definition/index.htm

The building regulations contain requirements for reasonable provision for the conservation of fuel and power that apply whenever building work is undertaken. The requirements were substantially improved by

amendment last year. Ways of compliance for dwellings, including thermal performance standards, are given in the 2002 edition of Approved Document L1, also available on the Office of the Deputy Prime Ministers website at: http://www.safety.odpm.gov.uk/bregs/brpub/ad/ad-11/index01.htm

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what help is being given to rural areas to deliver energy efficiency in *(a)* homes and *(b)* offices. [93129]

Mr. Morley: Since the publication of the UK's Climate Change Programme in November 2000, the following key actions have been taken to help deliver energy efficiency in both homes and offices across the whole of the country, in both urban and rural areas:

The Climate Change Levy, a levy on the business use of fuel, was introduced in April 2001. Receipts, forecast at £1 billion a year, are recycled back to business—including £50 million for business energy efficiency.

The Carbon Trust was launched in April 2001, and it receives two thirds of its annual budget from recycled receipts from the Climate Change Levy. It encourages and promotes the development of low carbon technologies to support the transition to a low carbon economy. It offers an interest free loan scheme for small and medium sized businesses and provides funding for the development of low carbon technologies through the Low Carbon Innovation Programme.

The Enhanced Capital Allowances Scheme enables businesses to claim 100 per cent. first year capital allowances on investments in a range of approved energy saving technologies.

The Energy Efficiency Commitment for 2002–05 (EEC) places a challenging but realistic obligation on electricity and gas suppliers to promote improvements in domestic energy efficiency. Suppliers will achieve individual EEC targets by encouraging and assisting consumers to take up energy efficiency measures. It is expected to save 0.4 million tonnes of carbon a year by 2005. It will also help those on lower incomes-who spend a larger proportion of their incomes on energy-by focusing at least 50 per cent. of energy savings on consumers in receipt of benefits or tax credits.

Since its launch in June 2000, the new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme-which is now marketed as Warm Front-has helped over 400,000 households through the installation of a range of insulation and heating measures. Warm Front is the Government's main programme for tackling fuel poverty, aimed at the most vulnerable groups in the private sector in England. Fuel poverty can occur in both urban and rural areas. We have recently received a scoping study looking at alternative technologies to help tackle fuel poverty, which may be of particular benefit to those in rural areas and a working group has reported on the potential to extend the gas network.

The Community Energy Programme is a £50 million grant programme operational from 2002–04 aiming to promote community heating in the UK, primarily through the use of CHP. It will install and refurbish community heating schemes, benefiting people on low incomes while contributing to the Climate Change Programme by reducing carbon emissions by an estimated 0.15 million tonnes of carbon a year.

Part L of the Building Regulations covering energy efficiency provisions was revised in October 2001 and the changes came into effect in 2002. These require work on new buildings and the refurbishment of the existing stock to conform to higher energy efficiency standards including those relating to building insulation, air tightness, lighting, space heating, hot water, boiler performance and replacement glazing. It is estimated that the package of measures introduced in October will reduce carbon emissions from the domestic sector by 0.8 million tonnes per year by 2010.

The Treasury has recently introduced a VAT reduction on certain energy saving materials installed under grant schemes.

The Government have provided funding for the Energy Saving Trust (EST) to help individual households, local authorities and others improve domestic energy efficiency. Since 2000, EST has created the Practical Help advisory service, expanded its local authority support programme providing dedicated staff to 23 areas across the UK, introduced a new grant scheme for innovative projects and expanded its network of Energy Efficiency Advice Centres providing households with advice and support. EST has developed the Energy Efficiency Recommended (EER) labelling scheme (with energy efficiency manufacturers, retailers and installers) to provide easy identification of energy efficient products. EST has also developed EEI-the network of accredited installers in the insulation and heating industries.

The Community Renewables Initiative (administered by the Countryside Agency) gives advice to community groups, individuals and businesses on ways in which they can incorporate energy conservation technologies within their homes, properties and buildings and so increase their energy efficiency. It currently operates in Scotland and in half of England. It is hoped that GB wide coverage of the Initiative will be achieved soon.

Environment Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the outcome was of the Environment Council on 10 December; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including its voting record; and if she will make a statement. [87183]

Margaret Beckett: I represented the UK at Environment Council on 9 December, accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment. This was the final Environment Council of the Danish Presidency. The Council reached agreement on four proposals and also considered a number of other important issues.

Political approval was given to a Regulation implementing the Rotterdam Convention on establishing a system of Prior Informed Consent for trade in hazardous substances, and also to a Decision to ratify the Convention.

The Council reached unanimous political agreement on the greenhouse gas Emissions Trading Directive. In negotiation the UK had secured a number of changes to meet our key requirements and I strongly supported this proposal, which gives further effect to the EU's strong commitment to action on climate change. The agreement includes an opt-out for the first phase in 2005–07, which will assist the transition from established national emissions trading schemes such as we have in the UK into the EU scheme.

Political agreement was reached, by a qualified majority, on a Regulation on traceability and labelling of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The package included elements already agreed in Agriculture and Fisheries Council (such as the inclusion of products derived from GMOs but including no detectable GM material and a 0.9 per cent. labelling threshold) for the parallel Regulation on food and feed, which I had voted against. Debate at Environment Council principally concerned the identification requirements for bulk shipments of GMOs in agricultural commodities. I argued that the requirement should be aligned to the language in the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which creates an obligation to

identify the GMOs a shipment "may contain". Most other member states were able to accept a wording requiring the identification of GMOs that "have been used" in shipments, which I regarded as unduly restrictive and impractical, and an insufficient reflection of the requirements of the Cartagena Protocol. My view was that the final package did not provide a sound basis for consumer choice, and was unworkable. I therefore voted against, as did the Netherlands, Denmark and Luxembourg, on different grounds.

Council Conclusions were adopted on the Community's Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides. The Conclusions recognised the importance of reducing the environmental impacts of pesticides and emphasised the principle of subsidiarity, calling for Community action to complement action at member state level.

The Council adopted Conclusions in advance of the UNEP Governing Council in February 2003. These highlighted the need for a strategic approach to international chemicals management.

Member states and other interested parties have been waiting for some time for firm proposals from the Commission for a legislative package on Chemicals. The Danish Presidency called a debate at Council around what it regarded as four key areas of the future chemicals strategy—scope, sanctions, dealing with chemicals in products and handling small and medium sized enterprises and downstream users. There was a useful discussion and the Commission confirmed that it planned, as urged by the member states, to bring forward proposals as quickly as possible. The residency adopted Conclusions summarising the debate.

The Council also took note of progress reports on a proposal for a Regulation concerning monitoring of forests ("Forest Focus"), and on the draft Environmental Liability Directive. There were several difficult outstanding issues on the latter, which would be taken forward under the Greek Presidency.

The Council noted a Commission Communication entitled "Towards a strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment", advocating an ecosystem approach to managing the marine environment. The Danish Presidency gave a report of a marine environment conference held in Denmark in early December.

The Council also noted a presentation by the Commission on its proposal to amend the Bathing Water Directive, and a written presentation by the Commission of the recently adopted nuclear package, covering safety of facilities and management of radioactive waste.

Spain made a statement on the situation of the sunken oil tanker "Prestige" and its environmental impact on the Galician coast. Portugal and France expressed their own concerns. The Council adopted Conclusions complementing those adopted by Transport Council on 6 December. These Conclusions underlined the significant environmental impact of the incident and encouraged further work in the IMO to tackle these issues. It reiterated the need to ban single hull tankers for the transport of heavy grade oils, called for a review of safety conditions and condemned the practice of cleaning out tanks while at sea.

The Danish Presidency reported on the outcome of the 12th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, attributing much of the success of the conference to the personal contribution made by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State responsible for fisheries, water and nature protection.

Portugal made a statement on its difficulties in implementing Natura 2000 when most its sites were in private ownership. The Commission assured Portugal that it was bringing forward a Communication on Natura 2000.

Finally, the Council noted a Belgian statement underlining the importance of setting thresholds for the maximum tolerated levels of genetic contamination of seed.

EU Procurement Directive

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact which the proposed new EU public procurement directive would have on the Government's ability to choose between procurement bids offering timber from *(a)* legal and sustainable sources, *(b)* legal and progressing to sustainable sources and *(c)* legal sources. [83931]

Mr. Meacher: The use of three distinct variant specifications for timber and wood products was recommended in the report on the timber scoping study that was commissioned by Defra in October 2001 and is currently under consideration. The rationale for this proposal is: *(a)* to allow poor producer countries some opportunities to compete for UK Government business and *(b)* to guard against any shortfall in supply that might jeopardise essential Government operations. The use of variants is permitted by the existing EU public procurement supply directive and the position is not changed by the new procurement directive as currently drafted.

What the report commissioned by Defra proposes is that bids based on the variant specification for "legal and progressing towards sustainable" would only be considered in the absence of an acceptable bid based on the higher standard variant specification. Similarly bids based on "legal" timber would only be considered in the absence of acceptable offers based on either of the two higher standard variant specifications.

Contracting Authorities would have the option of declining all bids if they believe that inviting fresh tenders would result in acceptable bids for legal and sustainable timber. However, where operational demands rule out such a course of action, it is practicable to include a fall back position that allows buyers to consider bids against the lower variants. Central Government Departments will be advised that whenever they receive acceptable offers to supply legal and sustainable products they should reject bids based on lower standard variant specifications.

Public procurement directives require that contracts be awarded either to the lowest bid or to the bid that is most economically advantageous to the Contracting Authority. UK Government procurement policy is to select the most economically advantageous bid criterion because that provides true value for money in terms of quality and whole life costs. Quality in the context of timber procurement includes the standard of forest management. This means that preferring bids based on the top variant for "legal and sustainable" is consistent with both UK Government policy and EC Directives.

The report containing the full set of recommendations and other information is at: http://www.forestforum.org.uk/docs/scopingstudyreport6-8-02.pdf. A notice was published in the *Official Journal* of the European Commission on 19 December announcing our intention to establish a contract for setting up a centre of procurement expertise to develop the practical implementation of variant specifications in line with those recommendations.(OJEC Ref (02/S246-196464/EN). An on-line version of this publication is at http://www.ted.eur-op.eu.int.

Fair Price Commission

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to establish a Fair Price Commission to examine the distribution of profits in the agri-food sector; and if this can be brought about within existing legislative frameworks. [88864]

Mr. Morley: The Director General of Fair Trading has powers under the Competition Act 1998 to investigate allegations of anti-competitive practice. But new legislation would be necessary to establish a statutory Price Commission, with powers to compel the industry to provide information, to undertake studies into the distribution of profits in the agri-food sector. The Government have no plans to establish a Fair Price Commission to examine the facts relating to the distribution of profits in the agri-food sector. The Government can commission less formal studies into such issues; for example, this is already being done in the milk sector by KPMG as part of a Milk Development Council (a Defra non-departmental public body) sponsored examination of UK milk prices and returns.

Farm Waste Grant

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farm waste grant applications have been *(a)* made and *(b)* refused in (i) Lancashire, (ii) the North West of England and (iii) England. [93728]

Mr. Morley: The number of farm waste grant applications which have been made and the number of applications refused in Lancashire, the North West of England, and England, since the start of the scheme in 1996 to 31 December 2002, is:

	Number of applications made	*Number of applications refused*
Lancashire	1	1
North West of England	6	1
England	65	1

Flood and Coastal Defence

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list those local authorities that have produced a policy statement under High Level Targets for flood and coastal defence; and when each statement was received by her Department. [94571]

Mr. Morley: Since the Environment Agency's report on High Level Target 1 was published in May 2002, a further 10 statements have been received by Defra. A number of statements were only sent to the Environment Agency and these are shown as received from EA. Also listed are a number of statements received by the Environment Agency but not yet copied to Defra. The Agency is due to provide a further update on the receipt of policy statements in spring 2003 and I will publish the report once it has been received.

Local authority	*Defra received*
Adur District Council	14 February 2002
Allerdale Borough Council	25 April 2001
Alnwick District Council	2 April 2001
Amber Valley Borough Council	2 August 2001
Arun District Council	19 October 2000
Ashford Borough Council	17 January 2001
Barnsley Metropolitan BC	31 May 2001
Barrow-in-Furness BC	7 March 2001
Bassetlaw District Council	16 July 2001
Bedford Borough Council	18 January 2001
Berwick-upon-Tweed BC	19 March 2001
Bexley London Borough Council	26 March 2001
Birmingham City Council	29 January 2001
Blackburn with Darwen BC	from EA
Blackpool Borough Council	2 April 2001
Blyth Valley Borough Council	2 April 2001
Bolsover District Council	8 March 2001
Bolton Metropolitan BC	8 May 2001
Bournemouth Borough Council	from EA
Braintree District Council	19 January 2001
Bristol City Council	from EA
Bromley London BC	28 March 2002
Broxtowe Borough Council	11 October 2001
Burnley Borough Council	27 May 2002
Bury Metropolitan BC	6 December 2002
Calderdale Metropolitan BC	30 March 2001
Camden London BC	6 June 2001
Canterbury City Council	17 April 2001
Caradon District Council	from EA
Carlisle City Council	30 March 2001
Charnwood Borough Council	17 April 2001
Cheltenham Borough Council	30 April 2001
Cherwell District Council	from EA
Chester City Council	from EA
Chesterfield Borough Council	21 February 2002
Chichester District Council	from EA
Chorley Borough Council	from EA
Christchurch Borough Council	18 April 2001
Congleton Borough Council	18 June 2001
Copeland Borough Council	from EA
Cotswold District Council	15 June 2001
Darlington Borough Council	3 April 2001
Daventry District Council	24 April 2001
Derby City Council	28 August 2001
Doncaster Metropolitan BC	25 April 2001
Dover District Council	15 March 2001
Easington District Council	3 September 2001
East Devon District Council	from EA
East Dorset District Council	30 July 2001
East Hampshire District Council	28 July 2002
East Northamptonshire DC	26 March 2001
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	19 April 2001
East Staffordshire BC	11 April 2001

Local authority	Defra received
Eastbourne Borough Council	12 March 2001
Eastleigh Borough Council	from EA
Eden District Council	6 March 2001
Ellesmere Port and Neston BC	26 April 2001
Elmbridge Borough Council	10 April 2001
Enfield London Borough Council	2 October 2001
Epping Forest District Council	2 August 2001
Epsom and Ewell BC	8 August 2001
Erewash Borough Council	4 July 2001
Exeter City Council	17 April 2001
Fareham Borough Council	from EA
Fylde Borough Council	from EA
Gateshead Metropolitan BC	2 April 2001
Gedling Borough Council	28 June 2001
Gloucester City Council	29 March 2001
Gosport Borough Council	19 April 2001
Gravesham Borough Council	21 March 2002
Great Yarmouth BC	14 May 2001
Halton Borough Council	30 January 2002
Harrogate Borough Council	17 May 2001
Harrow London Borough Council	3 May 2001
Hart District Council	30 March 2001
Hartlepool Borough Council	29 March 2001
Hastings Borough Council	9 July 2001
Havant Borough Council	30 March 2001
Hertsmere Borough Council	18 April 2001
Horsham District Council	11 October 2002
Hounslow London BC	16 May 2001
Huntingdonshire District Council	from EA
Hyndburn Borough Council	from EA
Ipswich Borough Council	25 June 2002
Isle of Wight Council	6 March 2001
Kennet District Council	from EA
Kerrier District Council	from EA
Kirklees Metropolitan BC	21 May 2001
Lancaster City Council	27 April 2001
Leeds City Council	9 May 2001
Lewes District Council	22 March 2001
Lichfield District Council	from EA
Luton Borough Council	25 June 2001
Macclesfield Borough Council	5 February 2002
Manchester City Council	22 October 2001
Mansfield District Council	30 April 2001
Medway Council	26 March 2001
Melton Borough Council	17 April 2001
Mid Bedfordshire District Council	26 March 2001
Mid Suffolk District Council	12 April 2002
Mid Sussex District Council	12 June 2002
Middlesbrough Borough Council	14 November 2001
Mole Valley District Council	8 March 2001
New Forest District Council	from EA
Newark and Sherwood DC	11 July 2001
Newcastle upon Tyne City Council	from EA
North Cornwall District Council	from EA
North Devon District Council	22 August 2001
North Dorset District Council	21 March 2002
North East Derbyshire DC	2 April 2001
North East Lincolnshire Council	30 March 2001
North Lincolnshire Council	10 September 2001
North Norfolk District Council	15 February 2001
North Shropshire District Council	26 March 2001
North Somerset Council	14 May 2001
North Warwickshire BC	from EA
Northampton Borough Council	2 October 2001
Nuneaton and Bedworth BC	8 October 2001
Oldham Metropolitan BC	28 March 2002
Pendle Borough Council	from EA
Peterborough City Council	29 March 2001
Poole Borough Council	16 February 2001
Portsmouth City Council	30 August 2001
Preston Borough Council	from EA
Purbeck District Council	10 April 2001
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	28 March and 6 December 01
Redditch Borough Council	from EA
Reigate and Banstead BC	8 February 2002
Restormel Borough Council	from EA
Ribble Valley Borough Council	30 March 2001
Richmondshire District Council	21 March 2002
Rochdale Metropolitan BC	11 April 2002
Rossendale Borough Council	from EA
Rother District Council	13 August 2001
Rotherham Borough Council	11 January 2002
Runnymede Borough Council	30 August 2001
Rushcliffe Borough Council	19 April 2002
Ryedale District Council	5 April 2001
Salford City Council	4 February 2002
Sandwell Metropolitan BC	from EA
Scarborough Borough Council	26 February 2001
Sefton Metropolitan BC	23 April 2001
Sevenoaks District Council	9 March 2001
Sheffield City Council	2 April 2001
Shepway District Council	22 March 2001
South Cambridgeshire DC	from EA
South Gloucestershire Council	from EA
South Northamptonshire DC	from EA
South Ribble Borough Council	17 December 2002
South Staffordshire DC	19 March 2001
Southampton City Council	from EA
Southwark London BC	from EA
St. Edmundsbury BC	30 April 2001
St. Helens Metropolitan BC	11 April 2002
Stafford Borough Council	23 March 2001
Staffordshire Moorlands DC	4 October 2002
Stockport Metropolitan BC	from EA
Stockton-on-Tees BC	19 April 2002
Stoke-on-Trent City Council	21 March 2002
Stroud District Council	3 April 2001
Suffolk Coastal District Council	26 March and 3 May 2001
Surrey Heath Borough Council	8 February 2001
Sutton London Borough Council	21 March 2002
Swale Borough Council	5 April 2001
Tameside Metropolitan BC	from EA
Tandridge District Council	24 July 2001
Taunton Deane Borough Council	21 March 2002
Thanet District Council	11 September 2002
Teignbridge District Council	20 May 2002
Tendring District Council	15 February 2001
Test Valley Borough Council	21 March 2002
Tewkesbury Borough Council	30 March 2001
Tonbridge and Malling DC	6 August 2001
Torbay Borough Council	12 March 2001
Torridge District Council	17 October and 17 December 2001
Trafford Metropolitan BC	from EA
Vale of White Horse DC	26 June 2001
Warrington Council	from EA
Warwick District Council	from EA
Waveney District Council	30 October 2001
Waverley Borough Council	18 May 2001
Wealden District Council	11 May 2001
Wear Valley District Council	2 April 2001
Wellingborough District Council	30 March 2001
Welwyn Hatfield District Council	2 April 2001
West Devon Borough Council	9 October 2001
West Dorset District Council	2 April 2001
West Lancashire District Council	from EA
West Oxfordshire District Council	from EA
Wigan Metropolitan BC	from EA
Winchester City Council	from EA
Wirral Metropolitan BC	29 March 2001
Woking Borough Council	5 February 2002
Wolverhampton Metropolitan BC	from EA
Worthing Borough Council	30 March 2001
Wychavon District Council	from EA
Wycombe District Council	from EA
Wyre Borough Council	3 October 2000
York City Council	17 April 2001

Policy statements received by Environment Agency, not yet copied to Defra.

Castle Morpeth Borough Council
Coventry City Council
Derwentside District Council
Durham City Council
Hambleton District Council
Isles of Scilly Council
Kingston upon Hull City Council
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Liverpool City Council
North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Oswestry Borough Council
Rugby Borough Council
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Sunderland City Council
Tamworth Borough Council
Tynedale District Council
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Wansbeck District Council
Worcester City Council

Flood Defence

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much has been spent in each of the past five years by *(a)* the Environment Agency, *(b)* the operating authorities, *(c)* her Department and *(d)* local authorities on flood defence in (i) the Thames Valley, (ii) Surrey and (iii) Spelthorne. [94610]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Defra provides grant aid to operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, for capital flood defence works that meet set criteria. Grant paid to EA Thames region in each of the past five years is as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	3.0
1998–99	2.7
1999–2000	4.1
2000–01	3.5
2001–02	2.7

The Environment Agency estimates that their expenditure on studies, capital improvements and maintenance in the past five years in the lower Thames Valley was £11.9 million, of which £4.9 million was in Spelthorne and £6.3 million elsewhere in Surrey.

Further breakdowns and figures for expenditure by local authorities could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what works have been carried out in Spelthorne to prevent flooding in each of the past five years; and how much each project cost. [94611]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Information is only readily available for projects undertaken by the Environment Agency as follows:

£000

	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	Totals
Ash, Feltham Hill Brook, Portlane Brook, Thames maintenance works	50	50	50	50	50	250
Colne, Wraysbury, Colnebrook maintenance works	100	100	100	100	100	500
Lino Mill (Lower Colne Improvement Scheme)	720	—	—	—	—	720
Stanwell (Lower Colne Improvement Scheme)	—	—	50	100	2,860	3,010
Shepperton weir A Improvements	—	—	—	—	105	105
Shepperton weir B rebuild	—	—	—	80	120	200
Prefeasibility studies	—	—	—	30	50	80
Total	870	150	200	360	3,285	4,865

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she plans to take to prevent a repeat of the recent floods in the lower Thames Valley. [94612]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Operational responsibility for flood management measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing.

I understand that the EA is already reviewing short-term actions such as encouraging residents to take up the flood warning service, providing advice on practical measures for people to protect themselves and their property, and ensuring that the Agency's Floodline service gives accurate and timely advice.

In addition, the EA will continue to promote a Flood Risk Management Plan for the area in partnership with local authorities and other organisations. Through the plan, the EA will seek to manage and reduce flood risk through the control of development in the flood plain, provide an enhanced flood warning strategy and deal with the longer term impacts of climate change. The EA is also reappraising options for flood alleviation measures in areas at risk of flooding.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the role the Jubilee River scheme played in this month's floods in the lower Thames Valley. [94614]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The Environment Agency's (EA) initial findings from measurements made from weir gauges is that there is no evidence that the Jubilee River has caused downstream

water levels to rise, and that in the recent flooding event, the rates of rise upstream and downstream of the Jubilee River were very comparable.

The EA has commissioned independent engineering consultants to rerun an updated hydraulic model using 2003 flood data to determine the impact on downstream flood levels. Their preliminary findings show no significant difference between downstream levels, with or without the flood alleviation channel, in the River Thames just downstream of where the Jubilee River rejoins it. I understand the EA plans to make this data and the analysis available to the public.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of key flood defence systems in urban areas were in *(a)* good condition, or better and *(b)* poor condition, or worse on (i) 1 January 2001, (ii) 1 January 2002 and (iii) 1 January 2003. [95345]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* Flood defence assets are defined as one of two types, defences or structures and each type has been assessed separately. Defences are generally linear barriers such as embankments or walls etc. between the river (or sea) and the area defended while structures include outfalls, sluices, weirs or pumping stations.

Currently, the Environment Agency does not differentiate between urban and rural communities in line with Defra High Level Targets.

Tables 1 and 2 show the condition of the defences and structures respectively, assessed during the financial years 2000–01 and 2001–02. There is no comparative data available at present from the inspections carried out during the current financial year, that data will be available by April 2003 to allow reporting of High Level Target 5 to Defra.

Table 1. Condition of main river and sea defences 2000–01 and 2001–02

Percentage of total length

	Very good	*Good*	*Fair*	*Poor*	*Very poor*
2001	6.2	58.1	32.1	3.2	0.4
2002	5.5	53.2	36.2	4.4	0.7

Table 2. Condition of main river and sea defence structures 2000–01 and 2001–02

Percentage of total number

	Very good	*Good*	*Fair*	*Poor*	*Very poor*
2001	12.3	47.9	31.6	5.7	2.5
2002	9.8	46.7	33.5	7.0	3.0

Notes:

The method used to identify the number of assets is flexible, allowing them to be classified as either a complete structure or as a number of components, this leads to apparent anomalies in the data reported. Work is being undertaken to ensure that by April 2003 reporting is fully consistent.

The duration covered by the data set is too short to allow any meaningful analysis of any trends in changes to the condition of assets. In addition, there are variations in the way that the data has been collected that are still being resolved, in effect the data set is still being "bedded down" and any apparent trends are as likely to be as a result of changes to the data as to changes to the defences and structures. It could be a number of years before meaningful trends start to emerge from the data.

Flood Insurance

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action her Department will take over cases where insurance companies are not honouring the Statement of Principles on flood insurance. [94310]

Mr. Morley: It is not for Government to intervene in commercial decisions taken by individual insurance companies. It is for the Association of British Insurers and not for Government to take appropriate action where the actions of their member companies are not in line with the Statement of Principles. Government will be continuing discussions with the ABI, who will be reviewing the Statement of Principles annually.

Flood Management (Thames Valley)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on progress with the preparation of a catchment flood management plan for the Thames Valley. [94572]

Mr. Morley: The Department is promoting the Catchment Flood Management Plan (CFMP) initiative with the Environment Agency and has to date made funds available for five pilot studies. The Agency has developed a programme for delivery of CFMPs to cover the whole of England over the next five years.

The Thames valley will be covered by eight plans; one for the River Thames itself and seven others on the major tributaries. The scoping phase of these plans has just started and is programmed to be complete by September.

Once the scoping work has been completed, subject to a satisfactory review of the five pilot plans, the main studies will begin. Currently, the eight plans for the Thames valley are scheduled to be completed by December 2005.

Flooding

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the risk of development in areas at risk of flooding as a result of the Government's proposals for large-scale housing development in the *(a)* Milton Keynes, *(b)* Ashford and *(c)* Thames Gateway areas. [89752]

Margaret Beckett: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals for large-scale housing development in Milton Keynes, Ashford, Thames Gateway and the Lond-Stansted-Cambridge area were announced in his statement on sustainable communities, housing and planning on 18 July 2002, *Official Report*, column 438. Development proposals will be subject to an appropriate flood-risk assessment and full consultation with the Environment Agency.

For example, Thames Gateway Strategic Executive have been co-operating with the agency for over a year. The agency is a member of the Environment Sub-Group

of the Strategic Partnership. It has already produced environmental constraint maps for each of the zones of change within Thames Gateway. A similar level of co-operation and consultation will form the basis for detailed proposals in the other major growth areas.

Flooding (Bedfordshire)

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the *(a)* flood precautions taken by responsible authorities in Bedfordshire prior to and during the flooding between 2 and 5 January, and *(b)* the inquiry process following those floods; and if she will make a statement. [94495]

Mr. Morley: Following the new year floods the Environment Agency have conducted numerous internal reviews concerning their flood warning and operational roles. The agency have also attended reviews held and have meetings programmed with other operating authorities to take supervisory duty matters further. The outcomes of and actions from these meetings will, where appropriate, be taken forward and used to improve the service offered during a flood event.

In terms of post event activity, the Environment Agency have had aerial photography and level survey returned, this will feed into mapping and flood defence improvements studies, as well as help review flood warning trigger levels.

The agency have also requested (and are in the process of receiving back) information from affected parish councils and professional partners (police, IDBs etc.). It is essential that local input about the locations affected is received, so that the magnitude of the flooding can be accurately reported and any local issues can be highlighted and, where appropriate, taken forward with the appropriate authorities/individuals, to reduce flood risk in the future.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment her Department has made of the impact on river levels and flooding of the speed of run-off from the built environment. [94496]

Mr. Morley: It has long been recognised that traditional urban development has an impact on downstream flood flows, typically reducing the time between the rainfall event and the peak flow in the river. This is, for example, incorporated in standard procedures for flood risk assessment set out in the Flood Estimation Handbook produced by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology with the support of extensive research funded by the Department. It is for this reason that PPG25 promotes the use of sustainable drainage systems for new development that aim to mitigate such impacts. The Environment Agency, as a statutory consultee to the planning authorities, is committed to ensuring that new development adopts such measures, where appropriate, to minimise impact on river levels and flood risk.

In Bedfordshire, the Environment Agency in conjunction with partner organisations is actively involved in the Milton Keynes surface water drainage strategy (River Great Ouse and tributaries, upstream of Bedfordshire). It has also been in partnership with other organisations (Beds and Ivel IDE) to produce the Marston Vale surface waters plan. These are examples of initiatives that aim to develop long-term strategies to address surface water run-off problems from development in the relevant areas.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact of flooding in Bedfordshire from 2 to 5 January, with particular reference to the rivers *(a)* Great Ouse, *(b)* Ivel and *(c)* Flit; and if she will make a statement. [94497]

Mr. Morley: Information is still being received and collated. Current data indicates that the number of properties that suffered internal flooding on the:

Great Ouse between Turvey and Little Barford is 7;

Rivers Ivel and Flit, Ickleford to Tempsford, including Shefford, is 50.

There were numerous road closures and evacuations in the area, including the A1 at Sandy. Details of these are still being received from other authorities. It should be noted that the recently completed Flood Defence Improvement Scheme in Bedford protected some 30 properties from flooding during the new year flood.

Flooding (Spelthorne)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many properties are at risk of flooding in Spelthorne; and what proportion are provided with a flood warning service. [95348]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The Environment Agency's maps show that 11,694 properties fall within the 1 per cent. probability or 1 in 100 years flood return period in the Spelthorne flood plain. These maps show the indicative floodplain area, not flood risk or definitive flood boundaries, and are based on land topography taking noaccount of the defences which are in place. The Environment Agency, with Defra funding, is creating more refined maps which will take account of likely depth of flooding and also current and planned flood defences. Pilot maps for four areas should be available soon with complete coverage planned for later in the year. To support this improved understanding of flood risk on a national basis, the EA are also developing a National Flood and Coastal Defence Database, again with funding from Defra. The aim of the project is to provide a single, easily accessible definitive store for all data on flood and coastal defences.

The Flood Warning service provides 100 per cent. coverage in Spelthorne, through Floodline, the internet and the media. At present 99 properties in Spelthorne Borough have been offered the Environment Agency's automatic voice messaging service to receive flood warnings direct to their telephones.

GM Crops

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of genetically modified hybrid maize exhibiting glysophate and insect resistance (NK603 x MON 810). [94917]

Mr. Meacher: The assessment is in progress. The UK is the lead competent authority for this application from Monsanto under Directive 2001/18 on the release of GMOs to the environment. Monsanto has applied for consent to import into the European Community this GM maize grain for use as or in food and feed products. The application is for import only and does not cover proposed cultivation uses. The UK authorities are required to assess whether the GMO in question should be placed on the European Community market and, if so, under what conditions. If the UK authorities form the view that the application does comply with Directive 2001/18, other member states and the European Commission will then have the opportunity to comment on the assessment or raise reasoned objections as regards possible risks to the environment or human health. The assessment will be made available to the public. No decision on the placing of the product on the market can be made until other member states and the Commission have given their views.

Illegal Meat Imports

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many prosecutions were made for seizures of illegal meats and bushmeat in 2002 at *(a)* airports and *(b)* seaports. [92588]

Mr. Morley: Figures on prosecutions for the illegal importation of meat are not collected centrally. Responsibility for prosecutions under the Products of Animal Origin (Third Country Imports) (England) Regulations lies with local authorities, and under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, with HM Customs.

We are aware of one successful prosecution brought by Crawley borough council in July, and six cautions issued by the London Port Health Authority in October. All were brought under the Products of Animal Origin regulations. There were no prosecutions made in 2002 under CITES regulations.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what quantity of illegal meat was seized coming into the UK at each airport and seaport in each of the last 22 months; and what percentage of each seizure was defined as bushmeat. [92611]

Mr. Morley: The table shows details of the quantities of illegal meats seized in each of the last 22 months, and the amount of bushmeat seized as a proportion of all seizures of Products of Animal Origin. The information requested against each airport and seaport would be available only at a disproportionate cost.

Date	*Number of meat seizures*	*Quantity of meat seized (kg)*	*Quantity of bushmeat seized (kg)*	*Bushmeat as percentage of all seizures*
2001				
April	154	943	237	1.5
May	95	2,170	932	16.2
June	84	521	34	1.1
July	75	425	71	1.3
August	174	9,577	68	0.4
September	128	735	125	1.7
October	125	1,251	282	4.1
November	76	224	29	0.1
December	53	183	11	4.5
2002				
January	124	346	33	0.9
February	70	991	35	0.8
March	99	1,980	953	27.0
April	112	361	18	1.1
May	84	531	197	6.9
June	113	538	130	6.5
July	158	1,445	149	3.3
August	171	2,183	116	2.8
September	143	839	90	1.3
October	184	816	53	0.6
November	156	1,346	301	3.8
December	236	1,400	175	2.1
2003				
1–17 January	66	165	27	2.8
Total	2,680	29,172	4,065	2.5

Bushmeat is defined as the meat of any wild animal hunted for food. It is not necessarily from endangered species. There is little evidence that meat from endangered species for human consumption is entering the country on a large scale. Indeed, bushmeat forms a very small proportion of illegal imports seized—around 2.5 per cent. Chicken or pork make up the vast majority of reported meat seizures.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions her Department has had with the governments of countries from which bushmeat is illegally imported. [92613]

Mr. Morley: Bushmeat is defined as the meat of any wild animal hunted for food. It forms only a very small proportion of illegal imports seized—around 2.5 per cent. Chicken or pork make up the vast majority of seizures.

To date, we have made general approaches through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the governments of other countries, to promote awareness of our import rules on meat and animal products. We are continuing to work with our posts and embassies abroad to raise awareness of our import rules at points of departure.

Although only a very small proportion of bushmeat is derived from endangered species, the issue was discussed at the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) conference in Chile last November, and the UK welcomed the conference decision to renew the mandate of the CITES Bushmeat Working Group which comprises a number of central and east African states and was set up to look at practical ways of dealing with this problem at national and regional levels.

Integrated Administration and Control Systems

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many agricultural holdings in England and Wales were registered for the use of Integrated Administration and Control System forms in 1995; and what the most recent figure is. [95479]

Alun Michael: I can confirm that in respect of England 79,431 agricultural holdings were registered for IACS in 1995 and 69,314 were registered in 2002.

In respect of Wales, 19,963 agricultural holdings were registered for IACS in 1995 and 16,774 for 2002.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* live sheep and *(b)* live pigs were exported from the United Kingdom between 2 November and 31 December 2002 for (i) slaughter, (ii) further fattening and (iii) breeding; and how many (A) sheep and (B) pigs in each of these categories were exported to each individual country of destination. [93437]

Mr. Morley: The number of live sheep and live pigs certified for export from the United Kingdom between 2 November and 31 December 2002 for slaughter, further fattening and breeding are shown in the following tables:

Country of destination	*Breeding*	*Fattening*	*Slaughter*
Live sheep			
France	118	17,877	19,630
Republic of Ireland	165	0	76,513
Belgium	5	0	50
Germany	0	0	2,285
Italy	0	0	2,854
Netherlands	15	0	0
Isle of Man	26	0	0
Total	329	17,877	101,332
Live Pigs			
Republic of Ireland	0	0	2,037
Belgium	863	0	0
Germany	701	0	0
Italy	307	0	0
Netherlands	399	0	0
Spain	227	0	0
Total	2,497	0	2,037

These figures are derived from the computer system used to issue export health certificates and are subject to updating and amendment.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many live sheep were exported from Dover to continental Europe on *(a)* 18 January and *(b)* 22 January; when and where health certification was carried out in respect of the sheep; how many of the sheep were rejected as unfit for the intended journey (i) during inspection for health certification purposes and (ii) at Dover docks; where those sheep were taken; and what the address was of the final destination given on the route plan for each of the consignments. [94608]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is as follows:

Sailing Date	*Total animals certified*	*Where consignments were certified*	*Animals rejected at certification*	*Animals rejected at Dover docks*	*Destination*
18/1	2,557	England	0	1	Germany
22/1	2,517	England and Wales	19	0	Belgium and France

The sheep for the consignments listed in the table were certified within 48 hours prior to export. The sailing on 18.01.2003 was for slaughter animals which went to an approved slaughterhouse, while the sailing on 22.01.2003 was for fattening animals which were transported to holdings. The animals rejected at certification and at Dover docks remained in Great Britain.

Nutrition

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much her Department and its agencies have spent in the last 12 months for which figures are available on promoting the consumption of fruit and vegetables. [92050]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Neither Defra nor any of its agencies have funded promotion of fruit and vegetable consumption in the last 12 months. The Department of Health leads and funds the Government's five-a-day programme, including the national school fruit scheme.

Ofwat

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Office of Water Service's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94207]

Mr. Morley: The Office of Water Services (Ofwat) does not have a service delivery agreement, as this has not been required by the Treasury since 2000. Instead, Ofwat publishes a forward programme. A consultative draft titled, "Forward Programme for 2003–04 to 2005–06", was published in November 2002, and the final version will be published in March 2003.

Pet Shops

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to review the regulations regarding pet shops, with specific reference to *(a)* the age at which children can buy animals and *(b)* the conditions in which animals are kept. [94967]

Mr. Morley: I am currently in the process of reviewing the legislation relating to the welfare of captive and domestic animals, including that which relates to the sale of pet animals.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what guidelines are issued to pet shops regarding the housing and sale of animals. [94968]

Mr. Morley: The Pet Animals Act 1951 sets out the conditions under which animals are housed and sold.

The legislation relating to the welfare of captive and domestic animals, including that which relates to the sale of pet animals, is currently under review.

Recyling

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what representations she has received concerning the impact of the 2003 packaging recycling targets on the market for PRNs; [91490]

(2) what forecasts have been made of the likely price of PRNs following the announcement of the UK's 2003 packaging waste recycling targets; [91492]

(3) for what reason the Department did not carry out a formal public consultation on the 2003 packaging waste recovery and recycling targets; [91488]

(4) what representations she has received from the reprocessing industry on the effect on the recycling market in 2003 of the decision not to increase the UK's 2003 packaging waste recycling targets; [91491]

(5) what estimate she has made of the likely effect on the overall level of recycling taking place in the UK in 2003 of the decision not to increase the UK's 2003 packaging waste recycling targets; [91493]

(6) what *(a)* informal consultations or discussions her Department held and *(b)* representations from the reprocessing industry she received before taking the decision not to increase the UK's packaging waste recovery and recycling targets in 2003. [91489]

Mr. Meacher: I announced on 17 October 2002 that there would be no change to the packaging waste recycling targets in the UK for 2003. Before the decision was taken to leave the targets unchanged, we consulted with other departments, including the DTI, Cabinet Office and the Treasury. We are required to hold a public consultation only if changes are being proposed to the Regulations. The decision to make no changes to the targets was taken largely because we did not know what targets the new EC Directive is going to set, nor to what deadline. Under these circumstances, I was unwilling to go into a consultation which would have meant 2003 targets being announced well into 2003.

We have received a number of letters from British Glass regarding the effects of leaving the targets unchanged on the PRN market. Concern was also voiced at the December meeting of the compliance scheme body (CoSWiG) which I attended.

We expect the level of recycling to rise slightly in 2003, consistent with the increase in the amount of packaging in the waste stream, but it could be greater if additional obligated businesses are identified. Estimates of available capacity, and of PRN prices, are affected, too, by an ongoing examination of whether reprocessing claimed so far in 2002 relates exclusively to packaging waste, and as to how far other factors have a significant influence. It is also expected that industry will be focussing in 2003 on starting the process necessary to have the requisite collection capacity in place in 2004–05. Inaction now will make the period 2004–08 more difficult. We expect to consult later this year on business targets in the packaging Regulations for the period 2004–08, or at least on targets for three years, to be rolled forward. It will be important for industry to set action in hand now if they are to have the necessary infrastructure in place to meet what are certainly higher targets in this period.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Forestry Commission's Service Delivery Agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94112]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission Service Delivery Agreement was published on 29 January 2003. It can be viewed on the Forestry Commission website (www.forestry.gov.uk)

Thames Flood Management Plan

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the progress made in preparing the Thames Catchment Flood Management Plan. [95347]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* The Department is promoting the Catchment Flood Management Plan (CFMP) initiative with the Environment Agency and has to date made funds available for five pilot studies. The Agency has developed a programme for delivery of CFMPs to cover the whole of England over the next five years.

The Thames Valley will be covered by eight plans; one for the River Thames itself and seven others on the major tributaries. The scoping phase of these plans has just started and is programmed to be complete by September.

Once the scoping work has been completed, subject to a satisfactory review of the five pilot plans, the main studies will begin. Currently, the eight plans for the Thames Valley are scheduled to be completed by December 2005.

United Nations Environment Programme

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the annual contribution to UNEP has been in each year since 1997; and what the anticipated contribution will be in the next financial year. [94972]

Mr. Meacher: The United Kingdom Government places a high value on the work of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and since 1997 has contributed 4.2 million annually to UNEP's Environment Fund. A decision has yet to be taken on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affair's budget for UNEP for the next financial year.

Waste

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her assessment is of the cost per tonne of the environmental externalities associated with *(a)* landfill and *(b)* incineration. [89618]

Margaret Beckett: The most recent estimates published by the Government are contained in the Waste Strategy 2000 for England and Wales, Part 2, Appendix B. (Cm 4693–2) (http://defraweb/environment/waste/strategy/cm4693/index.htm). This contains the following information.

Several studies have been published which attempt to value the environmental costs and benefits of different waste management options. It is difficult to make comparison between these studies, as they adopt different assumptions about technology used, emissions factors, environmental impact of emissions and economic values of environmental impacts. They do not all have the same coverage of environmental impact and some emissions and impacts are omitted due to absent data. Some studies do not adequately report the uncertainty in their estimates of environmental costs, and these are likely to be significant.

Most of the work done so far looks at single waste management options (ETU 1996), single materials (BNMA 1995), or compares the environmental costs of incineration and landfill (CSERGE 1993). Only one major study (Coopers and Lybrand 1997) compares incineration, landfill and recycling the different fractions of MSW. The result of these studies generally support the view that recycling has net environmental benefits over incineration and landfill (with the possible exception of certain materials, such as plastic film). The results of the Coopers and Lybrand (1997) study are shown in the table (Table C4, options with negative external cost have net environmental benefits). However, these estimates seem to omit the costs of leachate from landfills, all disamenity costs and some of the environmental costs of processing for recycling.

Table C4 External costs and benefits of different waste management options

Waste management option	*External cost estimate £ per tonne of waste, 1999 prices*
Landfill	3
Incineration (displacing average-mix electricity generation)	-17
Recycling	-161
Ferrous metal	-297
Non-ferrous metal	-929
Glass	-196
Paper	-69
Plastic film	17
Rigid plastic	-48
Textiles	-66

Source:
Adapted from Cooper and Lybrand (1997)

CSERGE (1993) suggests that existing rural landfill sites without energy recovery may have net external costs of between £1.09 and £10.90 per tonne (1999 prices). These estimates exclude disamenity costs which the study suggests could be significant. The same study suggests that urban incinerators with energy recovery may have net external benefits up to £15.20 per tonne, through to a net environmental cost £4.10 per tonne (1999 prices). However, this does not reflect potential disamenity impacts and it assumes that the electricity generated displaces in that of a coal-fired power station.

These estimates of external costs should be viewed with caution, due to the level of uncertainty in quantifying and valuing impacts, particularly those on human health. However they do provide an indication of the relative impacts of different waste management options—while recognising that the external costs per tonne of waste may vary according to location and the quantity of waste sent to each option.

DEFENCE

Aircraft Carriers

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason HMS Invincible and HMS Illustrious are in extended readiness and refit simultaneously. [94556]

Mr. Ingram: Neither HMS Invincible nor HMS Illustrious are currently in extended readiness.

HMS Invincible is nearing completion of her refit at Rosyth and, following sea trials, is planned to return to the Fleet in May 2003. HMS Illustrious commenced her refit at Rosyth in Mid November 2002. These refits are part of the planned maintenance cycle for aircraft carriers. The short overlap is operationally manageable.

Ammunition Stocks

Mr Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the level is of war stocks held in the UK; and what level of stocks are held of each ammunition type. [95116]

Mr. Ingram: Specific information relating to ammunition stock levels is withheld under Exemption 1 (Defence, Security and International Relations) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Infonnation. However, I can confirm that the Ministry of Defence has a stockpile of munitions held against the risk of short notice conflicts. Stockpile planning is subject to continuous review in order to ensure that it reflects as accurately as possible the likely nature of conflicts in which the United Kingdom Armed Forces could become involved.

Armed Forces (Inoculations)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether armed forces personnel are obliged to sign legal waivers in advance of the administering of Chemical Biological Warfare inoculations. [93647]

Dr. Moonie: No. There is no requirement for Service personnel included in any vaccination programme to sign any waivers or disclaimers, whether they accept the vaccinations or not. Personnel may be asked to confirm that they have received the necessary briefings, and units may maintain administrative records of which personnel have received the necessary briefings, need to be re-offered vaccines, or receive boosters, so that the continuity of immunisation programmes can be maintained. However, none of these records constitutes a legal waiver or disclaimer, and none supplants the Ministry of Defence's responsibilities in respect of the health and safety of Service personnel.

Armoured Vehicles

Mr Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what levels of spares are being taken overseas for the *(a)* Challenger 2 tank and *(b)* Warrior fighting vehicle. [95117]

Mr. Ingram: All units deploy with their Unit Spares Accounts (USAs) stocked with 30 days of spares required to carry out level 1 and 2 repairs (repairs carried out by the user and unit attached Royal

Electrical and Mechanical Engineer tradesmen). Royal Eogistic Corps support units hold farther spares, reflecting anticipated usage rates derived using lessons learnt from Exercises such as SAIF SAREEA II.

Carlyle Group

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence with reference to the departmental minute placed in the Library on 17 December 2002, if he will estimate the maximum potential value of the retained liabilities to which the taxpayer will be exposed as a consequence of the sale of a 33.8 per cent. shareholding in QinetiQ to Carlyle Group. [94952]

Dr. Moonie: As disclosed in the departmental minute of 17 December 2002, there is a group of warranties for which Ministry of Defence has a maximum liability equivalent to the cash proceeds received in relation to the transaction. The precise value of these proceeds will not be confirmed until after the completion accounts have been finalised, but is currently forecast to be £140 to £150 million. In setting MOD's maximum liability to the purchaser, we have deducted the £50 million already received as part of the PPP process, as this was a previous payment made directly to MOD by QinetiQ.

In addition, as set out in the departmental minute, MOD has given further indemnities for which the maximum possible exposure is as follows:

compensation for the premature cancellation for the 25-year Long Term Partnering Agreement for Ranges and Test and Evaluation services (sliding scale from £40 million in year one to zero at the end of year three);

an actuarial adjustment to the QinetiQ pension fund (maximum £45 million);

certain specific provisions in QinetiQ's accounts (maximum £4.3 million); and

costs arising but not yet incurred related to vesting of QinetiQ (maximum £3 million).

The actual costs that might arise in these areas are impossible to predict. However, MOD has taken measures which we believe reduce the potential financial risks to a very low level, and we do not anticipate making significant payments against these contingent liabilities.

Civil Contingency Reaction Force

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the recruitment targets for the new Civil Contingency Reaction Force are; and when he expects them to be reached. [95180]

Mr. Ingram: We are planning on the basis of up to 500 volunteers from existing Volunteer Reserve personnel being accepted for each of the fourteen Civil Contingencies Reaction Forces by 31 December 2003.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what interim measures have been put in place in advance of the introduction of the new Civil Contingency Reaction Force. [95182]

Mr. Ingram: The Civil Contingencies Reaction Forces are a means of expanding the existing capacity of the Armed Forces to respond to requests for assistance from local authorities and the emergency services. No interim measures were therefore required. Recruiting among Volunteer Reserve personnel has started and all CCRFs could already deploy sub-units if necessary. Their capability will build up as recruiting and training proceeds.

Deepcut Barracks

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the civilian medical practitioner at Deepcut Barracks was suspended in March 2000; at what salary the practitioner was retained; what payments have been made to the practitioner subsequently; and for what reason the officer responsible decided not to advertise for a full time replacement. [94714]

Dr. Moonie: For reasons relating to confidentiality and the provisions of the Data Protection Act, it is not Ministry of Defence policy to release or discuss information relating to an identifiable individual without that individual's consent. I am also withholding details in accordance with Exemption 12, Privacy of an Individual, of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The Civilian Medical Practitioner post at Deepcut was advertised once the Ministry of Defence was in a position to do so, but two recruitment campaigns have been unsuccessful. A military medical officer will, however, fill the post in February 2003.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the employment agencies used to provide locum civilian practitioners at Deepcut Barracks; what payments were made to each agency; how many weeks each locum civilian practitioner remained at the Barracks; and how many locum civilian practitioners and agencies have made complaints against *(a)* officers and *(b)* others at the Barracks since March 2000. [94715]

Dr. Moonie: The following Agencies have provided locum civilian medical practitioners at Deepcut Barracks since March 2000, and have been paid the stated amounts:

Agency	*Amount (£)*
CB Locums	1,961.15
Locums UK	14,000.80
Holt	4,994.09

In addition, a number of non-agency locums have been employed within this period; total payments in these cases have amounted to £148,575.90.

The majority of locum CMPs remained at the Barracks for one or two weeks, with one staying for five weeks and a small number only for two days.

There has been a complaint from one locum doctor in the period in question. This is against both officers at the barracks and others (including other locums).

Drug Tests (Military Barracks)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the result was of statistical analysis of random drug tests at Deepcut and Catterick Barracks in each year since they were first introduced. [94718]

Dr. Moonie: The Army does not store the required data in a format that enables the information to be easily scrutinized. As it will take some time for officials to extract the data required, I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Forces Accommodation (Portland)

Jim Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the freehold for the Hardy accommodation blocks at Portland was in the Department's ownership when they were sold. [95328]

Dr. Moonie: Forty percent freehold land at the Hardy Blocks, Portland, was in the Ministry of Defence's ownership when they were sold.

Friendly Fire

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what precautions have been introduced when UK service personnel are deployed with foreign forces to reduce the risk of casualties from friendly fire. [94137]

Mr. Ingram: It is standard practice, when deploying with the United States or other allied forces, to engage in thorough consultation and planning to ensure that clear and reliable Combat Identification measures are prepared. The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts published a report in 2002 on Combat Identification in which they said in relation to our deployment last year to Afghanistan with US forces:

"The Ministry of Defence has taken care when deploying troops to Afghanistan to ensure that the risk of fratricide was minimised through dialogue with American forces regarding tactics, techniques and procedures. Liaison through the two countries enables the respective chains of command to define areas where respective forces operate and to determine how the global positioning system is operated. There is scope for similar dialogue with countries other than the United States for other operations." (56th Report 2001–02 para 14).

In relation to possible operations in the Gulf, we are working closely with allies to establish robust arrangements on Combat Identification that maximise interoperability and we will acquire additional equipment in time for any potential conflict to enable our forces to operate effectively alongside coalition forces.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment of combat identification has been made in relation to reducing the risk of friendly fire. [95251]

Mr. Ingram: We assess that combat identification, which comprises the three elements of situational awareness, target identification and tactics, techniques and procedures, serves to minimise the risk of fratricide. We continue to review and update our combat identification capability, as required.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions his Department has had with *(a)* the US Government and *(b)* other NATO allies regarding combat identification and friendly fire. [95252]

Mr. Ingram: Ministry of Defence officials have frequent contact with their counterparts in the US Department of Defense on combat identification, which serves, to improve combat effectiveness and minimise the risk of fratricide. Discussions on combat identification have also recently taken place with the US and with other NATO allies in NATO's Identification Sub-Committee 7, which last met on 15–17 January 2003, and in the context of the 5-Power National Armament Directors International Co-operative Opportunities Group (comprising France, Germany, Italy, UK, US), which last met on 13–14 January 2003.

Gulf

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which RAMC units will be deployed in support of the task force being deployed to the Gulf; what their last three operational tasks were, and the length between them; and if he will make a statement. [93471]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* There are no RAMC units. Personnel from the RAMC, and other Army Medical Services, contribute to medical units as appropriate.

On current planning the following medical units will deploy on Op TELIC: 1 Close Support Med Regiment (reinforced with a Squadron from 3 Close Support Med Regiment); 16 Close Support Med Regiment; 4 General Support Med Regiment; 5 General Support Med Regiment (with elements of 3 Close Support Med Regiment). These Regiments were formed between 1999 and 2000, and since that date there have been no regimental level, operational deployments.

It is also planned that 22 Field Hospital, 33 Field Hospital and 34 Field Hospital will deploy as part of Op TELIC. None of these has deployed as a fully formed unit since Op GRANBY, in 1991.

HMS Sheffield

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* original cost and *(b)* annual operating cost is of HMS Sheffield. [94573]

Mr. Ingram: The cost of HMS Sheffield's construction, including all weapon systems and equipment, was £159 million.

Her annual operating cost; including manpower, fuel and port visits, depreciation and cost of capital is assessed to be £35 million. This is an annual average figure based on direct costs charged for financial year 2001–02, which was the last full financial year prior to her decommissioning in November 2002. In addition, during 1992 HMS Sheffield underwent a planned docking period for routine repair work. While the exact cost of the period is no longer available, it is estimated that it would have cost some £5 million to £6 million, based on other similar work at the time. In 1996, HMS Sheffield underwent a major refit at a cost of about £15.9 million. This was her last major upkeep period.

JDAMS

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what stocks his Department holds of JDAMS; and how many are available for use by forces in the Gulf. [94576]

Mr. Ingram: Details of munitions available for deployment to the Gulf region could provide a potential adversary with information that could undermine our defence capabilities. This information is therefore withheld in accordance with Exemption 1 (Defence, Security and International Relations) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

MOD Building

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* rooms and *(b)* offices are in the main Ministry of Defence building. [95016]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence Main Building in Whitehall is currently undergoing a major redevelopment to convert it from cellular office space to an open plan environment. The design incorporates a number of conference, meeting and study rooms on each floor, approximately 320 in total, but there will be only nine offices occupied by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, Ministers and senior officers and officials.

Naval Ships (Gulf)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provisions he has made for the air defence of naval ships in the event of hostilities in the Gulf; and if he will make a statement. [95135]

Mr. Ingram: In the Gulf, force protection, including air defence, is already provided jointly across coalition forces. Royal Navy ships have the necessary equipment to ensure that they are able to achieve a high degree of integration with coalition assets. Force protection is an issue that is well practised and understood. In addition, the Naval Task Group includes an escort force matched to the size of the Task Group. That escort force is able to provide air, surface and underwater protection. Merlin and Sea Kings with their early warning systems are also available.

QinetiQ

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the on-site security arrangements put in place to ensure continued physical protection of research sites divided between QinetiQ and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratories. [93889]

Dr. Moonie: QinetiQ, is a commercial company and is required to comply with Cabinet Office and commercial regulations set for companies involved in carrying out sensitive defence work. The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), as a Ministry of Defence Agency continues to be mandated by MOD security standards. The MOD is satisfied that appropriate, and robust security arrangements have been established at both QinetiQ and DSTL sites.

Radio Equipment

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what personal portable radio equipment, other than Clansmen, is issued to troops deploying to the Gulf; and if he will make a statement. [95136]

Mr. Ingram: Personal Role Radios have been issued to troops, primarily in infantry units, deploying to the Gulf.

RAF Buchan

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the drawdown of RAF Buchan. [94915]

Mr. Ingram: As the hon. Member will be aware, an Options Study has been completed to determine the most operationally efficient manning levels at RAF Buchan. A decision on the way forward will be made shortly and I will write to the hon. Member with details of arrangements to be put in place for the drawdown of RAF Buchan.

Territorial Army

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether Territorial Army soldiers who have not signed for service under the Reserve Forces Act 1996 are liable for mobilisation. [95093]

Dr. Moonie: All members of the Territorial Army may be called out when a call-out order made under the Reserve Forces Act 1996 is in force. However, it is Ministry of Defence policy that members of the Territorial Army whose reserve liabilities predate the Reserve Forces Act 1996 are only called out if they had a liability under a corresponding power in the Reserve Forces Act 1980 unless they voluntarily elected to assume the liabilities of the 1996 Act.

Five call-out orders are currently in force. Of these, three were made under Section 54 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 and two were made under Section 56 of that Act. The corresponding power to Section 54 was Section of the 11 Reserve Forces Act 1980. The majority of members of the Territorial Army had a liability under that section and are therefore liable to be called out. However, there is no call-out power in the 1980 Act which corresponds to section 56 of the 1996 Act. Therefore reservists whose liabilities predate the Reserve Forces Act 1996 and who did not voluntarily elect to assume the liabilities under that Act are not called out under that section.

Terrorism

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how quickly he estimates the armed forces would be able to deploy, with full protective equipment, to deal with a terrorist incident involving chemical, biological or radiological materials, should they be called upon to do so by the civil departments; [95184]

(2) what plans he has to procure more equipment for dealing with a terrorist incident involving chemical, biological or radiological materials. [95183]

Mr. Ingram: I am withholding information about the capability of the Armed Forces to assist in the response to a terrorist incident involving chemical, biological or radiological materials, including notice to move, response times and equipment procurement plans, in accordance with Exemption 1a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. I refer the hon Member to the supplementary memorandum provided

by the Ministry of Defence on 10 April 2002 in response to a question from the Defence Select Committee during their inquiry into Defence and Security in the United Kingdom (HC 518-n Col Ev100 Q456).

Troop Deployment

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in which countries British troops are stationed; and how many troops there are in each posting. [94759]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to Tri-Service Publication 6 (TSP 6), "Global Location of Service Personnel", a copy of which is held in the House of Commons Library. This is a quarterly publication, the latest edition is as at 1 October 2002.

Warship Repairs

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the state of repair is of *(a)* HMS Trafalgar and *(b)* HMS Nottingham; what the estimated cost of repairs is for each; when they are scheduled to be back in the operating fleet; and if he will make a statement. [95032]

Mr. Ingram: On the repair of HMS Trafalgar, I refer the hon Member to the answer I gave on 20 January 2003 (Official Report, column 65W) to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr Lewis). Surveys of the damage to Trafalgar have recently been completed and her combined maintenance and repair programme is expected to complete in early 2004. Trafalgar is expected to return to the Fleet in the first quarter of 2004, when she will undertake sea trials and training prior to being available for operational deployment. The estimated cost of the repair work is just over £5 million.

On HMS Nottingham, I refer the hon. Member to the written statement I made on 3 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 70WS, and to the answer I gave on 20 January 2003 *Official Report*, column 64–65W, to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). The contract for the repair of Nottingham has been placed and the work is underway at Portsmouth.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Military Force

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Solicitor General what principles she takes into account when considering whether the use of military force is permitted under international law. [94379]

The Solicitor-General: The use of military force is governed by the rules of international law. These rules then have to be considered as to how they apply to the particular circumstances of the case. There is a longstanding convention, followed by successive Governments, that neither the substance of the Law Officers' advice, nor the fact that they have been consulted on a particular matter, is normally disclosed outside Government.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Broadband

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions she has had with BT over the introduction of broadband in rural areas. [93128]

Mr. Timms: Ministers from the Department of Trade and Industry regularly hold meetings with the senior management team of BT to discuss relevant issues; broadband generally constitutes a major topic of discussion at these meetings.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the local exchanges in South Devon which *(a)* have been enabled for broadband access and *(b)* remain without; what the Government's strategy is for increasing broadband facilities; and what the timetable is for delivering these services to South Devon. [95520]

Mr. Timms: The Government's UK Broadband Task Force aims to increase broadband facilities by stimulating the market to increase the roll out and take up of broadband throughout the UK, particularly in those areas never previously served by a mass market, terrestrial solution. The Task Force will also be focusing on the aggregation of public sector demand for broadband in a bid to accelerate roll out and render it more efficient.

There is no specific timetable for delivering broadband services to South Devon in particular; nor does the Government keep lists of which exchanges have and have not been upgraded to deliver ADSL in that area. A list of those exchanges in BT's demand registration scheme where a trigger level has been set can be found at www.bt.com/broadband.

Business Links

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the charging policies are of each sub-regional Business Links organisation in the West Midlands in respect of processing applications from SMEs under the Accelerated Programme; and what guidance is given by her Department to sub-regional Business Links organisations with respect to charges to SMEs wishing to use the Small Business Service. [94770]

Nigel Griffiths: West Midland Business Link Operators deliver two elements of the Accelerate Programme. An initial diagnostic review, bench marker analysis, and if appropriate a strategic action plan. In five of the six West Midlands sub regions SME's are not charged for this element, the Business Link Operator for Herefordshire and Worcestershire charge £350 if an action plan is required. The second element comprises a business development project typically requiring 20–30 days of specialist consultancy. SME's are charged 50 per cent. of the consultancy cost. Three Business Link Operators also charge a project management fee of between 5–8 per cent. of total project costs. Staffordshire, Shropshire and Coventry and Warwickshire BLO's do not charge a project management fee.

The contractual agreement between the Small Business Service and Business Link Operators specifies that the Business Link Operators agree fees with the customer prior to delivery of services.

Employment Agencies

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she will lay before Parliament the final draft Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Business Regulations; and if she will make a statement. [94713]

Alan Johnson: I am currently considering the representations received during the last consultation exercise on our proposals for the draft Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations and also the implications of the proposed EU Directive on Temporary Agency Workers. I shall lay draft Conduct Regulations before Parliament as soon as possible.

Industrial Action (Post Office)

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many days were lost through industrial action in the Post Office in the last 10 years. [95145]

Mr. Timms: I am advised by Royal Mail that the number of working days lost through industrial action in each of the last 10 years and in the current financial year is as follows:

Year at financial year ends (end March)	*Number of days lost*
1991–92	771
1992–93	4,056
1993–94	17,064
1994–95	37,843
1995–96	63,554
1996–97	810,937
1997–98	44,664
1998–99	15,828
1999–2000	22,199
2000–01	62,908
2001–02	53,168
2002–03 (to December)	5,253

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by her Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92472]

Ms Hewitt: In relation to Special Advisers I would refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State in the Cabinet Office on 31 January, *Official Report*, column 1057W.

In relation to the Press Officers the answer is as follows:

	Number of Press officers	*Press office operating costs*
1 January 1995	[1]—	[1]—
1 January 1996	[1]—	[1]—
1 January 1997	20	[1]—
1 January 1998	17	[1]—
1 January 1999	24	[1]—
1 January 2000	25	[1]—
1 January 2001	23	£1.9 million (2000–01)
1 January 2002	23	£1.7 million (2001–02)
1 January 2003	23	[1]—

[1] Not available

Figures for earlier years are not readily available.

TREASURY

Food Additives

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the balance of trade in *(a)* food colourings and *(b)* approved food additives was in the most recent year for which figures are available. [92337]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* I have been asked to reply The Department does not collect statistics on the value of the market and trade for these items.

Inheritance Tax

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the percentage of estates that are liable for inheritance tax in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* the South East of England region, *(c)* Hampshire and *(d)* the Aldershot constituency. [95014]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that about 4 per cent. of estates will pay inheritance tax in the UK in 2002–03. Figures for regions and sub regions are not available for the South East (excluding London) the figure is likely to be about double this. Estimates are not available for Hampshire or Aldershot.

Inland Revenue (Liabilities)

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what total additional liabilities accrued in 2001–02 as a result of the units that previously formed the Financial Intermediaries and Claims Office of the Inland Revenue; and if he will make a statement. [94878]

John Healey: The information is not available. From April 2001, as part of the Inland Revenue's modernising programme, the former Financial Intermediaries and Claims Office and other specialist singleton offices were reorganised into six business streams: Capital Taxes; Centre for Non Residents: Charities; Savings, Pensions, Share Schemes; Stamp Taxes; and Trusts. These business streams have been created to deliver better customer focus through end to end policy and operational delivery.

Further details, including results for 2001–02, are set out in the Inland Revenue Annual Report, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library.

Israel

Richard Burden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action is being taken by HM Customs and Excise and other enforcement agencies to monitor

and prevent the import, under preference, of goods produced in illegal Israeli settlements but labelled as made in Israel. [94767]

John Healey: The European Commission published in November 2001 a notice in the Official Journal of the European Communities, alerting EC importers of the ineligibility of products originating from settlements in the occupied territories for preferences provided for by the EU/Israel Association Agreement. Along with customs authorities in other Community member states, Customs and Excise are selecting for verification those imports where preference has been claimed under the terms of the Agreement but where there is evidence that the goods are likely to have been produced in the Occupied Territories. Security for duty is being taken on such imports while verification enquiries are undertaken. Customs require payment of duty if they do not receive adequate confirmation that goods originated in Israel itself.

National Insurance

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the level of uncollected national insurance was in the latest year for which data are available; and if he will make a statement. [94874]

John Healey: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Paymaster General's answer of 20 November 2002, which contains the latest published information, *Official Report*, column 192W.

The comparable figure for 2001–02 will be published in the National Insurance Fund Accounts in spring 2003.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he plans to privatise the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [91703]

Ruth Kelly: There are no plans to privatise the Office for National Statistics.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the annual cost to the Office for National Statistics of the lease of the Drummond Gate offices; and if he will make a statement. [95380]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to David Laws, dated 4 February 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the annual cost to the Office for National Statistics of the lease of the Drummond Gate offices. (95380)

The current rent payable for the three buildings at Drummond Gate occupied by the Office for National Statistics is £6,260,000 per annum equating to £364 per square metre. The next rent review will take place in 2006.

One-parent Households

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children lived in one-parent households in each year from 1975–76 to 2002–03 in *(a)* numerical and *(b)* percentage terms; and if he will make a statement. [95583]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. David Laws, dated 4 February 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your question on the number and percentage of children living in one parent households. (95583)

Historical estimates of the number and percentage of all dependent children living in one-parent families in Great Britain, together with the latest revised estimates, are shown in the table below. The figures relate to children living in families, rather than households, as this is the basis on which such estimates are made.

An explanation of the method used in making these latest estimates can be found in the article "One parent families—and the dependent children living in them—in Great Britain" published in September 2002 in Population Trends 109.

The figures for 1998 and 2000 are provisional, while the percentages for 1996 and 1998 have been slightly revised.

Number and percentage of children living in one parent households

	Dependent children living in a one parent family (millions)	*Percentage of dependent children living in a one parent family*
1971	1.0	8
1981	1.5	11
1990	2.0	17
1991	2.2	18
1996	2.7	20
1998[1]	2.8	22
2000[1]	2.9	25

[1] Provisional

Pensioners' Benefits

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of pensioners eligible are in receipt of *(a)* the Minimum Income Guarantee, *(b)* Council Tax Benefit, *(c)* Housing Benefit and *(d)* Attendance Allowance; and what steps he is taking to (i) simplify the system and (ii) encourage a higher take-up of benefits. [93885]

Mr. McCartney: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested for Minimum Income Guarantee, (MIG) Council Tax Benefit (CTB) and Housing Benefit (HB) is available for financial year 1999–2000 in the DWP report entitled "Income Related Benefits—Estimates of Take-Up". Copies are available in the Library. Estimates covering 2000–01 are scheduled for publication in March 2003.

We welcome the findings of the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report, "Tackling Pensioner Poverty; encouraging take up of benefits"; which made a number of recommendations to improve the take up of benefits and make them easier to claim. We are pleased that the majority of the actions recommended are already well in train. We have introduced various initiatives to encourage pensioners to take-up the benefits to which they are entitled. As a consequence of one take-up campaign we put an average of £20 a week in the pockets of an extra 140,000 MIG recipients. We are working in partnership with organisations for older people on a

series of initiatives and have already introduced a shortened claim form to make it easier for pensioners to claim MIG.

It is not possible to be precise about the number of pensioners who might be entitled to Attendance Allowance (AA) if they claimed it. This is because entitlement to AA is determined on the customer's specific circumstances which can only be determined after a claim has been made. Up to date estimates of the take up of Attendance Allowance (AA) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) are not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The Disability Benefits Modernisation Programme has been set up to improve the information given to people about AA and the way claims are made. It is working on a range of initiatives including designing a new AA claim form and process, redesigning forms seeking medical evidence and the introduction of improved IT.

Public Service Agreement

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place the technical note underlying the Inland Revenue's Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [94877]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue's technical note will be published shortly, and a copy will be placed in the Library.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place the technical note underlying Customs and Excise's Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [94884]

John Healey: The technical note will be published shortly and a copy will be placed in the Library.

Returnable Bottles

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the case for a differential tax regime for returnable bottles in order to help reduce the amount of domestic and commercial waste in the UK. [94587]

John Healey: No assessment has been made.

As announced in the Chancellor's pre-Budget report, the Government will be considering how the use of economic instruments can be extended to provide a more comprehensive and coherent framework for waste management.

Royal Mail (VAT)

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with *(a)* the EU Competition Authority, *(b)* representatives of the Royal Mail and *(c)* representatives of Business Post, TPG and Hays DX concerning the Royal Mail's exemption from charging value added tax. [94859]

John Healey: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 11 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 114W.

Savings Tax Directive

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with representatives of the Cayman Islands regarding the EU Savings Tax Directive. [94858]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor's Departments have discussed the draft Savings Directive with representatives of the Cayman Islands Government on a number of occasions.

HM Government have also been in regular contact with the Governor of the Cayman Islands on this issue.

Stamp Duty

Mr. Caton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to abolish stamp duty on industrial property. [95537]

Ruth Kelly: Ministers have made a clear commitment to a fair tax system, and they keep all aspects of it, including stamp duty rates and thresholds, under regular review. In the 2002 Budget the Chancellor announced a major reform of certain aspects of stamp duty on land and buildings in the UK. A consultative document was published on 17 April 2002, seeking views on the detail of the modernised regime. This document contained no plans to abolish stamp duty on industrial property.

All commercial property—not just industrial property—will be exempt from stamp duty in 2,000 enterprise areas. The European Commission has now approved this relief under the State Aid rules. An announcement will be made shortly on implementation.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the *(a)* economic effects and *(b)* impact on investment stamp duty on share transactions; and if he will make a statement. [95581]

Ruth Kelly: There is no convincing evidence that stamp duty on shares significantly affects either UK companies or the UK markets. As with all taxes, stamp duty on shares has to be understood in the context of the revenue raised, which would otherwise have to be found elsewhere.

Stock Market

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the effect of the removal of Advance Corporation Tax relief on the value of the FTSE 100 share index. [94391]

Ruth Kelly: It is not possible with any certainty to attribute movements in share prices to the effects of particular Government tax measures. The Government remains committed to modernizing Corporation Tax in order to raise productivity and encourage long-term investment.

Tobacco Smuggling

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the research on tobacco consumption and smuggling undertaken by

Customs and Excise outlined on page 19 of the NAO report, Measuring the performance of Government Departments; and if he will make a statement. [94880]

John Healey: The research on tobacco consumption and smuggling undertaken by Customs and Excise outlined on page 27 of the NAO report, "Measuring the Performance of Government Departments" can be found in "Tackling Tobacco Smuggling", published by HM Customs and Excise and HM Treasury in March 2000, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

Customs' more recent published research on tobacco smuggling and consumption can be found in chapter 2 of "Protecting indirect tax revenues" and chapter 3 of "Measuring indirect tax losses", both published by Customs and Excise in November 2002.

Trader Liability

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much outstanding trader liabilities were written off by Customs and Excise for financial year 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [94875]

John Healey: Until 31 December 1998 write-off figures were published on a calendar year basis. Figures for the calendar years 1997 and 1998 were published in Customs Appropriation Accounts and Annual Reports for 1997–98 and 1998–99, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

MINISTER FOR WOMEN

Women Directors

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister for Women what action she has taken to encourage FTSE-100 companies to include more women on their main boards of directors. [93014]

Ms Hewitt: The Chancellor and I asked Derek Higgs to report on the role and effectiveness of non-executive directors. Research for his review, published on 20 January, showed that in the FTSE-100, women represent 11 per cent. of non-executive directors, 3 per cent. of executive directors and 1 per cent. of chairmen.

Derek Higgs emphasised in his review the importance of promoting meritocracy in the boardroom. He also noted that the composition of a board sends important signals about the values of the company. A commitment to equal opportunities is inevitably undermined, he argued, if the board itself does not follow the same guiding principles. He recommended that there should be a formal, rigorous and transparent process for the appointment of new directors to the boards of listed companies. Companies would need to set out the process used, and explain if external advice or open advertising has not been used. At the start of an appointment process, the balance of skills, knowledge and experience on the board should be evaluated and a description of the role and capabilities prepared for a particular appointment. These will be incorporated in a revised combined code applying to listed companies.

He also made various proposals to widen the pool from which non-executive directors are drawn, which in many cases would bring in more women. These include more executive directors and senior executives from other companies and directors of private companies, as well as advisers and those from other backgrounds. A small group of business leaders and others will be set up, led by Laura Tyson, Dean of London Business School, to bring to greater prominence candidates from the non-commercial sector. This will describe the profile of relevant skills and experience that make an effective non-executive director with such a background and a list will be developed of around 100 individuals. As women are more strongly represented at senior levels in the non-commercial sector, the expected outcome would be that a significant proportion would be female. The group will report to me in May.

He also noted that areas where women tend to be more strongly represented are in roles such as human resources, change management and customer care which are not regarded as traditional routes to the board. Yet the issues dealt with in such roles, and the skills needed, are important ones for the board, and he hoped that in future boards would draw more actively from these groups.

The Government welcomed Derek Higgs' recommendations. We will be looking to listed companies to put them into early effect as they make changes to their boards. I also hope that shareholders will play their part in pressing to ensure meritocracy and diversity in appointments to boards.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Asbestos

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what the Government's policy is on investigating past asbestos exposures in *(a)* state and *(b)* independent schools; [94385]

(2) what the Government's policy is on requiring school governors to inform those *(a)* in schools and *(b)* formerly in schools that they have been exposed to asbestos. [94383]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Local education authorities, for maintained schools and proprietors of independent schools have statutory responsibility, under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, for the health and safety of pupils and employees while they are on the premises.

The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 2002 (CAWR), will require those with responsibility for the repair and maintenance of non-domestic premises to find out if there are, or may be, asbestos-containing materials within them. It also requires them to record the location and condition of such materials, and then assess and manage any risk from them, including passing on information about their location and condition to anyone liable to disturb them.

The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) concerned that information on whether buildings have asbestos in them was not always passed to those at risk, proposed a new statutory duty—the duty to manage asbestos—on

those responsible for non-domestic premises to determine the presence of asbestos in their buildings, and assess and control the risk from the material. This will be enacted by a new provision, Regulation 4 of CAWR. HSC consulted widely on its proposal and CAWR was laid before Parliament on 31 October 2002 and came into force on 21 November 2002, with an 18-month lead in period for the duty to manage.

Departmental Website

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his answer of 19 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 56W, on the departmental website, how many key partners provide particular website services; and how much was paid to these partners in each of the last five years. [94153]

Mr. Miliband: The Department works with approximately 20 external partners who provide specialist web services such as web hosting, site management and research, design and technical build, e-marketing and evaluation of emerging technologies. Individual costs are not available for all of these separate specialist services. However, core programme costs for the Department for Education and Skills central website www.dfes.gov.uk for the last five years (real terms figures in 2001–02 prices) were as follows:

1997–98: £43,200

1998–99: £84,200

1999–2000: £140,300

2000–01: £266,600

2001–02: £654,800

Electronic Registration (Secondary Schools)

Jim Dowd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his answer of 21 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 249–50W, on electronic registration (secondary schools), when the tender for installation of an electronic registration system, Ref. OJEC No. 2001/S 200–137103, issued on 17 October 2001, was discontinued; and for what reasons. [93954]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The exercise to procure a panel of suppliers able to offer electronic registration systems to schools was discontinued on 31 May 2002, shortlisted suppliers having been notified that that was our intention on 17 May 2002.

A significant number of the short listed suppliers were not able to accept the terms and conditions of the draft contract the Department had despatched as part of the Invitation to Tender pack. In the circumstances we decided to abandon the procurement, issuing guidance to schools and local education authorities about how they could nevertheless proceed with introduction of electronic registration systems. Consequently, schools in the project are free to buy systems on the open market subject to ratification by the Department.

Examination Marking

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the potential impact of curriculum changes at secondary level on criterion-referenced examination marking procedure. [94325]

Mr. Miliband: Our policy document "14–19: opportunity and excellence" set out our intention to make changes to the curriculum at Key Stage 4 so that schools can offer programmes that better meet young people's individual needs and strengths, while ensuring they acquire the core of general learning and experience essential to later learning and employment. There will be some associated development of GCSE qualifications to further improve the choices open to young people. However, we do not anticipate changes to the criterion-referencing of GCSE examinations.

We have appointed a Working Group on 14–19 Reform which is to address the need for longer-term reform in relation to improving the quality of vocational options and coherent programmes for all young people, ensuring that assessment within programmes is fit for purpose, and the development of a unified framework of qualifications. The group is to report the group's interim conclusions within one year, with a view to finalising its work within 18 months.

Independent Schools

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the independent schools in England and Wales that qualify for grants from his Department. [95232]

Mr. Miliband: Central Government grants are not generally available for schools in the independent sector. However, grants are currently paid to support places at 361 schools remaining in the Assisted Places Scheme, which is being phased out, and at eight independent specialist schools participating in the Music and Dance Scheme. Any of the 34 independent choir schools in membership of the Choir Schools' Association also qualify for Chorister grants through the Choir Schools Scholarship Scheme. A list of these schools is being placed in the Library of the House. Grants are also available to support specific projects for collaborative working under the independent/state school partnerships scheme.

Independent schools in Wales are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

Learning Funds

Dr. Francis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what independent evaluations have been undertaken of the adult and community learning fund since its inception; [R] [94467]

(2) what plans are in place for *(a)* the adult and community learning fund and *(b)* the union learning fund beyond 2004; and if he will make a statement; [R] [94469]

(3) how the Department has ensured that lessons from the adult and community learning fund contributed to the development of the neighbourhood renewal strategy; [R] [94471]

(4) what the Department's annual expenditure on *(a)* the adult and community learning fund and *(b)* the union learning fund was in each of the four years up to and including 2002–03; [R] [94468]

(5) what proportion of projects supported by the adult and community learning fund were based on voluntary and community-based organisations in each year since 1999; [R] [94470]

(6) how the Department has ensured that the adult and community learning fund influenced the strategic planning of local learning and skills councils. [R] [94472]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Since its inception in 1998 there have been three independent evaluations of the adult and community learning fund (ACLF) as follows:

(1) Evaluation of the Adult and Community Learning Fund (Field, Spencer, Tight, Blaxter, Byrd and Merrill), published July 2001.

(2) Impact of the Adult and Community Learning Fund (Tyers and Aston) published June 2002.

(3) Evaluation of Round 5 of the Adult and Community Learning Fund (McMeeking, Taylor, Powell and Sims) published July 2002.

The Department's annual expenditure on the ACLF was as follows:

	£ million
1999–2000	6.1
2000–01	6.6
2001–02	5.1
2002–03	[1]3.3

[1] Expenditure to date (£5 million budget)

The Department's annual expenditure on the union learning fund was as follows:

	£ million
1999–2000	3.1
2000–01	3.9
2001–02	6.3
2002–03	[1]4.5

[1] Expenditure to date (£9 million budget)

I am considering the future of the adult and community learning fund within the Department's wider review of the funding of adult learning and the skills strategy and associated delivery plan, which we intend to publish in June 2003.

On future plans for the union learning fund, our intention is to help trade unions to continue to develop the key role they have to play in promoting the uptake of learning and skills in the workplace. We have allocated a further £33.6 million in the next three years up to 2005–06. From April 2003 the Learning and Skills Council will assume responsibility for its management and administration. This will place union learning at the heart of the LSC's strategy for workforce development.

Information on the proportion of projects supported by the ACLF which were based on voluntary and community-based organisations is not immediately available. I will write to the hon. Member shortly with the information, and place a copy of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

The Department ensured that the lessons from the adult and community learning fund contributed to the development of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy by providing officials within the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit with the findings of the independent ACLF evaluations and impact studies as the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy was being devised. The Department also provided the same material on the ACLF to local LSCs to help inform their strategic planning.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90608]

Mr. Miliband: There are no departmental staff employees paid below the main adult minimum wage of £4.20 per hour.

The estimated impact on the cost of salaries by increasing the minimum wage to *(c)* £4.87 per hour, *(d)* £5.00 per hour and *(e)* £5.30 per hour is £1,200, £18,500 and £68,800 respectively. The Department does not have employees located outside of England.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps he is taking to *(a)* improve the standards of Modern Apprenticeships and *(b)* expand their provision. [94317]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Government and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) are wholly committed to Modern Apprenticeships (MA) as a quality work-based learning route to craft, supervisory and technician skills for young people in England. We are implementing Modern Apprenticeship Advisory Committee recommendations to ensure the highest standards and to encourage take-up by employers and young people. We have adopted a challenging Public Service Agreement (PSA) target for MA entrants by 2004—28 per cent. of young people to begin an MA by the age of 22. We are also implementing with key partners a quality improvement strategy to improve MA outcomes and completion rates.

My right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, along with the Chairman of the Learning and Skills Council have announced a new Modern Apprenticeship Task Force which will take a key role in promoting MA to employers and thereby contributing to increased take-up. In addition, the Government will be publishing a national skills strategy in June setting out how we will further boost numbers of young people acquiring technical and craft skills across the economy.

Schools (Specialist Status)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what support and assistance he is able to provide to schools looking to raise money to apply for specialist status; and what measures he will take to remove the barriers to schools looking to apply for specialist school status. [94909]

Mr. Miliband: The Department has done much to help schools which are having difficulties raising the sponsorship necessary to apply join the programme. We grant-aid the Technology Colleges Trust and the Youth Sport Trust, which advise schools on raising sponsorship. The Trusts are often able to help schools with money donated centrally, on the basis of criteria set out by sponsors.

In 1999 we reduced the sponsorship requirement to £50,000, and in 2002 we reduced the amount of sponsorship required by small mainstream schools (defined as those with under 500 pupils on roll) to £100 per pupil, subject to a minimum of £20,000.

In November 2002 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the creation of a Partnership Fund. The Fund, which will contain £3 million in 2003–04, is designed specifically to help schools which have had serious difficulties meeting the £50,000 sponsorship requirement.

The criteria for the allocation of the Partnership Fund will be based around evidence that the school has made a real effort to raise sponsorship and that, although they have not been able to get the required level of private sector funding, the school has created other valuable links with businesses.

Shire Education Authority Funding

Paddy Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the planned capitation per pupil in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools for each shire education authority in 2003–04. [95033]

Mr. Miliband: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) on 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 231–33W.

Teachers (East Riding of Yorkshire)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers have left the teaching profession in the East Riding of Yorkshire in each year since 1997. [94305]

Mr. Miliband: The table shows the number of teachers that left full or part time service in maintained schools sector in East Riding of Yorkshire in each of the years shown and did not go on to teach in maintained schools in other LEAs in England. Data for 1999–2000 are the latest that is available at local education authority level.

Teachers leaving service

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Retirement	117	32	36
Out of service	118	107	134
Total	235	139	170

The table is based on pension returns. Some leavers will be taking career breaks (eg for maternity leave) and will return to service at a later date. Others may have moved from known service to service not recorded on the teacher pension return.

Teachers' Earnings

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will estimate the average weekly earnings of a fully qualified teacher working in a *(a)* primary school and *(b)* secondary school in the Greater London area. [94761]

Mr. Miliband: The average weekly gross pay of all full-time qualified teachers in the maintained sector in Greater London at 31 March 2001 is estimated[1] to be as follows:

Nursery/primary: £540

Secondary: £580

[1] Figures have been estimated using provisional average salary data.

Teaching Profession

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list by individual local education authority, how many teachers have left the profession *(a)* within the last 12 months and *(b)* in 1996–97 after two years teaching experience or less; and if he will make a statement. [93828]

Mr. Miliband: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures he is taking to reduce the administrative burden on headteachers and teachers. [94911]

Mr. Miliband: On 15 January an historic national agreement was signed by government, employers and school workforce unions, paving the way for radical workforce reform to raise standards and tackle teacher workload. The agreement covers progressive reductions in teachers' total hours, and changes to teachers' contracts to ensure they do not routinely undertake administrative and clerical tasks. To help achieve this, funding is in place to improve support available to both headteachers and teachers. There will also be a concerted attack on unnecessary bureaucracy and paperwork.

Schools are to be enabled to recruit at least 50,000 additional support staff during this Parliament. This will include personal administrative assistants for teachers and additional technical support,[1] as well as new managers from outside education and the training and recruitment of more bursars to relieve the burden on headteachers of financial and administrative work. We are also investing in teachers' personal access to computers—the total budget has risen from £100 million to £300 million, and the programme's duration from two years to four years, providing over 300,000 laptops.

To tackle bureaucracy, we are setting up an independent Implementation Review Unit to consider the workload impact of existing and new initiatives. The focus will extend beyond DfES and will cover all bodies which impact upon schools, including national agencies such as Ofsted, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Teacher Training Agency, as well as local education authorities and learning and skills councils. It will feature a panel of practitioners—overwhelmingly serving headteachers. They will have direct access to Ministers, will scrutinise existing policies

and programmes and identify priorities for end to end reviews to eliminate burdens. Panel members will make sure that grass-roots concerns get through to DfES and central agencies, and are tackled.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Industrial Action/Illness

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many working days have been lost in her Department and its predecessors owing to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997–98. [94937]

Clare Short: There have been no days lost due to industrial action in DFID since 1997.

The rates of sick absence recorded in DFID per calendar year from 1997 to 2001 are as follows. Figures on rates of sick absence in financial years could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

	Number of absences	*Average number of days per staff year*
1997	9,250	8.1
1998	8,643	7.3
1999	9,263	7.3
2000	8,426	6.2
2001	11,545	8.3

Staff numbers on which these are based have risen from 1,142 in 1997 to 1,391 in 2001. My department will announce the rates of sick absence recorded in 2002 in due course.

Peru

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid her Department is giving to Peru in 2002–03; which projects in Peru are run directly by her Department; which projects her Department participates in; and if she will make a statement. [94259]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development has a £3.7 million programme in Peru for 2002–03. DFID also funds £4 million per year of the EC development programme, and is a five per cent. shareholder in the World bank and one per cent. shareholder in the Inter American Development bank. Details of DFID's programme in Peru are given in the Peru Development Assistance Paper, which I have placed in the Library of the House.

Sudan

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking, in conjunction with other Inter-Governmental Association for Development observer nations, to investigate reports of breaches of the cessation of hostilities near Ler in Western Upper Nile, Sudan. [94616]

Clare Short: At the request of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development Special Envoy, Lt-Gen Sumbeiywo, the US-led Civilian Protection Monitoring Team, has investigated recent alleged violations of the Memorandum of Understanding on cessation of hostilities in Western Upper Nile. Their report has been presented to the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A for comment before dissemination.

We expect the parties to reach agreement soon on an improved verification and monitoring mechanism to underpin the Memorandum of Understanding on cessation of hostilities. This should help to reduce tension until a full ceasefire agreement can be worked out.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Cyprus

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* European Union colleagues, *(b)* the Government of Cyprus and *(c)* the Government of Turkey on the state of the reunification negotiations in Cyprus. [94257]

Mr. MacShane: The Government strongly supports the UN settlement process. We believe that there is a historic opportunity to secure a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement in Cyprus, by 28 February, based on the United Nations Secretary-General's 10 December proposals, and allow a reunited island to accede to the EU. We are urging the two sides not to let this opportunity slip away.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, and I, undertook wide-ranging and full contacts on the Cyprus settlement with our European colleagues in the run-up to the Copenhagen European Council. The Copenhagen European Council gave its full support to the UN process and concluded that:

> "The European Council believes that those proposals offer a unique opportunity to reach a settlement in the coming weeks and urges the leaders of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities to seize this opportunity".

The Copenhagen Council also restated the EU's preference that a reunited island should accede to the EU.

We have maintained regular contacts with the Greek Cypriot side and the Turkish Cypriot side on the settlement process. The UK Special Representative for Cyprus, Lord Hannay, visited Nicosia on 25–27 January. We regularly discuss Cyprus, among other issues, with the Government of Turkey. Lord Hannay visited Ankara on 2–3 February.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90539]

Mr. Rammell: The answer is as follows:
2001–02—£590,721.

European Convention on Human Rights

Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reasons he has not signed the 12th Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights. [93945]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

The Government did not sign Protocol 12 because it was not satisfied with the drafting of the text. In particular, we considered that there is uncertainty about the scope for positive action and as regards the meaning of the reference in the text to "any right set forth by law."

The Government remains in favour of a free-standing prohibition on discrimination. We have undertaken to keep the matter under careful consideration and to take account of the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights as it develops. We will report any new thinking as part of our general review of international human rights instruments, which is due to be completed in the spring of this year.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92441]

Mr. Rammell: The information is as follows.

Losses to FCO from fraud and theft 1996–2003

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
FCO (fraud)	26,350	114,385	91,375	11,153	15,642	22,462	37,730.49
FCO (theft)	6,606	Nil	10,827	30	684	18,996	20,550.50
Agencies	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total	32,956	114,385	102,202	11,183	16,326	41,458	58,280.99
Sum recovered	10,850	4,396	6,705	11,183	15,553	23,425	38,375.99
Net loss	22,106	109,989	95,497	Nil	773	18,033	19,905.00

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
NDPBs (cash losses)	15,105	Unknown	Unknown	8,667	6,535	4,868	Unknown
NDPBs (net losses)	19,945	Unknown	Unknown	13,500	29,307	5,748	Unknown
Total	35,050	Unknown	Unknown	22,167	35,842	10,616	Unknown

Future of Europe Convention

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the document being circulated by the Prime Minister's Representative at the Convention on the Future of Europe describing the role of the proposed President of the European Council. [94474]

Mr. MacShane: The document under reference is an internal paper drafted in the Foreign Office. It is not a final document, nor a representation of an agreed British Government position. It has not been submitted to the Convention on the Future of Europe. As with other documents of this nature it would not be appropriate to deposit it in the Library of the House. The Government will, of course, continue to deposit all formal Government submissions to the Convention.

General Affairs and External Relations Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the General Affairs and External Relations Council held on 27 and 28 January; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including its voting record; and if he will make a statement. [95261]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I represented the UK at the General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels on 27 and 28 January, 2003. Conclusions were agreed by consensus and no formal votes were taken.

General Affairs Session

Operational Programme of the Council for 2003 and Western Balkans (external session)

The Council heard presentations from the President and the High Representative about their recent visits to the Western Balkans and from Commissioner Patten on Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) developments.

Separately, in the Council's public debate on the Operational Programme of the Council (broadcast live) the Presidency stressed that the Union's relations with the Western Balkans would constitute a major priority and that the EU was keen to capitalise on the positive results so far yielded. Work would continue on consolidating democratic institutions, protection of minorities, promotion of economic reconstruction and regional co-operation. The Thessalonika European Council on 21 June 2003 is expected to lend a new impetus to this process. I welcomed the Presidency's focus, and emphasised the importance of entrenching the rule of law. Several speakers referred to the importance of the fight against crime and corruption.

Progress of work in other Council configurations

The Council took note of the Presidency's progress report on the state of play. The report highlights agreements reached on several important dossiers, including the Single European Sky, the greenhouse emission allowance, the Regulation on GMOs, the 'Dublin II Regulation (on member state responsibility for assessing asylum claims), as well as measures taken following the 'Prestige' accident. Particular attention was drawn to the ECOFIN agreement on the taxation of savings.

Follow-up to the European Council in Copenhagen

The Presidency debriefed on the successful conclusion of consultations with the European Parliament on the modalities for appointing the Members of the European Commission from the new member states for the remainder of the Commission's mandate, until late 2004.

The Presidency also outlined their priorities; these included taking forward the December 2002 Transport and Environment Council conclusions concerning measures to be implemented following the 'Prestige' accident; and continuing work on the 'Wider Europe' agenda, with the Western Balkans, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, and the southern Mediterranean countries.

Enlargement

The Presidency reported on its enlargement work programme and reiterated the priority it attached to meeting the timetable set by the European Copenhagen Council in December 2002. This included completing and signing the Accession Treaty on 16 April 2003 in Athens, ensuring the smooth integration of all new member states, and continuing to monitor the transposition of the acquis by the acceding states.

Recalling the European Council's preference for the accession of united Cyprus, the Presidency welcomed the resumption of talks between the two parties in Cyprus and their willingness to conclude a comprehensive settlement by 28 February 2003. The Commission referred to the possibility of a donors' conference to raise funds to support a settlement.

The Presidency stated its strong desire to maintain the momentum of the negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania and to strive energetically to strengthen further Turkey's accession strategy. The Commission confirmed that it would present, in March, a draft Accession Partnerships on Turkey, with a view to Council adoption in April.

Spring European Council

Member states broadly welcomed a presentation by President Prodi on the Commission's 2003 spring synthesis report, drawn up in view of the spring European Council meeting on 21 March 2003.

External Relations Session

Western Balkans

In addition to discussion in the Open Debate, the Council adopted conclusions on:

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

The Council welcomed the recent progress on Serbia and Montenegro's Constitutional Charter and Implementing Law, and urged their early parliamentary approval and their full implementation. It called for the rapid finalisation of the Action Plans on internal market, trade and customs that would allow further progress towards the EU.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Council welcomed the formation of governments at the State and Republika Srpska levels and looked forward to the prompt formation of the Federation Government. It urged the BiH authorities to proceed rapidly with the implementation of the reforms necessary for progress in the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), including the establishment of a single state-level customs and VAT system.

Co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

The Council welcomed that former Serbian President Milan Milutonovic will appear before the ICTY but expressed concerns that co-operation with FRY and ICTY remained insufficient. Failure to co-operate could seriously jeopardise further movement towards the EU.

European Security and Defence Policy

FYROM

The High Representative, Mr. Solana, debriefed on the preparations for the first ESDP military operation. The Council agreed on a Joint Action to launch this operation. The conclusions noted that the EU had intensified planning and preparations in consultation with the FYROM authorities and with NATO and underlined its pledge to achieving a stable and secure FYROM, committed to full implementation of the Framework Agreement and making further progress toward European integration, in the context of the Stabilisation and Association process.

EU Police Mission (EUPM)

The Council also welcomed the successful start of the EUPM in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 1 January 2003, the first operation under ESDP. The Council welcomed the commitments made by the new Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina to work with the EUPM.

EU-Africa Relations and Zimbabwe

Ministers discussed the renewal of EU sanctions against Zimbabwe (set to expire on 18 February), handling of the Franco-African Summit (Paris, 20–21 February) and the EU-Africa Summit (Lisbon, 4–5 April).

The outcome is that Coreper has been tasked to pursue, rapidly, work on the draft Common Position on Zimbabwe, renewing the targeted sanctions, with particular attention on the procedure for granting any exemptions to the travel ban. The measures in place include: an embargo on the sale, supply or transfer of

arms and technical advice; assistance or training related to military activities; an embargo on the sale or supply of equipment that could be used for internal repression; as well as a travel ban on and a freezing of funds, financial assets and economic resources of certain members of the Government of Zimbabwe and those bearing a particular responsibility for the observed violations.

In the discussion, we made clear that public opinion would not understand a failure to continue sanctions. We also made clear our firm opposition to the attendance of the EU/Africa Summit by President Mugabe. Several partners spoke along similar lines. Some others emphasised the importance of continued engagement with Zimbabwe.

Central Africa

The Council heard presentations by the Belgian Minister, following his recent trip to Central Africa, and by EU Special Representative, Ajello, on the implementation of the Pretoria Agreement. In its conclusions, the Council stressed inter alia that it could see no alternative to securing peace and stability in the Congo, other than through the global and inclusive Agreement on transition, signed in Pretoria on 17 December 2002. It urged all parties to complete negotiations on the outstanding points and to speedily establish the institutions required for transition. It reaffirmed its willingness to support transition to free and transparent elections, and intention to implement programmes to promote aid, the strengthening of state structure and the economic reconstruction of the country, as soon as its institutions are in place.

Cote D'Ivoire

The French Minister briefed his colleagues on prospects following the agreement among the representative Ivorian political forces, reached on 24 January. Conclusions were adopted without discussion in which the EU warmly welcomed the Agreement and called for full implementation of the regional confidence-building measures in the framework of ECOWAS. The EU, alongside the UN, the African Union and ECOWAS, is ready to take on its responsibilities in that framework.

Middle East

Ministers held a discussion against the backdrop of further deterioration and upcoming Israeli elections. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs briefed on the London conference on Palestinian reform. The Presidency intends to visit the region in February. The conclusions called on both parties to drive the peace process forward by supporting the efforts of the Quartet, called on Palestinian reforms to be speeded up and welcomed Egyptian efforts to promote progress on security issues and for a sustainable truce.

Iraq

Ministers discussed this over lunch on 27 January. Several speakers emphasised that a diplomatic solution was desirable but would be possible only if there was unanimity in the international community plus a credible threat of force. War might still be avoided but it would require real pressure to get Saddam Hussein to change his approach. In its conclusions, the Council reaffirmed that its goal remains the effective and complete disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, its support for UN efforts to secure full and immediate compliance; its appreciation for the work accomplished by the inspectors so far, urging the Iraqi authorities to engage in full and active co-operation with UNMOVIC and the IAEA; the fundamental importance of preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and the role of the UNSC in the implementation of UNSC 1441. On the second day of the Council there was an informal and inconclusive exchange following the debriefing of the UN Security Council by Mr. Blix.

North Korea

The Council welcomed the envisaged meeting between the permanent members of the Security Council and the EU, Japan and the two Koreas. The Council agreed to despatch a high-level EU mission to Pyongyang, in close co-ordination with the US and other partners. The SoS for FCA supported this initiative. The EU should stay in close touch with the major players. Other speakers agreed.

EC's approach to WTO Doha Development Agenda agriculture negotiations

After initial reluctance by a few member states, the Council agreed that the Commission should table its paper at the WTO Agriculture Negotiations. The Commission was clear that the timetable for its proposals in the mid term review of the CAP remained unchanged.

Items approved without debate

Relations with Russia

The Council noted the Presidency Work Plan on the implementation of the Common Strategy of the EU on Russia.

Relations with Ukraine

The Council noted the Presidency Work Plan on the implementation of the Common Strategy of the EU on Ukraine.

Relations with the Mediterranean Region

The Council noted the Presidency's priorities for implementing the EU's Common Strategy on the Mediterranean Region from June 2000 under its three chapters: political and security, economic and financial, and social, culture and human chapter. The Presidency intends to give special priority to the implementation of the Valencia Action Plan adopted at the fifth Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Valencia on 23 and 24 April 2002.

Angola

The Council adopted a Regulation repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1705/98 regarding the interruption of certain economic relations with Angola in connection with the activities of UNITA.

Somalia

The Council adopted a Regulation adopting certain restrictive measures in respect of Somalia, following from the Common Position 2002/960/CFSP of 10 December 2002. The Regulation prohibits the

provision of financing for arms sale, as well as of advice, assistance or training related to military activities directly or indirectly to any person, entity or body in Somalia.

Dual-use items and technology

The Council adopted a regulation amending and updating Regulation (EC) No. 1334/2000 setting up a Community regime for the control of exports of dual-use items and technology.

ESDP: Financing of operations having military or defence implications

The Council approved a document on contributions by third States to the financing of operations having military or defence implications.

Anti-dumping measures

The Council adopted four texts amending a number of anti-dumping measures to avoid an excessive amount of anti-dumping duty being levied in situations in which imported goods have been damaged before entry into free circulation. In these cases the specific duty will be reduced by a percentage which corresponds to the apportioning of the price actually paid or payable.

Asylum

Following the political agreement reached on 28 November 2002, the Council formally adopted the Directive laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers in member states, deemed sufficient to ensure a dignified standard of living. It contains specific provisions on residence and freedom of movement, family unity, schooling and the education of minors, employment and access to vocational training.

Access to justice in cross-border disputes

The Council adopted a Directive to improve access to justice in cross-border disputes by establishing minimum common rules relating to legal aid for such disputes.

The Directive seeks to promote the application of legal aid in cross-border disputes for persons who lack sufficient resources where aid is necessary to secure effective access to justice.

Protection of the environment through criminal law

The Council adopted the Framework Decision on the protection of the environment through criminal law.

According to this instrument, each member state shall take the necessary measures to ensure that the conduct referred to in the Framework Decision is punishable by effective, proportionate and dissuasive penalties, including, at least in serious cases, deprivation of liberty which can give rise to extradition.

Gibraltar

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the state of the Brussels process concerning Gibraltar. [95629]

Mr. MacShane: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on this matter by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 11 December 2002, *Official Report*, col. 380W.

Israel

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the level of compliance by Israel with the human rights provisions of the EU-Israel Association agreement; and what action he is taking to ensure full compliance. [94766]

Mr. MacShane: Respect for human rights and democratic principles constitute an essential element of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, and all other such agreements between the EU and Mediterranean countries, including the Palestinian Authority. The EU has used this as a vehicle to raise human rights as part of its political dialogue with Israel. The UK joined with other member states at the EU-Israel Association Council on 21 October 2002 in making clear its concerns about human rights and the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian territories and has continued to raise human rights issues in bilateral contacts with Israel.

Kenya

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to assist the incoming Kenyan Government in developing effective public administration and tackling corruption. [90145]

Mr. Rammell: We are discussing with the new Kenyan Administration the economic and social reform agenda which President Kibaki promoted during his campaign. Good economic management will be the key to the revival of Kenya. We expect the new Government to stand by its commitment to tackle corruption, including by creating an Anti-Corruption Authority and giving it the power to prosecute.

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions *(a)* his Department and *(b)* representatives of his Department in Nairobi have had with (i) representatives of the Government of Kenya in London and (ii) members of the Government of Kenya about the killing of Mr. William Mwaura Munhe; what reports he has received linking the murder to Mr. Felicien Kabuga; what assistance (A) his Department and (B) the UK Government are providing to the authorities in Kenya in this matter; and if he will make a statement. [94258]

Mr. Rammell: My noble Friend the Baroness Amos raised Felicien Kabuga's presence in Kenya with Mr. Kalonzo Musyoka, the Kenyan Minister for foreign affairs, on 28 January. Mr. Mwaura Munhe's killing is alleged to be linked to information on Mr. Kabuga's whereabouts. We continue to work with partners on gathering information leading to the apprehension of Rwandan genocidaires.

Liberia

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on *(a)* the nature of the attack on the town of Beam in Liberia and *(b)* the identity of the perpetrators; what discussions he has had or is planning to have with *(a)* representatives of the Liberian

Government and *(b)* the Liberian Government on Liberia's strategy to deal with this event; and if he will make a statement. [94260]

Mr. Rammell: We are raising the attack on Beam, in Liberia, with the UN Secretariat. The main aim of the attack seems to have been looting connected to the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire. It is unclear who orchestrated the attack but Liberian and Ivorian groups have been accused of involvement. We remain concerned about reports of Liberian involvement in the rebellion in Cote d'Ivoire and at the ease with which armed groups can pass across the border.

The Government of Liberia continues to ignore the demands of the UN Security Council by sponsoring armed groups in the region. Our aim remains to contain these activities by maintaining effective UN sanctions against Liberia.

Maganizo Mazeze

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to representatives and members of the Malawian Government concerning the arrest and trial of journalist Maganizo Mazeze; and if he will make a statement. [94254]

Mr. Rammell: Mr. Mazeze was arrested and bailed on 22 January. He was charged with disseminating false news after he had reported on stories of "bloodsuckers" in Malawi for his radio station, MIJ. While we have not specifically raised Mr. Mazeze's case with the Malawi Government, we have commented publicly on attempts to prohibit reporting of political news on MIJ. Our High Commissioner to Malawi last raised issues of media freedom with the Minister of Information on 24 October last year.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90600]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In the next financial year, our lowest salary will be £11,267 per annum, which equates to an hourly rate of £5.15.

The effect of a minimum wage of £4.17, £4.87 or £5.00 on the cost of salaries of FCO employees would therefore be nil.

If the minimum wage were raised to £5.30 per hour, there would be an effect on the cost of the salaries of FCO employees. This cost cannot, however, be quantified without disproportionate cost.

Occupational Stress

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress in his Department. [93672]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The FCO commissioned a company led by Professor Cary Cooper of UMIST to undertake an Occupational Stress Audit in 2000. An Action Plan, taking into account the results of this, and the 2001 FCO Employee Opinion Survey, has been drawn up and made available to all FCO staff. An Action Group, chaired by the Director Personnel, monitors progress. Its last meeting was held on 23 October 2002.

Peru

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what discussions *(a)* he has and *(b)* his Department have had with the Peruvian Government on its response to the Peruvian Constitutional Court's ruling to overturn in part four anti-terror legislative decrees; and if he will make a statement; [94262]

(2) what reports he has received from his Department's representative in Lima on the Peruvian Constitutional Court's ruling to overturn in part four anti-terror legislative decrees; what advice his Department is issuing on the ruling's legal and security implications; and if he will make a statement. [94261]

Mr. Rammell: Our Embassy in Lima is watching closely developments following the recent ruling of the Peruvian Constitutional Court on the anti-terrorist legislation. Our understanding is that the Constitutional Court has reached its judgment based on the legislation's compatibility with Peru's international human rights obligations. The laws in question were adopted in 1992 and have been the subject of criticism internationally. The Peruvian Government intends to adopt new legislation within 30 working days of this ruling. We support the Peruvian Government's efforts to improve and protect human rights for all Peruvians. We maintain a good dialogue with Peru on human rights matters as well as security aspects in common to both sides, including terrorism.

Public Service Agreement

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place the technical note underlying his Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [94887]

Mr. Rammell: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Technical Note for the period 2003–06 will be published within the next few weeks, once detailed planning for the delivery of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Public Service Agreement targets has been completed. The Technical Note will set out how progress against the Public Service Agreement targets will be measured. A copy of the Technical Note will be placed in the Library.

Richard Mechan

Mr. Dhanda: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what documentary evidence he has received on *(a)* mitigating circumstances of self-defence and *(b)* mitigating circumstances of self-defence that were not included in the official confession,

(c) health problems and *(d)* health problems that were not included in the official confession, relating to the case of Mr. Richard Mechan. [93520]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We received from Richard Mechan and his father, Terry Mechan, copies of selected documentation concerning Richard's judicial defence against his manslaughter charge in Bahrain. These included the issues of possible self-defence and Richard's heart condition. Our consular staff cannot provide detailed legal advice so, we have always advised Richard Mechan that any evidence in favour of his defence should be introduced by his lawyer. We understand that Mr. Mechan's lawyer did introduce the above mentioned documentation in support of his defence to the courts in Bahrain.

Rogue States

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his definition of rogue states is; and which states fall within that definition. [93903]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The term "Rogue State" was first used by the Clinton Administration in the US to describe states which were pursuing illicit programmes to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and those which the US Administration considered posed a threat to the US. The term has become widely used by media and commentators to describe states of proliferation concern and those which provide succour and support for terrorism. The Government generally prefers to use the phrase "Countries of Concern" to describe such states, although "Rogue States" has also been used for this purpose.

We continue to be concerned by the proliferation of WMD and the means for their delivery in several regions including the Middle East, South Asia and the Korean Peninsula.

We are also concerned about state support for terrorist activity in a number of countries. In the light of the continuing campaign against terror, it is not possible at this time to specifically name publicly any of the countries about which we are concerned or to speculate on any action that might be taken to counter our concerns.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94118]

Mr. Rammell: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Service Delivery Agreement for the period 2003–06 will be published within the next few weeks, once detailed planning and resource allocation for the delivery of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Public Service Agreement targets has been completed. The Service Delivery Agreement will set out how the Public Service Agreement targets will be delivered.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89889]

Mr. Rammell: The information is as follows:

Cost of fraud and theft to FCO in 2002

	£
Fraud and theft	61,613.99
Sum recovered	41,708.99

UNOMIG/HROAG

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions *(a)* he, *(b)* UK diplomatic staff at the United Nations and *(c)* UK diplomatic staff at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe have had since 2001 about expanding the mandate and area of function of (i) UNOMIG and (ii) HROAG; and if he will make a statement. [95256]

Mr. Rammell: The mandate of UNOMIG (United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia) was unanimously extended by the Security Council on 30 January after consultations between member states.

Expanding the mandate and overall area of function of UNOMIG and HROAG (Human Rights Office in Abkhazia, Georgia) is not under active discussion.

Weapons Inspections (1998)

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether UNSCOM 243 entered Iraqi presidential palaces between March and April 1998. [94724]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Yes.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on plans to discuss sanctions against Zimbabwe at the EU education council meeting, scheduled for 6 February. [94705]

Mr. Rammell: There are no such plans.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made with the compilation of the watch list of Zimbabwean nationals whose presence in the UK may not be conducive to the public good. [94728]

Mr. Rammell: The high commission in Harare and the FCO maintain a watch list of Zimbabwean nationals whose presence in the UK may not be conducive to the public good. This is regularly reviewed and up-dated. The list is being used on a discretionary basis to deny such people entry to the UK.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what UK sanctions are in place against Zimbabwe, independent of the EU sanctions. [94731]

Mr. Rammell: The UK imposed an arms embargo on Zimbabwe in May 2000. This pre-dates and is independent of the EU arms embargo which formed part of the EU Common Position of 18 February 2002.

CABINET OFFICE

Licensing Bill

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what research he undertook to seek to ensure that the Licensing Bill and related ministerial guidance *(a)* have broad public support, *(b)* are enforceable, *(c)* are easy to understand, *(d)* are balanced and avoid unintended consequences and *(e)* balance the risks, costs and practical benefits. [88907]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

The reform of the licensing laws that the Licensing Bill will introduce were the subject of a White Paper consultation in 2000. The White Paper was published following a review of current licensing laws that involved all key stakeholders including the licensed trade, the police and local authorities. 1,215 individuals and organisations responded to the White Paper, including many members of the public. The majority of responses were in favour of the proposed reforms.

In addition to publishing Explanatory Notes with the Licensing Bill, the Government will be issuing guidance to licensing authorities and the police when the Bill receives Royal Assent. A draft version of the guidance will be made available before the Bill reaches Report Stage in the House of Lords. The guidance will explain in clear terms how the new licensing system will work and, like the Bill, is being prepared in consultation with other Government Departments, executive agencies and an Advisory Group comprising representatives of the following organisations:

Alcohol Concern

Arts Council

Association of Chief Police Officers

Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers

Association of London Government

British Beer and Pub Association

Bar, Entertainment and Dance Association

British Institute of Innkeepers

British Marine Federation

British Retail Consortium

Business in Sport and Leisure

Cinema Exhibitors Association

Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

Committee of Registered Clubs Associations

Editor of Paterson's Licensing Laws

Federation of Licensed Victuallers Association

Guild of Master Victuallers

Justices' Clerks Society

Licensed Victuallers Wales

Local Government Association

Magistrates' Association

Musicians Union

National Parliamentary Committee of the Licensed Victuallers Associations

Restaurant Association

Theatrical Management Association/Society of London Theatre

In drafting the Bill, the Explanatory Notes and the guidance the Government has, as far as possible, ensured that they are easy to understand, unambiguous, capable of enforcement and that they balance the risks, costs and practical benefits for all those who will be affected by the licensing reforms. The Regulatory Impact Assessment published along with the Bill considers these effects and quantifies the likely cost implications.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Library (Visually Impaired People)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what conditions her Department attaches to funding for the British Library to ensure that services are provided for visually impaired people. [95244]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* It is an objective of the British Library's Funding Agreement that the Library will enable ready access to its collection to all who need it. The Library is addressing the needs of visually impaired people through adjustments to its buildings and through reader services, such as image enhancers, hand-held magnifiers, audio books and through improvements to its website.

Civil Servants (Bonus)

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many civil servants in her Department received bonuses having attained personal targets in the last financial year; and what the value was. [94581]

Dr. Howells: The number of civil servants who received bonuses, having attained personal targets in my Department in the last financial year, was 89. They received bonuses of between £750 and £3,500, with an overall value of £116,400.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she intends to reply to the letter to her dated 18 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. Adrian Webb. [94692]

Tessa Jowell: I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman on 31 January 2003. I apologise for the delay in responding.

Digital Curriculum

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if she will publish the reports to date from the BBC about development of the Digital Curriculum made before Government approval was given; [95623]

(2) what agreements were made between the Director General of the BBC and Pearson Ltd. about the development of a digital curriculum prior to Government approval being given; [95625]

(3) whether the Director General of the BBC authorised development of the Digital Curriculum prior to the Government approval being given. [95624]

Dr. Howells: These are matters for the BBC.

English Heritage

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what statutory authority English Heritage has to engage in capital fundraising projects; and if she will make a statement. [95162]

Dr. Howells: The National Heritage Act 1983 sets out English Heritage's core functions and duties. Section 33(5)*(d)* gives them the discretion to do such things as they think necessary or expedient for the purpose of exercising their statutory functions. This includes becoming involved in capital fundraising projects.

Licensing Reform

Mr. Hague: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) how the Government intend to differentiate in the Licensing Bill between live music used as part of a religious service and live music used to entertain in places of worship; [88250]

(2) what plans the Government have to amend the Licensing Bill to exempt places of worship from *(a)* the need to obtain entertainment licences and *(b)* the cost of obtaining an entertainment licence; [88249]

(3) if the staging of a Christian musical in a church or church hall would need an entertainment licence if *(a)* it was purely for the purpose of entertainment and *(b)* it formed part of a religious service; [88253]

(4) under what provisions of the Licensing Bill *(a)* bell ringing and *(b)* carol concerts will be exempt from licences if these events do not form part of a religious service; [88252]

(5) whether it is her policy that a church carol concert that is not part of a religious service should be exempt from the live music licensing proposals contained in the Licensing Bill and not count towards the five temporary event limit; [88251]

(6) what costs she estimates will be incurred by North Yorkshire churches and village halls under the live music proposals in the Licensing Bill; [88247]

(7) what assessment she has made of the effect that the Licensing Bill will have on the ability of churches and village halls to host community events involving live music. [88248]

Dr. Howells: In developing the proposals in the Licensing Bill the Government were careful to ensure that it included appropriate exemptions in relation to the provision of entertainment, including live music, for any faith when they are engaged in worship or any form of religious meeting. The Bill as drafted draws a distinction, however, between the provision of secular entertainment in a place of public religious worship and entertainment which is provided there for, or incidental to, a religious service or meeting. The Government are aware of the concerns that have been expressed about the licensing of secular entertainment in places of public religious worship and we have discussed possible solutions with faith organisations. An amendment extending the exemption to the provision of any entertainment or entertainment facilities at a place of public religious worship has been tabled for consideration at Report stage in another place.

Under the Bill as presently drafted, carol singing as part of, or incidental to, a religious service or meeting would not be licensable as the exemption in paragraph 9 of Schedule 1 to the Bill would apply. This exemption relates to the activity, not the place, and therefore applies irrespective of the venue. However, if a carol concert were held not as part of, or incidental to, a religious service or meeting it would be licensable and authorisation would be needed either under a premises licence or a temporary event notice. As noted above, an amendment has been tabled for consideration at Report stage in another place.

Bell ringing would not be licensable under the Bill if it were part of, or incidental to, a religious service or meeting. Further, if bell ringing is undertaken as a hobby or for practice, it would not be licensable because it would not be being provided for the public. However, if a bell ringing concert is put on for the public and it is not part of a religious meeting or service, then it would be licensable under the Bill as drafted. As already noted, an amendment has been tabled for consideration at Report stage in another place.

Under the current law, live music is licensable in community centres and village and parish halls.Outside Greater London these venues enjoy an exemption from fees in respect of public entertainment. Under the Bill, fees will be set centrally by the Secretary of State in regulations and the Government have announced their intention to exempt church halls, chapel halls or other similar buildings occupied in connection with a place of public religious worship, and village halls, parish or community halls or other similar buildings from the fees associated with the provision of entertainment under the licensing regime.

The Government do not anticipate that the Licensing Bill will cause any adverse impact on the ability of churches and village halls to host community events involving live music, and in fact believe that the new system of premises licences and temporary event notices will be simpler for applicants than the current regime. No specific estimates were made of the costs that would be incurred by churches and village halls in North Yorkshire. However, a Regulatory Impact Assessment was published with the Bill.

As the Bill is currently drafted, a Christian musical staged in a church or a church hall would not be licensable if it were provided for the purposes of, or for purposes incidental to, a religious meeting or service, but it would otherwise be licensable. As noted, an amendment has been tabled for consideration at Report stage in another place.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what costs she estimates will be incurred by North Staffordshire churches and village halls under the live music proposals in the Licensing Bill. [95731]

Dr. Howells: No costs will be incurred by churches and village halls in North Staffordshire for the provision of regulated entertainment or entertainment facilities under the proposals of the Licensing Bill.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a statement to the House on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, columns 7WS-8WS setting out the conclusions of our consideration of the provision of entertainment and entertainment facilities in places of religious worship and village halls under the Licensing Bill. The Government have now tabled an amendment to the Bill that would exempt secular entertainment provided in places of public religious worship and the provision of entertainment facilities in such places from the need to obtain a licence under the Bill when it is enacted. Music for the purposes of or incidental to a religious service or meeting will remain exempt.

We have also made clear our intention to exempt church halls, chapel halls or other similar buildings occupied in connection with a place of public religious worship, and village halls, parish or community halls or other similar buildings from the fees associated with the provision of entertainment or entertainment facilities under the licensing regime.

Lottery Funding (Children's Hospices)

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what eligibility criteria were employed by the New Opportunities Fund when allocating National Lottery money earmarked for children's hospices; which hospices applied to the New Opportunities Fund for a share in the allocation; which hospices were successful; how much each hospice was allocated; and which hospices were declined funding and on what grounds. [95427]

Mr. Caborn: Applicant organisations must have had a hospice building; have been providing hospice services for children including in-patient services; and must have been registered with the Charity Commission with the word 'hospice' included in the registered name or with the 'relief of sickness' included as a charitable objective. An applicant organisation had to meet all these eligibility criteria to be considered for funding against a further set of published assessment criteria. Full details of all published assessment criteria is available from the New Opportunities Fund.

With the funding available the Fund was able to fund 23 applications. The following table gives details of the awards.

Three hospice applications were not successful because they failed fully to meet either the programme's eligibility or assessment criteria. The Fund's policy is that, to protect the confidentiality of unsuccessful applicants, feedback on individual bids is not made public unless the organisation concerned gives its express approval.

New Opportunities Fund children's palliative care programme: children's hospice awards

£

Organisation and grant scheme	*Grant awarded*
Acorns Children's Hospice Trust. Acorns Selly Oak.	650,000
Acorns Children's Hospice Trust. Acorns Walsall.	650,000
Butterwick Children's Hospice. Butterwick Children's Hospice NOF Bid.	435,057
Chase Children's Hospice Service. Christopher's Hospice.	650,000
Children's Hospice South West. Bridging the Gap.	617,758
Claire House. Specialist paediatric palliative care at Claire House Children's Hospice.	650,000
Cope Children's Trust, known as Rainbows Children's Hospice.	650,000
Demelza House Children's Hospice.	647,332
Derian House Children's Hospice. Children's hospice provision.	649,971
East Anglia's Children's Hospices. Care development scheme for children and the family (Quidenham/Milton/Ipswich (ii)).	617,570
East Anglia's Children's Hospices. Care development scheme for children and the family (Quidenham/Milton/Ipswich (i)).	617,570
East Anglia's Children's Hospices. Care development scheme for children and the family (Quidenham/Milton/Ipswich (iii)).	617,570
Haven House Foundation. Haven House Foundation Children's Hospice.	650,000
Helen House Children's Hospice. Helen House children's hospice scheme.	650,000
Hope House Children's Hospice. Support for the existing high quality provision of children's palliative care by Hope House.	650,000
Little Haven. Provision of hospice care to children with life limiting and life threatening illnesses.	650,000
Martin House. Hospice for children and young people.	644,005
Pasque Charity. Keech Cottage children's hospice service.	650,000
Richard's House Children's Hospice. Children's in-patient respite and palliative care service.	649,557
St. Andrew's Hospice Ltd. Development of family support and video phone installation.	337,909
St. Barnabas Hospice. Chestnut Tree House children's hospice.	650,000
The Donna Louise Trust. Hospice based nursing care for life limited children and their families.	631,064
Wessex Children's Hospice Trust. Developing our services.	650,000

North West Tourist Board

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what the benefits to *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* businesses and organisations are of membership of the North West Tourist Board; [94865]

(2) what help and support the North West Tourist Board provides to *(a)* tourist organisations in each district of Lancashire and *(b)* local authorities in Lancashire in helping to promote tourism. [94864]

Dr. Howells: The Regional Tourist Boards are independent companies which produce annual reports on their activities. The North West Tourist Board's (NWTB) report details activities carried out with or on behalf of local authority members including Lancashire and its districts. Work undertaken by the NWTB on behalf of the industry is supported by local authority, businesses and other organisation's subscriptions. Membership benefits for local authorities include networking and support for tourist information centres, assistance with tourism strategy and guidance, dissemination of research and best practice and regular liaison with local authority departments, including tourism, planning and economic development. For private sector members, NWTB facilitates marketing opportunities, a range of member benefits and tourism business support. Both public and private sector funding contributes to the NWTBs operations and complements funding from the North West Development Agency (NWDA) and the English Tourism Council.

The NWTB are currently working closely with the NWDA in the production of a Vision Document for Tourism in the next 5–10 years. This will help to ensure a strong tourism product for the region, more efficient and focussed use of resources and future benefits for tourism businesses.

Specific benefits in helping promote tourism in Lancashire include:

The NWTB Chairman is Chair of the Lancashire Tourism Partnership which is a £7.5 million single regeneration budget funded programme giving direct benefit to the industry in Lancashire from marketing and training to business support and development.

NWTB also lead on the development of ICT interoperability in Lancashire enabling timely and accurate information on tourism to be available to consumers and businesses in Lancashire.

Examples of projects undertaken in Lancashire are:

Ribchester Roman Museum £10k—towards a complete refurbishment

Darwen Library Theatre £6,250—now fully accessible both front and back of house

Fold House Caravan Park £10k—new reception, education room, heritage centre and information point

Leighton Hall £2,397—new aviaries and signage.

A copy of the NWTB's annual report is available form the board's offices at Swan House, Swan Meadow Road, Wigan Pier, Wigan WN3 5BB.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many telephone helplines are sponsored by her Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95708]

Dr. Howells: DCMS does not sponsor any telephone helplines.

HEALTH

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many accident and emergency departments of NHS hospitals in England and Wales use the triage nurse system for patients; and what the most recent average waiting time has been before treatment. [94462]

Mr. Lammy: The Department does not collect data on the number of accident and emergency departments that use the triage nurse system.

The Department does not collect average waiting times in accident and emergency departments before treatment. The Department measures total waiting time in accident and emergency from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge. This has been collected from August 2001.

The first full and validated data was published in Quarter 2, 2002–03. This showed that 77 per cent. of patients spent four hours or less in accident and emergency from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge.

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many accident and emergency departments of NHS hospitals in England and Wales have introduced see and treat systems for patients; and what the average waiting time before treatment has been since their introduction. [94463]

Mr. Lammy: The Department does not collect data on the number of accident and emergency departments that have introduced see and treat for patients.

The Department does not collect average waiting times in accident and emergency departments before treatment. The Department measures total waiting time in accident and emergency from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge. This has been collected from August 2001.

The first full and validated data was published in Quarter 2, 2002–03. This showed that 77 per cent. of patients spent four hours or less in accident and emergency from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the costs incurred by the NHS to meet the health needs of asylum seekers in the last 12 months. [94914]

Ms Blears: Information about the breakdown of health costs by population group is not held centrally.

National health service funding is allocated direct to 303 primary care trusts (PCTs) to enable them to secure local health services. In doing so, PCTs are expected to

assess what configuration of health services best meets local needs, including the needs of asylum seekers in their area.

Children's Database

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to open up the Department of Health's computerised database of deaths and serious injuries of children to members of the public. [94622]

Jacqui Smith: Given the sensitive nature of the personal information contained in the database and the Data Protection Act's principles of good practice, no general public access to this database is planned.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many entries have been made on the Department of Health's computerised database of deaths and serious injuries of children since April 2002. [94623]

Jacqui Smith: As at 31 January 2003 and with effect from 1 April 2002, there have been 119 recorded serious case notifications to the database.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the Department of Health's computerised database of deaths and serious injuries of children is continuously updated. [94624]

Jacqui Smith: The Department's database of serious case notifications, including those relating to deaths and serious injuries, is continuously updated by the Social Service Inspectorate.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether a report will be published after the first year of operation of the Department of Health's computerised database of deaths and serious injuries of children. [94625]

Jacqui Smith: Information derived from the database will feature in future biennial national overview reports of serious case reviews. The next report is planned to be published at the end of 2003.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of entries on the Department of Health's computerised database of deaths and serious injuries of children are *(a)* deaths and *(b)* serious injuries. [94626]

Jacqui Smith: Of the 119 notifications between 1 April 2002 and 31 January 2003, 91 were of deaths and 28 were of serious injuries.

Children's Hospices

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the children's hospices in Greater London. [94321]

Ms Blears: There is one children's hospice currently operating in Greater London: Richard House, based in Newham.

Cigarettes

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce the mandatory labelling of cigarette packets detailing the additives contained within cigarettes. [93686]

Ms Blears: There are currently no plans to introduce mandatory labelling of cigarette packets detailing additives. The number of additives contained in a brand of cigarette ranges greatly depending on the brand from under 20 to possibly over 100. The Government believes that it would be difficult to label these effectively on cigarette packets, in a fashion that is meaningful to the consumer.

However the Government has recently made Regulations setting out new requirements for the labelling of cigarette packets with larger, starker health warnings, including drawing attention to the chemicals in tobacco smoke.

The Regulations also provide for the Government to collect information about ingredients contained in tobacco products. We are collecting this data and plan to make information about product ingredients available to the public in a meaningful way.

Cocaine (Pregnant Mothers)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to identify mothers who use *(a)* crack cocaine and *(b)* cocaine during pregnancy. [94213]

Jacqui Smith: No specific steps have been taken to identify mothers who use crack cocaine or cocaine during pregnancy.

However, midwives who provide the majority of antenatal care for pregnant women will usually carry out a needs and risk assessment of the pregnant woman at the time of booking. This will ensure that the antenatal care support, which they receive, is tailored to their own particular requirements. This will include additional support if the woman is currently abusing alcohol and/or substances.

In addition, there are also some midwives in particular units who specialise in the area of pregnancy support to drug users.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to what extent funding for coronary heart disease will be allocated to purchase new medical devices for the treatment of coronary heart disease. [95635]

Ms Blears: The funding allocated to the national health service for the next three years provides sufficient resources to cover anticipated new developments in technology and clinical practice. This funding is part of the largest investment in the NHS since its inception over half a century ago. A total of over £353 million has now been earmarked for the treatment of coronary heart disease since the launch of the national service framework in March 2000, as well as major capital investment costing £300 million over the next five years.

The level of funding allocated to particular new medical devices, however, is for local decision, reflecting assessed clinical need, local priorities and best authoritative guidance.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the use of percutaneous coronary interventions over coronary artery bypass grafts. [95636]

Ms Blears: The most suitable form of procedure to treat coronary heart disease depends on the condition of individual patients and the professional judgment of the clinical teams who are caring for them. Technological developments and changing clinical practice are increasing the number of cases in which percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) may be a safe and effective treatment, and the proportion of PCIs to coronary artery bypass grafts is likely to increase over the next few years.

Correspondence

David Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a substantive answer to his letter of 9 December 2002, ref PO1021593; [95435]

(2) when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 9 December 2002, regarding a constituent, ref P01021593. [92801]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* A reply was sent to my hon. Friend on 3 February 2003.

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter dated 5 December 2002 from Graham Ruff of Lutterworth, a constituent. [95627]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Pensions Agency was asked to respond to Mr. Ruffs letter as the issues raised fall within their area of responsibility. I understand that the reply was sent to him on 30 January 2003.

Dentistry

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which areas were approved to field site status in the Modernising Dentistry Options for Change Programme; which applications were unsuccessful; and if he will make a statement. [89595]

Mr. Lammy: A total of 139 expressions of interest were received for field site status, covering 27 of the 28 strategic health authorities. Fifty applications, grouped into 26 field sites, have been approved by the programme steering board for further development. More detailed work now needs to be done to ensure that the applicants are able to deliver the required learning within the capacity of the programme. Officials from the Modernisation Agency will visit each of these 50 applicants soon, and we will publish a list of participants in the options for change field sites once this work has been completed.

Some 79 applications were found not to fall within the seven key themes in the options for change report. The remaining 10, while not suitable for field site status, are being considered for inclusion in other modernisation programmes, for example, development of the information technology infrastructure for National Health Service dentistry andpersonal dental services pilot schemes.

With their positive response to the call for applications to become field sites dentists have demonstrated a most welcome commitment to changing the way in which NHS dentistry is organised. This together with the Government's intention to legislate to enable far reaching reform for NHS dentistry provides an opportunity to address the problems that have been identified with the system over many years.

Dentists

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average salary is for an NHS dentist in *(a)* each health authority and *(b)* England. [93554]

Mr. Lammy: Information on the average salary for salaried national health service dentists is not available. These dentists are paid on national salary scales determined by the Doctors and Dentists Review Body.

Principal dentists in the general dental service (GDS) are self employed. They receive gross fees which are related to the amount and range of treatment they perform and, the number of patients registered with them. These exclude other payments such as superannuation, reimbursement of non-domestic rates, commitment payments, training allowances as well as maternity and sickness payments. Dentists' earnings from sources other than NHS dentistry are not included.

For dentists in Great Britain income after expenses was about 45.2 per cent. of dentists gross income in 2000–01.

Information on the average gross fees paid to a GDS dentist for providing NHS dental treatment in each health authority and England for year ending March 2002 has been placed in the Library. The averages will be affected by the amount and type of dental work done in each HA.

DXA Scans (Hull and East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many DXA scans were completed in Hull and the East Riding in 2002. [92908]

Jacqui Smith: There were 6,716 dual energy x-ray absorptiometry (DXA) scans completed at Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust from January to December 2002.

Source:

Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust

East Yorkshire Primary Care Trust

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money is available to primary care trusts from central government for the provision of digital hearing aids; and how much money the East Yorkshire Primary Care Trust needs to provide as a top up to government grant. [94309]

Jacqui Smith: In the current financial year, £20 million has been made available for the modernising hearing aid services project. This enabled the 20 first-wave trusts to continue running; an additional 30 to join the project and 17 more to be provided with equipment so that they can begin to provide digital hearing aids from April. Items such as

training and equipment are paid for centrally while other funding is made to the national health service trusts providing the service.

For second wave sites the Department of Health pays the full cost of updating information technology and other equipment. We are also paying 75 per cent. of the additional cost of providing digital, rather than analogue aids and 75 per cent. of the additional staffing cost arising from operating a modernised service. We expect primary care trusts to support the modernised service by contributing the remaining 25 per cent. of revenue costs.

Entertainment

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent on entertainment by the Department of Health in 2002–03; and what is budgeted to be spent on entertainment in *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06. [94586]

Mr. Lammy: Expenditure arises on hospitality and entertainment only in the context of promoting the Department's business objectives. All such expenditure is made in accordance with published departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on the principles set out in "Government Accounting".

No specific budget amount is allocated for hospitality and entertainment, which is only one element of the Department's overall administrative budget. £88,503 was spent in the period April to December 2002.

Fluoridation

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Medical Research Council report on water fluoridation published on 4 September; and what advice his Department has received from *(a)* Sir Liam Donaldson and *(b)* Professor Raman Bedi on the implications of the MRC report for Government policy on fluoridation. [87321]

Ms Blears: We have asked the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Dental Officer to consider how the success of existing fluoridation schemes in improving oral health and the oral health benefits residents of naturally fluoridated areas enjoy might be extended to other communities who wish it.

The Medical Research Council has identified and prioritised the research necessary to strengthen the evidence base on fluoridation and the Department is already taking action to commission appropriate research.

Food Additives

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total value of the domestic market for *(a)* food colourings and *(b)* approved food additives was in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [92336]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 January 2003]*: I have been asked to reply.

The Department does not collect statistics on the value of the market and trade for these items.

Foundation Hospitals

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many three star hospitals *(a)* have been invited to apply and *(b)* have applied for foundation hospital status. [94042]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 28 January 2003]*: Following publication of A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts on 11 December 2002, applications to become foundation trusts have been invited from acute and specialist NHS trusts, which achieved three star status in the NHS performance ratings, published in July 2002.

The application process has now begun and the closing date for preliminary applications is 28 February 2003. In March 2003, we intend to announce a shortlist of candidates once preliminary applications have been assessed.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions have taken place between the Department and Chairman and Chief Executives of three star hospital trusts regarding applications for foundation hospital trust status. [94043]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 28 January 2003]*: Departmental officials are engaging in on-going discussions, covering all aspects of the policy for the establishment of national health service foundation trusts, with the current cohort of three star acute and specialist trusts.

GP Provision (Southend)

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action is being taken to meet patient demand for general practitioners in Southend-on-Sea. [94985]

Mr. Lammy: Southend Primary Care Trust (PCT) is undertaking a number of initiatives to meet patient demand for general practitioners. It has been involved in international recruitment since September 2002 and is in the final stages of contract negotiations to recruit general practitioners from Spain.

In addition the PCT is working to increase the numbers of nurse practitioners in Southend to give more time for general practitioners to focus on those patients with higher levels of need.

Health Professionals (Contagious Diseases)

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* doctors, *(b)* nurses and *(c)* other health professionals have (i) HIV and (ii) hepatitis B, broken down by country of birth, at the most recent date for which information is available. [94925]

Ms Blears: We do not hold this information centrally. However, we have recently published for consultation draft guidance for the national health service entitled "Health clearance for serious communicable diseases: new health care workers"—http://www.doh.gov.uk/healthclear.

This guidance proposes strengthening existing health checks for tuberculosis and hepatitis B and introducing new ones for HIV and hepatitis C. We will be considering monitoring needs as part of implementation of the guidance following consultation.

Health Protection Agency (Staff)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risk of a loss of staff expertise during the formation of the Health Protection Agency; and what measures he has put in place to prevent this. [94955]

Ms Blears: Records of staff turnover are not held centrally. However, information from each of the component organisations indicates that there have been no dramatic increases in the overall number of staff resignations. The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) has indicated that there are above average resignations in a small number of management posts, potentially directly affected by the proposed changes. The Department will be working with the PHLS board to address any business continuity issues that may arise as a consequence.

HPA

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what terms and conditions of employment will apply to staff in the HPA after 1 April; and how these will differ from current terms and conditions. [90053]

Ms Blears: Staff transferring to the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will retain their terms and conditions of employment, which apply at the time of transfer, until harmonised terms and conditions of employment are agreed with recognised trade unions. The HPA as a special health authority will adopt National Health Service terms and conditions of employment for new employees.

It is the intention to establish the HPA as a non-departmental public body when legislative time permits. It would then be a matter for the HPA board to determine, subject to consultation, what terms and conditions will apply.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the 1 per cent. increase in Employers' National Insurance contributions will be fully funded for the HPA and its component organisations. [90057]

Ms Blears: The allocation for the Health Protection Agency is still to be confirmed. In coming to a decision, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have regard to all the pressures which the organisation will have to meet in the coming year.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what work the HPA Steering Group has done to allocate budgets to the different component organisations for 2003–04; and how those budgets differ from the current financial year. [90072]

Ms Blears: Work is ongoing to establish costs and pressures in the component parts so that when the total available is announced the steering group will be in a position to make a recommendation to the Health Protection Agency board.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on plans to introduce an HPA payroll system. [90135]

Ms Blears: From 1 April 2003, the Health Protection Agency will operate the two payroll systems transferring from the Public Health Laboratory Service and the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of prescriptions via the NHS were for patients receiving jobseeker's allowance in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement; [94265]

(2) how many patient prescriptions claimed to be receiving jobseeker's allowance in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [94266]

Mr. Lammy: The available information, in respect of England, is shown in the table.

	Number of prescription items (millions)	*Percentage of total items dispensed*
	Income based jobseeker's allowance	*Income based jobseeker's allowance as a percentage of total items dispensed*
1997	2.4	0.5
1998	4.4	0.9
1999	6.1	1.3
2000	6.7	1.3
2001	6.3	1.2

The information is in respect of prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists and appliance contractors. Information is only available separately in respect of recipients of income based jobseekers allowance.

Midwifery

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the future provision for midwifery training; and if he will make a statement. [94267]

Jacqui Smith: Between 1996–97 and 2001–02, the number of students entering training to become a midwife, both by direct training and the post-registration route from nursing, has increased by 226 (14 per cent.). Latest figures suggest a further increase of around 200 in the current financial year. We are expecting further increases in the numbers entering midwifery training over the next three years. Plans are currently being developed by workforce development confederations.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and workforce development confederations are required to ensure that midwifery education is quality assured. A benchmark statement for midwifery education was published in 2002. It brings together all the stakeholder requirements, i.e., the NMC, workforce development confederations and higher education, as a single shared statement that describes the nature, characteristics and expected standards and learning outcomes of midwifery programmes.

During the academic years 2003–06, all national health service funded midwifery education, alongside nursing and allied health professional education, will be reviewed, against respective benchmark statements,

using the new integrated and streamlined process of major review. Reports will be published for each higher education institution and their associated workforce development confederation.

Mixed Sex Wards

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use of mixed sex wards. [94838]

Mr. Hutton: In 1997 we made a commitment to end mixed-sex accommodation in 95 per cent., of national health service trusts by December 2002. The NHS responded with drive and determination and has now met or exceeded the targets we set. The elimination of mixed sex accommodation is an exceptional achievement and testament to the commitment of professionals across the NHS.

May I also refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement made on 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 24WS.

Motor Neurone Disease

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what level of support his Department provides for research into and treatment of motor neurone disease; and if he will make a statement. [93948]

Jacqui Smith: The main Government agency for research into the causes of and treatments for disease is the Medical Research Council (MRC). The Department of Health also funds research to support policy and the delivery of effective practice in the national health service.

The MRC spent £1.4 million in 2001–02 on research relevant to motor neurone disease (MND) and on basic work on the function of motor neurones. The MRC also supports a large portfolio of basic research into the biology of the brain and the nervous system in both normal and diseased states. Such studies may well have relevance to the treatment of MND and related conditions in the future.

The Department of Health has also supported work in this area. Recent research projects include "The Clinical Effectiveness and Cost Effectiveness of Riluzole for the Treatment of Motor Neurone Disease" that completed in December 2001. There is an on-going project on speech recognition for people with severe dysarthria that is due for completion in July 2003. Dysarthria is the inability to articulate speech and is common in MND patients.

Also, a project entitled "Health and Independence through Education: a controlled evaluation" ended last year. It assessed the value of education in promoting health and independence for people with progressive neurological disorders.

The national service framework (NSF) for long-term conditions will have a particular focus on the needs of people with neurological disease, brain and spinal injury, as well as some of the common issues, such as access to services, faced by people with a long-term condition. The NSF will include services for people with Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, MND and other similar conditions. Publication of the NSF is currently planned for 2004, with implementation starting in 2005.

Mr. Reginald Crew

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the implications of the case of Mr.Reginald Crew; and what plans he has to review policy on euthanasia in the United Kingdom. [93687]

Mr. Lammy: The Government has followed the case of Mr Crew and understands the suffering of many who have a terminal illness and those who care for them. It is right that dying patients should be relieved of suffering through the provision of adequate care and support. However, euthanasia, the intentional taking of life at the patient's request or for a merciful motive, is unlawful in the United Kingdom. Similarly, assisted suicide is unlawful under the Suicide Act 1 961.

The Government has no plans to change the law in this area.

NHS Direct

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of CAS calls at NHS Direct (Midland Shires) have ended with a nurse giving advice. [93507]

Mr. Lammy: 38 per cent. of all calls to NHS Direct Midland Shires are completed with advice or information.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what contingency plans are in place for NHS Direct to cope with surges in activity due to flu-like illness. [93514]

Mr. Lammy: In addition to its own historic data NHS Direct draws on a numbers of external sources, including reports produced by the Public Health Laboratory Service, in order to forecast and plan for seasonal increases in demand, including flu like illness. NHS Direct has well rehearsed local and national plans to deal with increases in demand to ensure service resilience.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of NHS Direct nurses were recruited from *(a)* secondary care specialities and *(b)* primary care. [93519]

Mr. Lammy: On the basis of the information available, 27 per cent. of NHS Direct nurses were recruited from secondary care specialities and 33 per cent. from primary care.

NICE

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total cost to the NHS of guidance issued to date by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence since the Department announced that guidance would be mandatory. [89652]

Ms Blears: The Directions which place on National Health Service funding bodies the obligation to provide funding within three months for all recommendations in Technology Appraisal Guidance from the National

Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), except where ministers explicitly direct otherwise, were published on 14 December 2001.

The estimated annual cost to the NHS in England of all NICE technology appraisals published since that date is approximately £350 million per annum. The Directions apply to all NICE technology appraisals, including those completed before 14 December 2001.

Nurses

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 25 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 136W, on ethical foreign nurse recruitment, what action he has taken on the reported cases of breaches in the code of conduct. [90121]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 15 January2003]:* Reported breaches of the code of practice have been taken up with the relevant agency, and the agency has had the opportunity to respond to the allegations. In each of the reported cases, officials have been satisfied that the organisation in question is operating in line with the code of practice.

Nursing Agencies

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 17 December 2002, *Official Report*, ref 86806, how many nursing agencies his Department has investigated *(a)* this year and *(b)* last year because the nursing agencies' behaviour appeared to be inconsistent with the code of practice. [89359]

Mr. Hutton: No evidence of non-compliance with the code of practice has been brought to the attention of the Department of Health and no investigations have been undertaken to date.

The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency is working with the national health service through a procurement programme for the provision of temporary staffing by commercial agencies across the NHS in England. As the framework agreements are awarded, the agencies will be contractually bound to comply with detailed quality standards, including compliance with the code of practice. The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency will ensure that all successful agencies are complying with their contractual obligations. A full range of national audits into compliance will begin in summer 2003.

Paediatric Pathology

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's strategy on the development of paediatric pathology. [92544]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The Department of Health is aware of the challenges facing the national health service paediatric pathology services, highlighted in the recent report by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, "The Future of Paediatric Pathology Services". We are committed to working closely with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and the Royal College of Pathologists to improve long-term staffing levels in this speciality. The establishment of three histopathology training schools and of International Fellowships to attract experienced histopathologists to work in the NHS will both increase the pool from which paediatric pathologists can be recruited. The children's care group work force team is also considering this issue.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will answer the parliamentary questions numbered *(a)* 82781, *(b)* 84772, *(c)* 87547, *(d)* 88559, *(e)* 88564, *(f)* 89789, *(g)* 91130, *(h)* 91129 and (i) 91126. [93829]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* I refer the hon. Member to the replies that I gave on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 118W and 130W, to the reply that I gave on 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 480W, to the reply that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, gave on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 393W, and to the reply that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford, gave on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 392–93. The other replies were sent on Tuesday 28 January and Wednesday 29 January. The question numbered 89789 was tabled for the Ministry of Defence.

PHLS Laboratories

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what additional resources NHS trusts are receiving to finance the running costs of the transferred PHLS laboratories. [90073]

Ms Blears: Currently, Public Health Laboratory Service central funding in laboratories, which will transfer to National Health Service trusts, supports both routine diagnostic as well as specialist public health work.

That funding which supports routine diagnostic work will be provided to the NHS Trusts via a host primary care trust (PCT) for one year. It will then be subsumed into PCT baseline funding in time for the trusts to agree contract prices for the following year.

That part of the central funding which supports specialist public health work will be provided to the NHS trust via the Health Protection Agency, under a service level agreement and will remain at the 2002–03 level for at least the first two years.

Prisoners (Mental Health)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many prisoners with mental health problems are awaiting transfer to secure hospitals; and what proportion have been waiting *(a)* for up to three months, *(b)* between three and six months, *(c)* between six months and a year and *(d)* more than a year. [93304]

Jacqui Smith: Data are not currently collected in the form requested. However, between 1 October and 31 December 2002, 651 prisoners were identified by health care staff in prisons as requiring mental health assessment for possible transfer to secure hospital. In that same period 258 prisoners were transferred. The

position on 31 December 2002 was that, of those accepted and waiting for a transfer to hospital, 33 had waited longer than three months.

Salt

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines are in place to moderate the levels of salt in processed food. [94285]

Ms Blears: There are no guidelines in operation at the present time on moderating the levels of salt in processed foods.

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition is currently considering whether the evidence on dietary salt and health has altered since it was looked at in 1994 by the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition. Salt intakes by adults are currently recommended to reduce by around 30 per cent. A final report on this is expected to be published in the spring. In anticipation of the report, the Food Standards Agency and the Department are currently engaged in discussions with the food industry about salt reductions in processed foods already achieved and the scope for further reductions.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* obligatory and *(b)* voluntary packaging symbols exist to advise consumers of salt levels in processed food. [94286]

Ms Blears: The use of symbols or logos to advise consumers of salt levels is not obligatory. The Government do not collate information on the voluntary use of symbols on packaging.

Under current food law, nutrition labelling of foods is voluntary unless a nutrition claim about the food is made. Where claims are made about the quantity of salt present in packaged food, either in words of by using voluntary logos or symbols, full nutrition information must be given. The Food Standards Agency is pressing for European Union rules to require compulsory nutrition labelling (including a declaration of salt content) on all foods, and in a format that is consumer friendly. Consumer research is being carried out to determine the ideal content and format of the nutrition label.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94122]

Mr. Lammy: The Department of Health, as one of the four key delivery departments has agreed a combined public service agreement (PSA) delivery contract with the Prime Minister's delivery unit and Her Majesty's Treasury.

A Department's service delivery agreement (SDA) would typically serve to supplement the PSA by describing how the targets contained in the PSA will be achieved over the course of the agreement. The Department has set out its approach to delivery in a key publication, "Improvement, Expansion and Reform: Priorities and Planning Framework 2003–06", which can be found on the Department's website and will be linked to Her Majesty's Treasury's website as its SDA.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93500]

Mr. Lammy: In respect of absenteeism in the Department of Health, the information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The information requested regarding sickness in the Department is shown in the table.

	Average[1] days lost per employee through sickness in the Department of Health and its agencies	*Targets set for reducing sickness absence in the Department of Health (days)*
1990	2.3[2]	—
1991	2.3[2]	—
1992	2.3[2]	—
1993	9.7	—
1994	9.68	—
1995	9.8	—
1996	7.14	—
1997	7.8	—
1998	7.4	—
1999	6.8	6.6
2000	5.5	5.5
2001	6.5	7.9
2002	[4]	[4]

[1] Working days absences exclude weekends and bank holidays for staff working a Monday to Friday week.

2 Combined data for the Departments of Health and Social Security continued to be collected by the then Department of Social Security (DSS) following the break up of the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS). Separate figures are not available for the Department of Health.

[3] Not available.

[4] Not published.

The information for non-departmental public bodies is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Speech Therapists

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are in place to encourage the study of speech therapy and the take-up of speech therapy positions. [93139]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The Government are implementing a range of measures to improve recruitment and retention of all staff, including speech therapists. These include an increase in pay, encouraging the national health service to become a better employer through the Improving Working Lives and Positively Diverse programmes, increasing training commissions, reducing student attrition, running national and local recruitment and return to practice campaigns and supporting international recruitment where appropriate.

Further information on Improving Working Lives is available at www.doh.gov.uk/iwl These measures are being implemented nationally.

TENYAS

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff have been contacted from third-parties by TENYAS in the past 12 months; and what their duties were. [93780]

Jacqui Smith: Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service National Health Service Trust (TENYAS) has requested assistance from the St. John's Ambulance Service on three occasions during 2002.

In addition, TENYAS has a service agreement with the West Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance Service. During January 2003, a crew based at the Hull Royal Infirmary helped in the assistance of inter-hospital transfer of patients.

Three-star Hospitals

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many three star hospitals there are in *(a)* the north west and *(b)* England. [94041]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The most recent performance ratings, published in July 2002, included a total of 46 three-star hospital trusts in England. Of these, nine were in the north west of England.

Tobacco Regulatory Council

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to establish a tobacco regulatory authority. [93683]

Ms Blears: Given the trans-national nature of tobacco, we believe that much of the work of a tobacco regulatory authority is best carried out at a European level. There are therefore no plans to establish such an authority at present in the United Kingdom. The Government will, however, keep this situation under review.

In the meantime, the Government is committed to regulating tobacco and recently introduced legislation to transpose the Manufacture, Presentation and Sale of Tobacco Products Directive (2001/37/EC). This new legislation will require greater information on the content, emissions and effects of tobacco to be displayed on packets of tobacco; and information on the ingredients and additives in tobacco products and their purpose and effect to be disclosed to Government.

Waiting Times (Hull and East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients admitted to accident and emergency departments in Hull and East Riding waited more than 12 hours before being treated in each of the last two quarters for which figures are available. [92903]

Mr. Lammy: Data are not collected for individual hospitals. The average waiting time for outpatients attending Hull & East Yorkshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust is nine weeks. The maximum outpatient waiting time will reduce to 21 weeks by March 2003.

Source:

Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people waited over 12 months for an operation in Hull and the East Riding in the last year for which figures are available. [92906]

Jacqui Smith: Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) date indicate that 3,505 people waited more than 12 months in Hull and East Riding in financial year 2001–02.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria his Department has for identifying whistleblowing inside the health service; and what mechanisms are in place for a whistleblower, whose case has been dismissed by a trust, to have his case examined by the Department. [94935]

Mr. Hutton: The Government expect a climate of openness and dialogue in the national health service that encourages staff to feel able to raise concerns about health care matters sensibly and responsibly without fear of victimisation.

On 27 August 1999, the Department of Health issued new guidance in Health Service Circular 1999/198, "The Public Interest Disclosure Act: Whistleblowing in the NHS", to all NHS trusts and health authorities. The HSC advises that all NHS trusts and health authorities are expected to issue guidance to staff so that they know how to raise concerns in a reasonable and responsible way. The Department's policy is that, wherever possible, concerns raised by staff should be dealt with locally in accordance with local policies and procedures on whistleblowing, so that problems can be addressed quickly. However, there have been cases where whistleblowers have considered the local response inadequate, and, as a consequence, have sought to raise their concerns with the Department. At present, these cases would be examined by the relevant Directorate of Health and Social Care, on behalf of the Department.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

North Greenwich (Millennium Dome)

Joyce Quin: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent assessment his Department has made of the effects on the regeneration of North Greenwich of the Millennium Dome; and if he will make a statement. [94478]

Mr. McNulty: One of the stated objectives of the Millennium Experience was to support the regeneration efforts on the Greenwich Peninsula. English Partnerships' acquisition of land on the Greenwich Peninsula for the Millennium celebrations has so far resulted in: reclamation of 289 acres of despoiled land; installation of servicing and public access across the land; private investment of over £400 million in the Millennium Village, a new cinema, retail and hotel developments on the Peninsula; the provision of a new school and health centre; 50 acres of new parkland, a new ecology park and yacht club, and over 12,000 trees planted. The Village will ultimately have some 1,400 homes, 300 of which have been completed so far: 20 per cent. will be affordable.

A study commissioned by the New Millennium Experience Company, English Partnerships and the London borough of Greenwich in 1999 found that the preparation for and running of the Millennium celebrations at the Dome led to the creation of 7,700 jobs in construction, 5,300 jobs in management and operation of the Dome. In addition, of the £500 million worth of contracts let for the Dome, companies in Greenwich won £44.7 million.

These developments and activities have helped narrow the gap between the unemployment rate in Greenwich and the rate in London from 2.9 per cent. in April 1993 to 1.0 per cent. in November 2002.

The regeneration momentum is being maintained, and will be boosted further on the Peninsula by the deal signed by English Partnerships on 29 May 2002, under which Meridian Delta Ltd and Anschutz Entertainment Group are committed to investing £200 million in the Dome. MDL expects the total investment in the development on the Greenwich Peninsula to be up to £4 billion. The development is expected to deliver around 20,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

The deal is subject primarily to planning permission. An application for planning permission was submitted to Greenwich Council on 23 December 2002, for a new 26,000 capacity arena inside the Dome, with associated leisure, entertainment, retail, exhibition and community uses in and around the Dome; over 10,000 homes on the Peninsula of which a substantial number will be affordable; 3.5 million sq. ft. of commercial development; and associated infrastructure and public open space. An interim base-line study and evaluation published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in 2000 confirmed that the Peninsula developments were acting as a catalyst for regeneration in Greenwich and the Thames Gateway, and that the developments demonstrated best practice in terms of sustainable development. It is intended to follow up that research with a further evaluation and long-term monitoring of the Peninsula regeneration.

Cleveland Fire Brigade

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many firefighters serve in the Cleveland fire brigade; what percentage are from ethnic minorities; and if he will make a statement. [94229]

Mr. Raynsford: There are 695 operational staff employed by Cleveland Fire Brigade. 0.58 per cent. are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The report of the Independent Review of the Fire Service stressed the importance of a diverse workforce and the need to improve the representation of minority groups within the fire service. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will continue to work with the fire service to achieve a work force that better reflects the communities it serves; to help the service remove barriers to creating a more diverse workforce and to assist in raising the profile of the service as a career choice within currently under-represented groups. The Fire White Paper due to be published later this year will address equality and diversity issues.

Fire Services Act

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his plans for possible repeal of section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947. [94869]

Mr. Raynsford: An amendment to the Local Government Bill will be put down to repeal section 19 (subsections 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8) of the Fire Services Act 1947 so that Parliament can consider the issue. This repeal would remove the requirement for fire authorities to seek approval of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister before making any reduction, no matter how minor, in the number of firefighting posts or appliances, or before closing a fire station. We do not believe that in a modern fire service my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister should take these decisions. They should be taken by democratically accountable fire authorities, acting on the professional advice of chief fire officers and after consulting locally as at present.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will soon be consulting on the proposed guidance to fire authorities on how to apply the new approach.

Firefighters' Dispute

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to yield to the benefit of local fire authorities any net savings in firefighters' salaries arising from strike action over and above the contingency costs of covering that strike action. [93433]

Mr. Raynsford: There will be no net savings to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The costs to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of providing emergency fire cover will exceed the amount deducted by fire authorities from striking fire fighters' pay.

Homelessness

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what legislative changes would be necessary to enable local authorities to discharge their duties under Part VI of the Homelessness Act 2002 by offering homeless households in priority need a choice of accommodation both within and outside that local authority area. [95144]

Mr. McNulty: No legislative change is necessary. The Homelessness Act 2002 amends Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 which governs the allocation of social housing by local authorities. The amendments to the 1996 Act which came into force on 31 January 2003, include a provision to make it easier for housing authorities to offer housing applicants a choice of accommodation, whether they live within or outside that local authority area. This includes people who are unintentionally homeless and in priority need who must be given reasonable preference under a housing authority's allocation scheme.

House Building Profession

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the number of persons needed in the house building profession. [94216]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend Lord Rooker and my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) met in November to discuss sustainable communities. Construction issues were discussed as part of the meeting. Officials in the Department of Trade and Industry and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister are in frequent contact on construction issues.

Housing

Mr. Pike: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to announce funding allocations for the Housing Renewal Pathfinder Pilot Area; and if he will make a statement. [94588]

Mr. McNulty: Additional funding for the Housing Market Renewal pathfinder projects will be announced as part of the Communities Plan to be launched very shortly. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister intends to make a statement at the time of the launch.

Milton Keynes/South Midlands Study

Andrew Selous: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will announce the conclusions of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Study. [95631]

Mr. McNulty: The final report for the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Study was published in September 2002. The Regional Planning Bodies for the East Midlands, South East and East of England are now considering the study recommendations and will publish alterations to regional planning guidance in due course, in the light of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's forthcoming statement Sustainable Communities; Building for the Future.

New Lettings

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what time scale the Housing Corporation and the London boroughs are working within to agree a framework across London for the pooling of nominations for new lettings on a sub-regional basis; and if he will make a statement. [95143]

Mr. McNulty: The framework for new lettings will apply to all general needs new supply allocations from the Housing Corporation's 2003–04 Approved Development Programme (ADP). The details of the framework are being finalised by local authorities and it is hoped that agreement will be reached by 1 April 2003 or shortly thereafter, depending on when the ADP allocations are approved.

Rents

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what information he has collated on the *(a)* rent charges for former council homes that are being let by private landlords and *(b)* rent levels for similar council-owned properties; and if he will make a statement. [94505]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister does not have any information on the rent charges for former council homes currently let by private landlords. However, such homes would be let at market rents.

Council rents are generally well below market rates, as a result of the subsidy Government pays to support council housing and the fact that authorities are not required to make a return on the capital employed. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's rent restructuring policy for England aims to keep rents affordable to tenants and well below market levels.

The following table shows the average rent levels for council homes in England by Government region from 1996 to 2002.

Local authority average weekly unrebated rents at the end of April each year in England

£

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
England	40.13	41.17	42.25	43.83	45.62	47.87	49.42
North East	33.37	34.17	35.28	36.76	38.54	40.43	41.39
North West	37.70	38.38	39.49	40.57	42.24	44.20	45.51
Yorkshire and the Humber	31.44	32.36	33.64	35.11	36.95	39.44	41.22
East Midlands	34.20	35.67	33.67	38.05	39.66	41.45	42.94
West Midlands	37.03	37.96	38.83	39.82	41.31	44.68	45.27
East	41.37	42.71	44.20	45.59	47.78	49.94	51.40
London	52.94	54.23	55.25	58.00	60.17	62.36	64.29
South East	45.96	47.05	48.36	50.55	51.97	53.98	55.86
South West	40.85	41.45	42.48	43.59	44.99	46.55	47.89

Right to Buy

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the changes to the Right to Buy in the London Boroughs of *(a)* Havering, *(b)* Barking and Dagenham and *(c)* Greenwich. [94215]

Mr. McNulty: The London Boroughs of Havering, Barking and Dagenham, and Greenwich are not among the 42 local authority areas with greatest pressure on their local housing markets mentioned in my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's statement on 22 January 2003.

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many people have bought homes under the right-to-buy scheme in *(a)* Haltemprice and Howden and *(b)* the East Riding of Yorkshire in each year for which figures are available since the scheme began. [94298]

Mr. McNulty: Information is not available below local authority level. The available information reported by the former authorities comprising the East Riding of Yorkshire unitary authority and, from April 1996, by the authority itself, is in the table.

Reported right-to-buy sales in East Riding of Yorkshire: 1980–81 to June 2002

	Beverley	*East Yorkshire*	*Holderness*	*Boothferry*	*East Riding of Yorkshire UA*
1980–81	0	14	11	0	
1981–82	183	267	137	2	
1982–83	249	133	110	0	
1983–84	226	73 (3)	83	0	
1984–85	107	78	66	0	
1985–86	101	0	50	0	
1986–87	111	70	65	0	
1987–88	118	136	65	0	
1988–89	237	0	126	0	
1989–90	198	105 (2)	93	0	
1990–91	83	69	30	0	
1991–92	69	42	25	0 (2)	
1992–93	46	21	23	0	
1993–94	40	n/a	25	0	
1994–95	67	55	21	0	
1995–96	49 (3)	28 (3)	20	11 (3)	
1996–97					151
1997–98					173
1998–99					217
1999–2000					229
2000–01					253
2001–02					286
April to June 2002					83

Note:
Where there has not been full reporting, the figures in brackets indicate the number of quarters for which complete information is available within the financial year.
Source:
DOE/DETR/DTLR/ODPM quarterly P1B returns.

In addition to these reported right-to-buy sales, the former East Riding authorities recorded some 3,000 other council house sales, 2,150 of which were by Boothferry local council.

Travellers (Permanent Sites)

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister by what date local authorities had to submit applications for financial support in the current financial year for the provision of permanent sites for travellers; how many local authorities made applications; how many were successful; what the total sum available for financial support was; and how much is unallocated. [93107]

Mr. McNulty: For the second round of the Gypsy Site Refurbishment Grant, £6 million has been made available to local authorities to help improve and maintain their existing sites. Applications to bid for grant for the 2002–03 financial year were received in January 2002. A total of 86 bids were received from 47 local authorities with 57 bids approved. The sum of the costs of projects approved was £8,112,613. The office of the Deputy Prime Minister will pay a maximum of £6,084,466 which is 75 per cent. of the total cost of approved projects.

Application forms for bids for the Gypsy Sites Refurbishment Grant 2003–04 were received on 13 of January 2003. A total of 92 applications were received from 53 local authorities in England. The bids are currently under assessment and results will be announced in March 2003.

The Gypsy Site Refurbishment Grant for 2003–04 covers funding for sites refurbishment as well as provision of transit and stopping place sites. The total amount of money available for both Schemes is £8 million.

PRIME MINISTER

Gibraltar

Mr. Spring: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions the Prime Minister had with the Prime Minister of Spain at their meeting on 30 January, on Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [95628]

The Prime Minister: My discussions with Prime Minister Aznar during our meeting in Madrid on 30 January focused exclusively on Iraq.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Call Centres

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what action his Department is taking in response to the National Audit Office report, Using call centres to deliver public services (HC 134); and if he will make a statement. [88449]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The NAO report recommends that Departments should: ensure that planned improvements in efficiency and quality of service are

achieved; adopt a portfolio approach to assessing quality of service; ensure that reliable information is available and regularly monitored to give assurance that services are delivered cost effectively; manage call centre resources to handle peaks and troughs in the volume of calls; and provide better information for the public on the services which they can obtain by telephone.

The Department welcomes this report. As far as the specific recommendations are concerned:

DWP accepts the need for a robust business case covering the development of all new centres and for effective planning and monitoring to ensure that the expected benefits are actually realised. The Department has established new governance procedures to ensure that modernisation projects only proceed to the next stage of development if an appropriate business case, including appropriate plans for realising benefits, is in place.

DWP accepts the portfolio approach to measuring the quality of service it provides from its centres. We already use a variety of measures (cost, efficiency, customer service etc) but are always looking for ways to improve our measures. In particular our central Contact Centre Advisory Team are currently developing proposals for measuring customer satisfaction in a way that gives quicker feedback to our centre managers. We expect this new methodology to be ready for piloting in the summer of 2003.

All new DWP centres are being developed using modern IT designed to give managers at all levels a wide range of information about the cost and effectiveness of the service provided. Managers are being trained, in understanding the data they receive and acting on it to improve performance. Some of our existing centres operate on old IT that does not give access to as much information as we would like, for these centres we will update their technology as and when opportunities arise.

All new DWP centres are being established with appropriate work force management software. Several of our older centres lack this software. Our central Contact Centre Advisory Team have recently secured funding for a project to provide this software to the older centres that don't currently have it, this project is due to complete its work in September 2003.

DWP routinely publicises details of its services in telephone directories, on leaflets and letters and on its website.

DWP is keen to develop and improve the service it gives its customers. With that in mind we have become foundation partners of the Call Centre Association and our central advisory team, working closely with the CCA, have developed a good practice framework for DWP centres and are developing the process through which our centres will be able to secure professional accreditation.

Disability Living Allowance

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many Disability Living Allowance appeals were successful on *(a)* reconsideration and *(b)* aural tribunal for people whose main disabling condition is deafness in (i) England, (ii) Scotland and (iii) Wales since 1997. [95273]

Maria Eagle: The information is not available.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what percentage of people *(a)* with a disability and *(b)* whose main disabling condition is deafness received disability living allowance in the United Kingdom in (i) 1997 and (ii) 2002. [95541]

Maria Eagle: The information in the following table indicates the total number of people receiving Disability Living Allowance and those whose main disabling condition is deafness or deafness and blindness in Great Britain at 31 August 1997 and 2002. Information for Northern Ireland is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Thousands

	1997	*2002*
All DLA recipients	1,926.2	2,385.8
Deaf or deaf and blind DLA	16.7	28.9

Source:
IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample as at 31 August each year.
Figures in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred

It is estimated that there are 8,582,200 disabled adults in Great Britain (aged 16+). This estimate is based on a survey published in 1999[1], and it is therefore not possible to calculate the proportion of disabled people receiving DLA in 1997 and 2002 from this information, as the data are not comparable. The survey estimated that 34 per cent. of disabled people had a disability related to hearing.

It should be noted that entitlement to Disability Living Allowance is based on the extent to which a severely disabled person requires attention, supervision or watching over by another person and/or has walking difficulties as a result of their disabilities, and not on the disabilities themselves. In addition, the majority of people who are hard of hearing are over the age of 65. People who become disabled after reaching age 65 claim Attendance Allowance instead of Disability Living Allowance. For these reasons, there is no meaningful correlation between the numbers of disabled and deaf people in Great Britain and the numbers receiving Disability Living Allowance.

[1] Grundy, E., Ahlburg, D., Ali, M., Breeze, E. and Sloggett, A. (1999) Disability in Great Britain: Results from the 1996–97 Disability Follow-Up to the Family Resources Survey, Department of Social Security Research Report No.94.

External Consultants

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the projects on which external consultants have been used by his Department in each of the last four financial years for which data is available; and if he will indicate which firms of consultants were used on each project. [94000]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not held centrally or in the format requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Gender Income Gap

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the average gap, expressed as a percentage, was between the incomes of all working *(a)* women and *(b)* men for the last year for which figures are available. [94015]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

In 2000–01 women working full-time had weekly median income of £295 per week, 78 per cent. of the weekly median income of men working full time

(£379 per week). Women working part-time had weekly median income of £135, 82 per cent. of the weekly median income of men working part-time (£164 per week). These figures reflect differences between men and women in hours worked in addition to differences in hourly rates of pay.

K Shoes Factory (Kendal)

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to assist those who become unemployed following the closure of the K Shoes factory in Kendal to find new work. [94014]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: JobCentre Plus offers assistance to help companies handle any significant reduction in staffing they may have to make, and help to those employees who are affected in identifying alternative jobs or any training they require.

In the case of the K Shoes factory in Kendal, JobCentre Plus has already agreed to give those employees being made redundant immediate access to its employment and training programmes. JobCentre Plus is working closely with the employer and the local authority. Together they have arranged to run advice and information sessions in the factory during the week commencing 3 February 2003 and have planned a jobs fair for the 14 February 2003.

Pension Payment (Automated Credit Transfer)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many *(a)* existing and *(b)* new state retirement pension claimants have opted for payment via automated credit transfer in each of the last 12 months. [93918]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the format requested as the statistics are collated on a periodic basis. The information that is available is in the following tables.

Analysis of cases on computer main file

Period ending	*Total live cases*	*Order book cases*	*Order payable cases*	*ACT cases*
30 November 2001	9,610,506	4,958,548	179,760	4,472,198
20 February 2002	9,601,651	4,899,331	173,174	4,529,146
30 April 2002	9,605,886	4,858,229	172,523	4,575,134
30 June 2002	9,616,957	4,824,513	171,176	4,621,268
31 August 2002	9,622,462	4,786,398	169,294	4,666,770
29 November 2002	9,644,971	4,713,765	165,896	4,765,310

Analysis of first payment to new State Retirement claimants—by method of payments

Period ending	*Order book cases*	*Order payable cases*	*ACT cases*
30 November 2001	35,125	496	62,701
28 February 2002	50,626	673	88,271
30 April 2002	34,116	498	57,671
30 June 2002	31,098	451	57,544
31 August 2002	36,032	485	67,345
29 November 2002	48,079	607	95,180

Source:
Method of Payment Scan—Pension Strategy Computer System 27 November 2002

Pre-Budget Report

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the constituent parts of the allocation of the planned expenditure for *(a)* 2002–03, *(b)* 2003–04, *(c)* 2004–05 and *(d)* 2005–06, set out in Table B15 of the Pre-Budget Report 2002. [93412]

Mr. McCartney: Latest information on the approved allocation of planned expenditure for 2002–03 is published in the Central Government Supply Estimates 2002–03, Winter Supplementary Estimates and New Estimates, command number HC43. The allocations will change, subject to Parliamentary Approval of the Spring Supplementary, and will be published in the Central Government Supply Estimates 2002–03, Spring Supplementary Estimates and New Estimates in February 2003.

Approved allocations for future years have yet to be finalised and have not been published.

Private Pension Schemes

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what measures are being taken to educate and encourage recent graduates and new members of the work force to make provision for private pension schemes. [93383]

Mr. McCartney: We are committed to encouraging people to consider their pension saving options early. Everyone needs to be equipped to understand their financial choices and have access to the information they need to prepare for their retirement.

The Green Paper "Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement", published on 17 December 2002, Cm 5677, sets out the Government's proposals to work with employers and the financial services industry to provide:

A simple framework to help people understand their choices.

Financial education and awareness to navigate the system, including access to

generic financial advice for the mass market

Personalised information tailored to individual circumstances, so people can make

rational choices; and a choice of suitable products.

The Green Paper, therefore, sets out proposals for building on work that has already been done, as well as identifying new initiatives, in order to provide a coherent education and information effort.

It also sets out the Government's proposals for working with employers to encourage and facilitate the provision of better information, both generic and specific personalised information, to employees and prospective employees.

We have launched a wide ranging consultation exercise in which we are seeking views on all these issues. We want to reinvigorate the pension partnership to make sure that future generations of pensioners can make informed choices.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Animal Cloning

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many animals have been cloned in the United Kingdom for each year since 1996, broken down by species; [94981]

(2) how many cloned animals are living in the United Kingdom, broken down by species; [94984]

(3) what the cause of death was for animals that have been cloned and then died in the United Kingdom since 1996. [94982]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Only a small number of projects are currently licensed by the Home Office under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 involving cloning by nucleus transfer for experimental or other scientific purposes. This technology may be used for a number of purposes, including the better understanding of the regulation of gene function and development in relation to cloning; the enabling of some potential therapies, or seeking additional potential therapies when stem cell therapy would not be an option; and to allow some forms of genetic modification not practical or possible by other current methods.

The specific information requested in respect of these projects is not collected centrally, or readily obtainable.

Cloning for other purposes, such as agricultural practice, including by common means such as embryo splitting, is not regulated by the Home Office.

Assets Recovery Agency

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Assets Recovery Agency. [94764]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Assets Recovery Agency came formally into being on 13 January 2003, and its Director, Jane Earl, took up post on 3 February 2003, as did her Assistant Director for Northern Ireland, Alan McQuillan. I have signed a commencement order to bring the Agency's powers of civil recovery, taxation, investigations and data sharing into force on 24 February 2003, and the criminal confiscation provisions of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, which include powers for the Director, will come into force on 24 March 2003.

Jane Earl and her staff will have my full support in their efforts to reduce crime. They will do this by making sure that those in our communities who seek to live off of the misery and suffering caused by crime are not allowed to enjoy their ill-gotten gains.

Air Guns

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many pellet and air guns were sold in each year since 1990, broken down by region; how many crime incidents involved an air or pellet gun in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [94227]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Information on the number of firearms sold, including pellet and air guns are not collected centrally.

The number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in which air weapons were reported to have been used since 1990, are given in the table.

Number of offences involving air weapons

	Number
1990	5,380
1991	5,464
1992	6,098
1993	6,337
1994	7,165
1995	7,568
1996	7,813
1997	7,506
1997–98	7,902
1998–99[1]	8,665
1999–2000	10,103
2000–01	10,227
2001–02[2]	12,340

[1] There was a change of counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998, which would have the tendency to increase the number of offences counted. Numbers of offences before and after this date are therefore not directly comparable.

[2] Figures may have been inflated by some forces implementing the principles of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) before 1 April 2002.

The Government is not prepared to tolerate the misuse of air weapons and we are introducing new controls which will raise from 14 to 17 the age at which they may be acquired and possessed without adult supervision. We are also creating a new arrestable offence of carrying an air weapon in a public place without lawful authority or reasonable excuse.

Airport Policing (Wheeler Report)

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what access he will give hon. Members to the restricted aspects of Sir John Wheeler's Report on Policing at UK Airports 2002; and if he will make a statement. [94459]

Mr. Jamieson: I have been asked to reply.

In his parliamentary reply on 30 October last year my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained that Sir John Wheeler's findings and recommendations were being placed in the Libraries of both Houses, but that the main body of his report, which contains information about operational security matters, was not being released. The Government's view remains that security considerations make it sensible not to give the full report a wider circulation.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Boris Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Algerian asylum seekers there have been in each year for the past five years; and how many have *(a)* been refused and *(b)* left the United Kingdom. [93729]

Beverley Hughes: The available information is provided in the table. It is not possible to say how many left the United Kingdom voluntarily without informing the Immigration Service.

The refusal figures for each year do not necessarily relate to the applications received in the same year. The removals figures for each year do not necessarily relate to initial decisions made in the same year.

		Initial decisions[1]			
	Applications received	*Total initial decisions*	*Refused under normal procedures*	*Non compliance refusals under backlog criteria*[2,3]	*Removals and voluntary departures*[1,4]
1997	715	765	655	—	180
1998	1,260	500	180	—	85
1999[5]	1,385	905	160	30	n/a
2000[5,6,7]	1,635	1,935	1,330	85	n/a
2001[8]	1,145	2,665	2,530	—	125

[1] Information is of initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.
[2] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre '96 asylum backlog.
[3] Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.
[4] Includes persons departing 'Voluntarily' after enforcement action had been initiated against them, persons leaving under Assisted Voluntary Programmes run by the International Organisation for Migration, and removals on safe third country grounds.
[5] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January 1999 and March 2000.
[6] Cases considered under the normal procedures may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria.
[7] From October 2000, the source for data on decisions changed. The nationality breakdown is therefore not directly comparable with previous months.
[8] Provisional data
Note:
Figures rounded to nearest five.

Information on the number of asylum applications, initial decisions and removals is published quarterly on the Home Office website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html. The next publication will be available from 28 February and will cover the final quarter of 2002.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average cost to the taxpayer was of processing a claim for asylum per asylum seeker in 2002 and in each of the five previous years. [94132]

Beverley Hughes: The total cost of processing claims from asylum seekers cannot be separately identified within the overall processing costs of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what obligations those who provide accommodation to asylum seekers have to the Home Office when an asylum seeker leaves that accommodation. [94920]

Beverley Hughes: Support, including accommodation, comes to an end once a final decision is made on the claim except in the case of asylum seeking families with children under 18. In such cases where support ends, the former asylum seeker will be given notice to leave the premises at which they are residing by the accommodation provider. For those former asylum seekers who have received positive decisions on their claim, accommodation providers are expected to assist with issues such as access to the main benefits system and long-term housing.

Asylum seekers may choose to leave their NASS (National Asylum Support Service) provided accommodation before a final decision has been made on their claim. Providers are required to make regular checks to ensure the asylum seeker is resident at the address and must tell NASS if it is clear that they have left.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what checks the Department carries out on *(a)* accommodation provided to asylum seekers and *(b)* those who own such accommodation. [94938]

Beverley Hughes: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is part of the Home Office and all its procurement exercises are undertaken in accordance with standard Home Office procurement rules. As part of the procurement process checks were made on the capability and suitability of potential suppliers and these checks would have included a review of their experience of housing and accommodation but not necessarily limited to asylum seekers. All properties contracted to NASS are subject to inspection and contracts are monitored to ensure that the contractor is complying with the terms of the contract.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will take a decision on the application by Ms LC of Aylesbury (case reference C1048555/2; PO19353/2) for indefinite leave to remain in the UK. [95083]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* A decision has now been taken on this application.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average time was before the initial determination of asylum claims *(a)* in the most recent period for which figures are available and *(b)* in each year since 1997. [95569]

Beverley Hughes: The average time between application and initial decision was seven months for initial decisions made between October 2001 and September 2002. This has been calculated using all cases for which data are available, including older cases decided as part of the reduction of the backlog, as well as new cases.

The table shows the average time to initial decisions for cases decided between 1997 and 2001.

Average time to initial decision, 1997–2001 [1,2,3]

Year of decision	*Average time to initial decision (in months)* [4]
1997	22
1998	17
1999	35
2000	18
2001	13

[1] Excluding dependants.
[2] Figures are estimates based on cases for which information is recorded.
[3] Based on data from Refugee Index for 1997 to 1999, and the ACID database for 2000 and 2001.
[4] The average length of time (in months) is calculated from date application is lodged to the date of initial decision, and relates to the year in which the decisions were made.

Asylum Support

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department of those who have not been deported following a refusal to grant asylum and failing their appeal, what proportion were not at the place of residence recorded by the Home Office when the Department tried to deport them. [95132]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* Information on the proportion of asylum seekers who were not living at the place of residence is not recorded by the Home Office and could be obtained only by examination of individual case files at disproportionate costs.

There are different methods of apprehending those who have no entitlement to stay in the United Kingdom. In addition to home visits, they may receive written notice of Removal Directions or be apprehended during the course of enforcement/police operations.

Asylum Support Fraud

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 27 January (refs 91210, 91211 and 91212), when NASS support will become subject to payment through the Application Registration Card; what payment arrangements apply at present; and what measures to prevent fraud have been taken in respect of the present arrangements. [95221]

Beverley Hughes [*holding answer 3 February 2003*]: Payment of financial support via the application registration card (ARC) began on 5 August 2002. To date over 37,000 main applicants (50 per cent of the total of main applicants supported) are using their ARC as a means of payment. The transfer to payments using an ARC are being introduced on a phased basis and we are aiming to complete the transition by the Spring of this year. Until the transfer is complete some asylum seekers will continue to receive their support on presentation of a personal Receipt Book at their designated Post Office. Making payments via an ARC provide a more secure method of payment. The process requires Post Office counter staff to undertake a photo Identity check which is proving to be an effective control. The system also allows for detailed electronic records of all transactions including the location, time and nature of every transaction (whether successful or unsuccessful).

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 27 January, *Official Report*, columns 705–7W, how many fraud investigations were undertaken prior to April 2002, and what the outcomes were; and if he will make a statement about the arrangements to prevent asylum support fraud since the establishment of NASS in April 2000. [95222]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The National Asylum Support Services (NASS) became operational on 3 April 2000. Between that date and 31 March 2002 NASS investigated 1,467 suspected cases of fraud. NASS did not begin to keep a central record of the outcome of investigations until June 2001. Between June 2001 and 31March 2002, 176 support claimants had their NASS support terminated following a fraud investigation.

NASS Investigations Section was formed in October 2000 and became fully operational until May 2001. In addition to investigating referrals the Section conducts visits (both announced and unannounced) to supported asylum seekers to establish continued eligibility for support and also works with other government departments to tackle fraud. This work will be devolved to NASS regional offices as part of the current regionalisation programme.

The introduction of Application Registration Cards (ARCs) containing photographs and biometric data is aimed at further reducing the opportunities for fraud.

Children in Custody

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children there were in *(a)* custody and *(b)* secure accommodation in September in each year since 1997; and how many of those in custody were aged (i) under 14, (ii) 14 to 16 and (iii) 16 to 18. [94485]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is in the attached tables. Information on those in custody outside Prison Service establishments prior to 1 April 2000 was only collected on Local Authority Secure Units, and was based on a snapshot as of 31 March each year.

Children in custody by age group and type of accommodation 30 September 2000

Age group	*Local authority secure units*	*Prison service establishments*	*Secure training*	*Total centres*
Under 14	40	—	19	59
14 to 16	226	978	106	1,310
17 to 18	14	1,880	2	1,896
Total	280	2,858	127	3,265

Source:
YJB custody statistics

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 140W, to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on children in prison, how many children were held in prison, broken down by *(a)* type of offence, *(b)* gender, *(c)* ethnicity, *(d)* age and *(e)* length of sentence in each of the last five years. [91754]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The data requested is given in the following table.

Gender breakdown all custody types

Gender	*1998*[1]	*1999*[1]	*2000*[1]	*2001*[1]	*2002*[1]
Male	2,387	2,336	2,345	2,344	2,486
Female	79	86	89	90	114
Total	2,466	2,422	2,434	[2]2,434	[2]2,600

[1] The figures are taken for June of each year

[2] The figures have been revised following quality checks

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 140W, to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on children in prison, what his Department is doing to establish what offences were categorized as *(a)* other and *(b)* not recorded. [91755]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The offences categorised as 'other', for prisoners aged under 18 on 31 October 2002, are shown in the table.

For statistical purposes offences are grouped in standard ways for presentation because there are too many offence codes to list them separately and the figures for many offences would be too small for meaningful analysis. For prison statistics the 'other' offence group corresponds to the 'other' offence group used in crime and court statistics to which have been added offences from the criminal damage and motoring groups because historically these have been small components of the prison population.

The number of offences categorised as 'not recorded' for the prison population under sentence has declined. From 1990 to 2000 there has been a decrease of 74 per cent.

Juveniles in Prison Service establishments by offence type, 31 October 2002

Other offence type	*Number of persons*
Affray	42
Arson	32
Blackmail	2
Breach of Court Order	49
Criminal Damage	46
Drunkenness	1
Immigration Act 1971	5
Driving Under the Influence	9
Kidnapping	6
Other Criminal Offences	40
Other Motoring Offences	108
Perjury, Libel, Pervert Course of Justice	3
Threat, Disorderly Behaviour	13
Violent Disorder	24

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92376]

Mr. Blunkett: The figures can be found in "Civil Service Statistics", published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office for the Government Statistical Service annually and placed in the Library.

Deputy Director General of Policy (Home Office)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the remarks made by the Deputy Director General for Policy in the Home Office at a conference in London on asylum with respect to the Coniston Hotel. [95543]

Beverley Hughes: He made no such remarks at last week's Refugee Council Conference and has not commented publicly on this issue.

Drug Offenders (Lincolnshire)

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much funding was made available for the rehabilitation of drug offenders in each year from 1997 to 2002 in *(a)* Boston and Skegness, *(b)* Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, *(c)* the East Midlands and *(d)* England. [94226]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Prior to the introduction of the pooled treatment budget in 2001–02 information on the level of treatment spend at local level was not collected centrally.

The total spend on drug treatment reported by East Midlands Drug Action Teams (DATs) in 2001–02 are as follows:

£000

Area	*Total reported treatment spend 2001–02*
Lincolnshire DAT (area includes Boston and Skegness)	3,881
Nottinghamshire DAT	3,832
Derbyshire DAT	2,213
Leicestershire DAT	1,439
East Midlands	21,040
England	301,841

The pooled treatment budget, introduced in 2001–02, provides significant additional funding for the treatment of people with drug problems, including offenders. Drug Action Teams use pooled treatment budget allocations, together with additional resources from health and local authorities and other sources, to fund treatment provision in their areas.

The level of pooled treatment budget funding allocated to the specified areas in 2001–02 and 2002–03 was as follows:

£000

Area	*Pooled treatment budget 2001–02*	*Pooled treatment budget 2002–03*
Lincolnshire DAT (area includes Boston and Skegness)	1,788	1,883
Nottinghamshire DAT	987	1,811
Derbyshire DAT	1,376	1,849
Leicestershire DAT	896	1,177
East Midlands	9,052	12,955
England	125,300	191,202

Drug-related Crimes

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes committed in Lincolnshire were drug-related in each year from 1997 to 2002. [94202]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Recorded crime figures include statistics on drugs offences, such as possession, and on acquisitive crimes, such as burglary, but do not record whether the latter are related to an offender's drug habits.

However, the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) research programme, which involves interviewing and drug testing those arrested by the police, confirms a link between drug misuse and crime, although the conclusions do not relate specifically to Lincolnshire. Analysis of the data from the first eight sites in the survey, collected during 1999–2000, shows that 65 per cent. of arrestees provided a urine sample that tested positive for one or more illegal drug. The analysis also shows that up to 29 per cent. of arrestees tested positive for opiates (including heroin) and/or cocaine (including crack).

As a guide to the proportion of crime that is drug-related, analysis of the NEW-ADAM self-report data indicates that whilst only 21 per cent. of non-drug using arrestees reported having previously offended in the past 12 months, this figure rises to 75 per cent. for those arrestees who use heroin and/or cocaine/crack. Moreover, whilst users of both heroin and cocaine/crack represented just under one-quarter of all arrestees interviewed, they were responsible for more than three-fifths of all the illegal income reported.

In support of this, 55 per cent. of arrestees who reported using one or more drugs in the last 12 months and committing one or more acquisitive crimes acknowledged a link between their drug use and their offending behaviour. This proportion rose to 78 per cent. for arrestees who said they had used heroin and cocaine/crack.

Drugs Offences

Angela Watkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many banned visitors were arrested for possession of illegal drugs and subsequently charged, over the last three years for which figures are available; [94526]

(2) from which prisons and institutions visitors were banned for smuggling drugs during 2001–02; how many bans pertained to each prison; and for what periods of time. [94525]

Hilary Benn: Data concerning banned visitors at individual prisons is not held centrally. However, this information is being collated and I shall write to the hon member when it is available and place a copy in the Library.

The following table details national figures for banned visitors, including time periods, for 2001–02.

Number of visitors banned	2,815
For less than three months	227
For three or four months	2,292
For five or six months	129
For more than six months	89
Duration of ban not specified	78

Data is not kept on the correlation between visitors arrested and then banned. Almost without exception the arrest of a visitor will lead to a ban. The following table provides figures for the last three years.

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Number of visitors banned	2,464	2,584	2,815
Number of visitors arrested	728	499	526

EU Travel Ban List

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what powers he has to ban *(a)* Mr. Robert Mugabe and *(b)* other people on the EU travel ban list, from entering the UK between the dates of 19 to 24 February 2003 apart from under the EU sanctions regime. [94726]

Beverley Hughes: The current European Union sanctions on Zimbabwe, which include a travel ban on Robert Mugabe and a further 71 individuals, are due to expire on 17 February. Negotiations are currently in progress amongst EU partners to renew the sanctions.

If unanimous agreement to extend these measures cannot be reached, provisions exist to prevent admission of individuals whose presence in the UK is not considered conducive to the public good. This can be effected at the personal direction of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, using the powers available to him under the Immigration Rules, or by an entry clearance or immigration officer.

Gun Control

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many converted air weapons were seized by police forces in England in each year since 1997; and how many different seizures there were; [91558]

(2) how many illegal firearms were *(a)* found and *(b)* seized by police forces in England in each year since 1997; and how many (i) findings and (ii) seizures there were. [91559]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The requested information is not collected centrally.

Gun Crime

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the level of gun crime was in each year between 1997 and the last year for which information was available in *(a)* Hampshire, *(b)* Southampton, *(c)* Portsmouth and *(d)* the Fareham Basic Command Unit. [94903]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 31 January 2003]*: The number of recorded crimes involving firearms in Hampshire, excluding air weapon offences, are given in the table.

Number of firearm offences in Hampshire (excluding air weapons)

Year	Number of offences
1997[1]	29
1998–99	38
1999–2000	52
2000–01	49
2001–02	58

[1] Calendar year
[2] From 1 April 1998

There was a change of counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998, which would have the tendency to increase the number of offences counted. Numbers of offences before and after this date are therefore not directly comparable.

Details of firearm offences for areas below police force area level are not collected centrally.

Immigration

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many documents relating to applications for leave of entry to the UK were lost by the Immigration Service in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [95632]

Beverley Hughes: The Immigration Service does not compile statistics for documents that have been mislaid but received nine complaints from passengers during the last 12 months concerning the temporary or permanent loss of their documents.

Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of *(a)* offenders and *(b)* victims agreed to participate in the mediation component of the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme; [93849]

(2) how many young offenders have *(a)* started and *(b)* completed the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme since it began. [93850]

Hilary Benn: The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP) was launched in 2001 to provide the courts with a tough community based programme designed to tackle persistent young offenders. It was extended last year and is now able to provide for approximately 3,500 young offenders a year. 3,243 people have started on ISSP. We do not have centrally-held data on the number of successful completions or the proportion of offenders and victims who agree to participate in the mediation component of the ISSP. However, ISSP is being independently evaluated by Oxford University: the final report with reconviction data is due in March 2004.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90856]

Hilary Benn: Job sharing is only one of a number of alternative and flexible working patterns that employees are welcome to take up. 46 staff are currently recorded as being job sharers in the Home Office, and Forensic Science Service. Information on staff in the Prison Service who are job sharers is not held centrally and could not be provided without disproportionate cost.

It is Home Office policy (including Prison Service) to advertise jobs as being open to part-timers or job sharers unless there is an operational reason not to do so.

Prison Service

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* pay and *(b)* career development incentives there are for prison officers to assist prisoners in (i) obtaining educational and vocational qualifications and (ii) developing emotional and parenting skills; and what plans he has to change these incentives. [94491]

Hilary Benn: Prison officers involved in the teaching of vocational qualifications receive a specialist allowance of £1,200 a year. There are no direct promotion incentives for prison officers to assist prisoners in obtaining qualifications or in improving their emotional and parenting skills. However, a number of personal development opportunities are available. Prison officers undertake the Custodial Care National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) which includes optional units that measure competence in areas such as assisting in the provision of emotional and parenting skills. The Prison Service is considering linking attainment of the NVQ to the promotion process.

There are also a number of specific training courses for prison officers that relate to these areas and cover:

staff working in mother-and-baby units;

staff at establishments that provide offending behaviour programmes (including the reasoning and rehabilitation, sex offender treatment, enhanced thinking skills and cognitive self-change programmes);

physical education officer training; and a prisoner development and pre-release course.

Prisons (Women/Young People)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to halt the rise in the numbers of *(a)* women and *(b)* young people in prison. [93330]

Hilary Benn: It is for the courts to decide in indidual cases whether a prison sentence is appropriate. However, custodial sentences should be used for dangerous violent and sexual offenders and those who persistently offend or commit serious offences. Protecting the public is a priority and these offenders should go to prison for as long as public protection requires. Whether a custodial or community sentence is given it is important that rehabilitative processes are followed to address the causes of offenders' behaviour and to break the cycle of repeat offending.

We are taking forward the 'Women's Offending Reduction Programme' over the next three years, which seeks to address the range of factors that have an impact on why women offend. It encourages closer joint

working between departments, agencies and other organisations where a primary focus will be on improving community-based interventions that are better suited to the needs of women. Greater use of such interventions will ensure that custody is only used for women offenders who really need to be there.

For young offenders the Government has introduced a range of credible community options including Electronically monitored curfew orders for 10–15 year olds and Electronic tagging for 12–16 year olds on bail and local authority remand. The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP) is a recently introduced programme to tackle persistent and serious young offenders as an alternative to custodial sentences or secure remands. Targeting the 3 per cent. of young offenders estimated to be responsible for 25 per cent. of youth crime, it is the most rigorous non-custodial intervention available for young offenders, providing the courts with a credible alternative to custody.

Probation Service (Cardiff)

Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the proposed closure of the Probation Service workshops, Lewis Road, Cardiff. [92803]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The South Wales Probation Board decided on 27 November 2002, after careful consideration of options, that the Community Service Workshop in Cardiff should close on 30 September 2003. Not only will this alleviate health and safety concerns about the facility, but will release funding to improve the focus on punishment in the community, rehabilitation and work with victims. There will be no loss of capacity in the area and better use of resources will increase the number of staff to run offender programmes.

Public Service Agreement

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place the technical note underlying his Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [94886]

Mr. Blunkett: The technical note will be published shortly, and a copy will be placed in the Library.

Refugees

Dr. Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether contingency plans are being drawn up to cope with *(a)* an influx into the UK and *(b)* an exodus from Iraq of refugees following war in the middle east. [95307]

Beverley Hughes: Home Office officials, in liaison with other Government Departments, routinely revise contingency plans, including those for large influxes of displaced persons.

Researchers (Lunar House)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many searchers are employed at Lunar House to seek out documents in respect of which hon. Members request information on behalf of constituents. [94479]

Beverley Hughes: There are five members of staff whose duties include searching for documents in connection with telephone and written enquiries from hon. Members for information on behalf of their constituents. There is also a dedicated team of 10 searchers who retrieve missing documents throughout Lunar House and other buildings in the Croydon estate.

Sexual Assault Referral Centre

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that a Sexual Assault Referral Centre is available in every centre of population. [91892]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* We recognise the importance of the provision of support services for victims of sexual violence. We are currently exploring a range of options for the provision of support to victims of sexual assault, with reference to criminal justice, health and counselling services. We are aware of excellent services being provided by Sexual Assault Referral Centres and as part of this work we will be giving full consideration to them and to other service options.

Shop Workers (Assaults)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were successfully prosecuted for assaulting shop workers in each of the last five years; how many of these were registered as drug abusers; and if he will make a statement. [94274]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is not collected centrally. We do not record separately the employment status of victims of assault.

The Government take all assaults seriously. People are entitled under health and safety legislation to a safe working environment, and employers should do all they can to protect their staff from assault.

Solicitors

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines have been issued to prisons, with specific reference to HMP Wakefield, concerning the rights of solicitors to trawl for inmates who have been residents in Tennal Assessment and Community School. [89538]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: No guidelines have been issued on this matter.

Terrorism

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convictions have been made under the Terrorism Act 2000. [94249]

Mr. Blunkett: Of those arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000, there have been three convictions under that Act to date. A further 29 people who have been charged with offences under the Act, and eight charged with other offences, are currently awaiting trial.

Victim Counselling

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the

level of funding provided to victim counselling services in each year since 1997; what discussions he has had with Victim Support about its organisational structure; and if he will make a statement on *(a)* the means by which his Department monitors the use of funds by victim counselling services and *(b)* how the monitoring of the use of funds has changed since 1997. [94080]

Hilary Benn: The Department provides funding to the organisation Victim Support for its work in providing practical help and emotional support to victims of crime and to witnesses. Victim Support does not provide a victim counselling service. The level of funding provided each year since 1997 is:

Victim Support funding

£ million

Year	*Grant*
1996–97	11.7
1997–98	12.7
1998–99	12.7
1999–2000	17.5
2000–01	18.6
2001–02	25.1
2002–03	29.3

The Department has maintained dialogue with Victim Support about its organisational structure over the last few years.

The Department monitors the use of funds by Victim Support in a wide variety of ways, including through the organisation's annual reports and accounts and other literature, attendance at the meeting of the Victim Support Funding Panel, and frequent discussion with the organisation in a range of formal and less formal settings.

The monitoring arrangements have not changed fundamentally since 1997, although since then the basis of funding has changed from grant to grant-in-aid, and the terms and conditions of grant are now set out more formally and fully in a grant-in-aid agreement which details, amongst other things, the information Victim Support are required to provide to show how the grant has been used.

Victim Supportline

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 9 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 114W, if he will place a copy of the study of calls to Victim Supportline in the Library. [92671]

Hilary Benn: A copy of the information studied to inform the answer of 9 December has been placed in the Library. It comprises a single page spreadsheet entitled "Victim Supportline Statistics 2001–02".

Victims of Crime

Mr. David: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what financial support is given to organisations that work with the victims of crime. [92094]

Hilary Benn: Many publicly-funded bodies work with, and provide support to victims of crime as part of a wider remit. Such bodies include the police, the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Prison and Probation Services, the national health service, the Benefits Agency and local authorities. It is not possible to place a monetary value on this wide range of support.

Similarly, a number of voluntary organisations which work with victims of crime as part of a wide remit receive funding from public funds. However, data on this is not collated centrally.

The Home Office provides direct grant aid to three voluntary organisations that help victims of crime. In the current financial year that grant aid will amount to £29.3 million to Victim Support, some £400,000 to the Rape Crisis Federation, and £130,000 to Support After Murder and Manslaughter.

Young Offenders

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of *(a)* the mental health needs of young offenders and *(b)* the services provided to meet those needs in (i) Haltemprice and Howden and (ii) England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [93838]

Hilary Benn: We have not made a separate assessment of the mental health needs of young offenders but there is evidence of mental disorder in a significant number of young offenders.

We are committed to addressing the mental health needs of all young people, including those in the criminal justice system. The Department of Health has a public service agreement (PSA) target to improve child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), and is providing an additional £140 million for this over three years from October 2002. A new 24-beddded unit is being provided for young people requiring mental health treatment in secure conditions. Mental health provision for young offenders is also being addressed as part of the Children's National Service Framework, due to be published later this year.

The Youth Justice Board have developed a new mental health screening tool and staff training programmes to help early identification and CAMHS referrals. The Board are also working closely with the Department of Health to improve services available for young offenders.

I will write to the hon. Member about the provision in Wales and in his constituency.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 5 February 2003

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Assembly

9. **Mr. McFall**: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made in re-establishing the Northern Ireland Assembly. [94829]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I would refer my hon. Friend to the response I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson).

Landfill Site

10. **Mr. Beggs:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when a decision will be announced in respect of the application for planning permission submitted by Loughside Quarries for a landfill site at Ballyrickand Larne, County Antrim; and what potential has been identified for future extension at the site. [R] [94830]

Angela Smith: A planning application and Environmental Statement were received in January 2001. Following consultation, further information was required and an addendum to the Environmental Statement was received in December 2002.

Consultation on this will end on 10 February. Following consideration of comments, Planning Service will be in a position to proceed to a decision.

Any future development will be considered if a planning application is submitted.

Devolution

11. **Mr. Goodman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent discussions he has had concerning the restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland. [94831]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I would refer the hon. Member to the response I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson).

Good Friday Agreement

Lawrie Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the Good Friday Agreement. [94832]

14. **Ann McKechin**: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on recent progress towards implementing the Good Friday Agreement. [94834]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I would refer my hon. Friend to the response I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson).

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. [94821]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Intensive discussions are in progress aimed at restoring the full operation of the devolved institutions and at the continuing implementation of the Agreement. They involve the political parties in Northern Ireland and both governments, including the Prime Minister and Taoiseach, who will visit Northern Ireland on 12 February. It is essential we restore the institutions on a stable basis, founded on the use of exclusively peaceful means.

Peace Process

13. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process. [94833]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I would refer my hon. Friend to the response I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (John Robertson).

Drug Education

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps is the Government taking to improve drug education among young people in Northern Ireland. [93669]

Mr. Browne: Under the Drug and Alcohol Campaign, various resources have been specifically allocated to educating young people against the dangers of drug use. Information and awareness raising is provided through many forums such as counselling services, treatment services, public information campaigns, projects providing life skills training and by other Departments and agencies, including the Health Promotion Agency. The Department of Education also include drug education as part of the present school curriculum, in line with the aims of the Drug Strategy, which is compulsory for all pupils aged 4–16. The Education and Library Boards have each employed two full-time Field Officers, from the start of the 2000–01 school year, to address the development of drug education programmes within schools and youth clubs and provide training for teachers, youth leaders, parents and governors.

Electricity Generation

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what he estimates the change in costs to Northern Ireland electricity customers would be if renewable generation were used. [95000]

Mr. Pearson: Much would depend on the volume, nature and location of the renewable generation used;

and on whether or not it was grid connected. Generally speaking the grid connection, operational and other costs associated with assimilating renewables on to the system increases the cost to consumers. However, regulation initiatives can mitigate some of these costs to some consumers.

Employers' Liability Insurance

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the recent increases in employers' liability insurance in Northern Ireland; what action is being taken to address this situation; and if he will make a statement. [95095]

Mr. Pearson: The current difficulties in the insurance market have a particularly adverse impact on a predominantly small and medium enterprise-based economy such as that in Northern Ireland. Three initiatives are under way to address various aspects of current difficulties: Government are conducting an urgent review of employers' liability to assess the scale and nature of the current difficulties; the Office of Fair Trading have launched a fact finding study to examine the reasons for premium increases and the Financial Services Authority are consulting on proposals for regulating the sale of general insurance.

In Northern Ireland the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has conducted a business survey on insurance costs. It indicates significant rises particularly (but not exclusively) in employers' liability and property insurance. The results of this survey will be fed into Government's current review in which my officials are participating. The outcome of the review will be reported to Ministers by the end of March 2003.

European Components

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Government grants have been received by European Components in Dundonald in the last 15 years; and how much has been allocated to the company through these grants. [94963]

Mr. Pearson: The information requested, covering the last 15 years, is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, over the past five years, the former Industrial Development Board offered TK-ECC (formerly European Components Corporation) a package of selective financial assistance totalling £2 million.

Lagan Valley Hospital

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* doctors, *(b)* nurses and *(c)* consultants have been employed in Lagan Valley Hospital in each of the last 10 years. [95510]

Mr. Browne: Down Lisburn HSS Trust are only able to provide whole time equivalent figures between March 1997 and December 2002 for the number of doctors, nurses and consultants working in Lagan Valley Hospital. These figures are detailed in the following table.

WTE[1] figures of doctors, nurses and consultants working in Lagan Valley Hospital between March 1997 and December 2002

	Doctors	*Nurses*	*Consultants*
March 1997	*23.01*	*254.28*	25.68
March 1998	*19.25*	*245.71*	23.73
March 1999	*19.92*	*242.61*	24.18
March 2000	*19.27*	*243.56*	23.93
March 2001	*25.92*	*255.39*	22.71
March 2002	*22.91*	*244.06*	23.05
December 2002	*26.26*	*267.95*	27.03

[1] Whole time equivalent

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action the Government is taking to attract more nurses, doctors and consultants to the Lagan Valley Hospital. [95511]

Mr. Browne: The recruitment of staff is a matter for individual Health and Social Services Trusts taking into account factors such as service needs and available resources. Down Lisburn Health and Social Service Trust has stated that there are no medical staff vacancies at Lagan Valley Hospital. The Trust has also confirmed that they have recently recruited 25 nurses from India.

Medical Training

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures have been introduced to increase the number of training places for nurses and doctors. [95147]

Mr. Browne: The commissioned number of pre-registration nurse training places was increased from 580 to 680 in 2001 and from 680 to 750 in 2002.

The annual intake of medical students was increased from 166 to 200 in 2001.

Parliamentary Questions

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the reasons were for the delay in replying to written questions tabled by the hon. Member for Thurrock on 9 January; and if he will make a statement. [94477]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Questions referred to by my hon. Friend have now been answered.

I am sorry for the delay in responding. This was because information from an outside, commercial, agency was needed to provide an answer.

I would like to assure my hon. Friend that the Northern Ireland Office, as with all Government Departments, takes it obligation to answer all Parliamentary Questions promptly and accurately very seriously.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the reason was for the delay in answering the questions tabled on 6 and 9 December by the hon. Member for Thurrock about the draft Harbours (Northern Ireland) Order 2002; and if he will make a statement. [94930]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Questions referred to by my hon. Friend were answered on the 9 December 2002 (*Official Report*, columns 46W and 55W).

I regret to inform my hon. Friend that due to an administrative error, the answers were re-issued on 28 January 2003.

Personality Disorders

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many places there are at specialist residential units for individuals with personality disorders in *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* Northern Ireland. [94959]

Mr. Browne: In Great Britain there are five specialist residential units providing 85 beds for people with personality disorders in the statutory sector. In Northern Ireland there are no specialist units in the statutory sector. There is one specialist residential unit in the voluntary sector which provides 11 beds.

Physiotherapy

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many physiotherapists are employed in Northern Ireland in each health trust. [95158]

Mr. Browne: The information requested is detailed in the table.

Physiotherapists employed by each HSS Trust at 30 September 2002

	Headcount	*WTE*[1]
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	54	46.9
Green Park Healthcare HSS Trust	66	57.6
South and East Belfast HSS Trust	37	24.8
Ulster Community and Hospitals Group HSS Trust	74	56.3
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	79	67.9
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	19	17.0
North and West Belfast HSS Trust	34	21.0
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	58	48.0
Causeway HSS Trust	33	25.3
United Hospitals Group HSS Trust	84	69.8
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	31	25.0
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	60	48.4
Newry and Mourne HSS Trust	28	23.2
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust	38	35.7
Foyle Community HSS Trust	2	2.0
Sperrin/Lakeland HSS Trust	25	21.9
Total	722	590.9

[1] Whole Time Equivalent

The Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* inpatients and *(b)* outpatients are on the waiting list for physiotherapy at South Tyrone Hospital, Loane House. [95151]

Mr. Browne: *(a)* Inpatients requiring treatment by a physiotherapist, perhaps following an operation, are not allocated a place on a waiting list. The physiotherapy treatment they receive forms part of their inpatient episode and is counted as hospital activity.

(b) There are currently 174 outpatients awaiting physiotherapy treatment at South Tyrone and Loane House hospitals. The vast majority of these cases, 172 (99 per cent.), are waiting less than three months, while the remaining two are waiting less than six months. Urgent cases are prioritised and seen within 2–3 weeks.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will take steps to ensure that South Tyrone Hospital, Loane House, has its full complement of physiotherapists. [95148]

Mr. Browne: The South Tyrone Hospital has recently secured funding for a temporary full-time physiotherapist. Advertisements have been placed in newspapers and with recruitment agencies. There are no physiotherapy waiting lists for hospital in-patients or day attenders at Loane House. However, the out-patients' department of the Hospital currently has a waiting list of 174 for physiotherapy treatment.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many physiotherapists are *(a)* employed within the Southern Health and Social Services Board area and *(b)* working at South Tyrone Hospital, Loane House, County Tyrone. [95153]

Mr. Browne: The information requested is detailed in the table.

Physiotherapists employed in South Tyrone Hospital (Loane House) and the Southern Board

	Headcount	*WTE*[1]
South Tyrone Hospital (Loane House)[2]	n/a	1.1
Southern Health and Social Services Board[3]	119	96.7

[1] Whole-time equivalent.
[2] Staffing figures are current.
[3] Staffing figures are at 30 September 2002.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* inpatients and *(b)* outpatients are on the waiting list for physiotherapy within the Southern Health Board area. [95154]

Mr. Browne: *(a)* Inpatients requiring treatment by a physiotherapist, perhaps following an operation, are not allocated a place on a waiting list. The physiotherapy treatment they receive forms part of their inpatient episode and is counted as hospital activity.

(b) Data is collected on the number of outpatients who had a first appointment during the quarter with a community physiotherapist by the time waited. The following Figures are for the quarter ending December 2002.

Completed waiting times for a first outpatient appointment with a community physiotherapist in the Southern Health Board, quarter ending December 2002

	Time waited (months)			
	0–3	*3–6*	*6+*	*Total*
Craigavon/Banbridge Community HSS Trust	28	28	11	67
Armagh/Dungannon HSS Trust	1,099	8	0	1,107
Newry/Mourne HSS Trust	999	332	26	1,357

Completed waiting times for a first outpatient appointment with a community physiotherapist in the Southern Health Board, quarter ending December 2002

	Time waited (months)			
	0–3	*3–6*	*6+*	*Total*
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	415	245	165	825
Southern Board Total	2,541	613	202	3,356

Source:
CP3

Organ Donor Cards

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will estimate how many individuals in Northern Ireland carry organ donor cards. [95843]

Mr. Browne: At the end of December 2002 there were 156,148 people from Northern Ireland on the organ donor register.

Public Transport

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the main uses of the sums recently announced for *(a)* railways and *(b)* buses. [94948]

Angela Smith: Additional funding in excess of £80 million was allocated to the Department for Regional Development in the December 2002 Budget announcement for the development of public transport. Of this, £40 million will be used to improve safety and reliability on the core railway network in accordance with the A. D. Little Safety Review and the "consolidation option" as outlined in the Railways Task Force Report. £40 million will be used to purchase new coaches and buses to replace vehicles, whose "economic life" has expired, and help improve the reliability and accessibility of the Ulsterbus and Citybus fleets, including assistance with the promotion of Quality Bus Corridors. A significant proportion of this funding has been made available under the Strategic Investment Programme, hence it will be subject to final approval processes in advance of expenditure being incurred.

Queen's University, Belfast

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many places are *(a)* retained and *(b)* proposed in the new academic intake, by Queen's University, Belfast for foreign nationals studying medicine. [94433]

Jane Kennedy: The recruitment of students is entirely a matter for Queen's University. The number of foreign nationals admitted to study medicine at Queen's University, Belfast in the current academic year is not yet available. The 2002–03 Higher Education Student Early Statistics return indicate that the University recruited 173 Home and EU students and 13 Island and Overseas students as new entrants to full-time undergraduate courses in medicine. Information is not available on the number of foreign nationals which the University proposes to admit to study medicine in the 2003–04 academic year.

Railways

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the level of *(a)* reliability and *(b)* punctuality of enterprise services on the Belfast-Dublin railway line. [94950]

Angela Smith: In relation to the reliability of the Enterprise Service I can report that there were four breakdowns of the locomotives servicing this line over a 30 day period in January 2003, this reflects a trend of mechanical failures in these locomotives.

Over the same period the punctuality performance was as follows:

Trains arriving at their destination	*Ex Belfast (per cent.)*	*Ex Dublin (per cent.)*
On time	22.5	41.3
Within 10 minutes of their published arrival time	50.0 [1](72.5)	38.5 [1](79.8)
Within 20 minutes of their published arrival time	15.6 [1](88.1)	8.3 [1](88.1)
Within 30 minutes of their published arrival time	4.6 [1] (92.7)	6.9 [1](95.0)

[1] The figures in brackets reflect the cumulative performance

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what efforts are being made to deal with the volume of train breakdowns on the Belfast-Dublin railway line. [94951]

Angela Smith: The performance of the Belfast-Dublin Enterprise Service continues to give cause for concern, representing as it does a serious disruption to passenger services. Northern Ireland Railways is working closely with Iarnrod Eireann, their partners on the Enterprise Service, to identify the technical causes of the increasing regularity of mechanical failure on the locomotives servicing this line. Engineers have closely examined the performance of the locomotives over a 2½ year period. On the basis of this assessment Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnrod Eireann have agreed to jointly approach the suppliers of the locomotives with a view to addressing this unacceptable performance.

Retail Planning (Belfast)

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the timescale is for the review of Belfast retail planning strategy; who is to conduct it; and what its terms of reference are. [93928]

Angela Smith: As part of the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Department of the Environment has appointed consultants to assess the potential need for additional retail floor space within the Plan Area up to 2015. The terms of reference also require the consultants to advise on where any

additional floorspace should be located, and if it should be phased, how it should be phased and why it should be phased.

The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan covers Belfast, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down Council Areas. The Retail Study will inform the policies to be included in the Draft Plan, which is programmed to be published in September 2003. The findings of the Study will be published with the Draft Plan and all policies and proposals will be open to objection. Unresolved objections will be considered at a Public Inquiry.

The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) acknowledges the vital role that retailing plays in the development of Northern Ireland. In particular it emphasises the need to create a thriving Metropolitan Area centred on a revitalised Belfast, through the enhancement of the role of the city, by supporting and strengthening the city centre as the leading regional shopping centre and maintaining the city centre as the primary retail and office location in the region. The RDS also advocates the development of the complementary role of the suburban districts of Castlereagh and Newtownabbey, and the development of the city of Lisburn, and the towns of Bangor and Carrickfergus and strengthening the multi-functional role of their town centres.

In recognition of this, the Department for Regional Development is currently preparing a new planning policy statement on Retailing and Town Centres (PPS5) to replace the current retail planning policy statement, which was first published by the Department of the Environment in June 1996. The purpose of this new policy is to assist the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy. In addition, it will provide strategic planning guidance to assist the Department of the Environment in the preparation of development plans and the determination of planning applications. Roger Tym and Partners were commissioned by the Department for Regional Development to carry out evidence-based retail research to guide the Department in the preparation of the new retail planning policy statement. The final draft report of the retail consultancy is due to be issued within the next few days. The new draft planning policy statement is scheduled to be issued for full public consultation during the next few months.

TK-ECC

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who the purchasers were of land disposed of by *(a)* the former IDB and *(b)* Invest Northern Ireland at the TK-ECC factory site at Dundonald. [95536]

Mr. Pearson: European Components Corporation purchased a 23-acre land holding and the 275,000 sq ft factory from IDB in July 1995. There have been no subsequent land disposals at this site by IDB or Invest NI.

PRIME MINISTER

Chemical Weapons Convention

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with President Bush during his last visit to Washington on United States compliance with the inspection requirements of the Chemical Weapons Convention. [95268]

The Prime Minister: None. The US is fully compliant with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention including the requirements for inspectors.

Chequers

Nick Harvey: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the *(a)* official entertainment functions and *(b)* conferences which have been held at Chequers in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [95525]

The Prime Minister: My family and I have used Chequers in a variety of ways, both official and private, consistent with the wishes of the donor, Lord Lee, and the Chequers Estate Acts.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Prime Minister how many days he has spent in residence at Chequers in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [95528]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 16W.

Iraq

Ian Lucas: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 292, if he will make a statement on the circumstances in which the veto of a Security Council Resolution would be unreasonable. [95009]

The Prime Minister: As I outlined in my evidence to the Liaison Committee, we cannot have a situation in which there is a material breach recognised by everybody and yet action is unreasonably blocked.

No. 12 Downing Street (Refurbishment)

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister from which countries timber was obtained for the refurbishment of No. 12 Downing Street; and what steps he took to ensure that the timber used was derived from legal and sustainable sources. [84733]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 3 December 2002]:* The ground floor of No. 12 Downing Street was refurbished in 2001 in order to relocate staff from No. 10 Downing Street. The contract did not specify for the supply of timber as none was required. However during the course of the project the contractor had to replace a short length of skirting board using Medium Density Fibre Board (MDF) off cuts. Our contractors abide by the industry guidelines of "Forests Forever (A Campaign For Wood) Environmental Timber Purchasing Policy 2000 following the commitment given by DEFRA in July 2000 that timber used on the Government Estate should be derived from sustainable sources.

Race Equality and Diversity Taskforce

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Prime Minister (1) whether it will be within the scope of the new Race Equality and Diversity taskforce to recommend *(a)* legislation and *(b)* financial incentives, to encourage positive discrimination; [94853]

(2) what the remit will be of the Race Equality and Diversity Taskforce. [94688]

The Prime Minister: Race Equality and Diversity Taskforce has been established by the Institute for Public Policy Research. The Government does not have any responsibility for the Taskforce or its terms of reference. However, the Government would of course take note of any reports or recommendations arising from the Taskforce.

CABINET OFFICE

Public Body Appointments

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people at or above state pension age have been appointed to public bodies in the past two years. [95277]

Mr. Alexander: There is no age limit for people applying to be considered for public appointments.

The following figures on age are available for chairs and members appointed and re-appointed to the boards of public bodies within the remit of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. As the figures are not broken down by gender there are no figures on how many of the appointees and re-appointees are at or above state pension age.

Age band	*Chairs*	*Percentage of total*	*Members*	*Percentage of total*
2000–01				
66 plus	56	12.2	298	8.8
56–65	214	46.6	1,058	31.1
2001–02				
66 plus	47	12.7	252	8.1
56–65	201	54.2	1,110	35.5

Figures for other public appointments, which do not fall within the remit of the Commissioner, are not available.

Contingency Planning

Tom Brake: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 892W, on contingency planning, what alternative back-up communication medium is available in the event of failure with or unavailability of the Public Switch Telephone Network as the principal and common medium for communication between emergency services throughout the UK; and what plans the Government has to introduce a more secure medium than the current PSTN as the principal and common medium for communication between emergency services throughout the UK. [94514]

Mr. Alexander: The emergency communications network (ECN) is available to the emergency services throughout the UK as a back-up to the PSTN. The emergency services radio replacement programme will provide security based on digital standards and interoperability across the emergency service agencies.

Government Car Service

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Ministers are entitled because of security reasons to use ministerial cars for all purposes including party purposes. [94994]

Mr. Alexander: This information is not disclosed under Exemption 1*(a)* of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information on the grounds that its disclosure could harm national security.

Public Service Targets

Tony Wright: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what the key public service targets are against which the Delivery Unit monitors progress; and what assessments have been made by the Delivery Unit of progress against these targets; [95107]

(2) how the Delivery Unit selects the key public service targets that it will monitor. [95106]

Mr. Alexander: The Delivery Unit works with HM Treasury to help departments meet their Public Service Agreement targets set out in Cm 5571, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House. The Government monitors progress against these targets regularly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Accountancy (investigation and Discipline Board)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions officials from her Department have had with officials from the Accountancy Foundation concerning the creation of the investigation and discipline board. [96189]

Miss Melanie Johnson: In the course of the recent Review of the Regulatory Regime of the Accountancy Profession, officials from the Department of Trade and Industry held extensive discussions with all the key interests as well as undertaking a full public consultation. Meetings were held with officials of the Accountancy Foundation, which covered all the main aspects of the review including the role of the investigation and discipline board.

Consultancy Contracts

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* terms of reference and *(b)* guidelines have been set for the Government's review of the relationship between companies, their accountants and the awarding of consultancy contracts. [94397]

Miss Melanie Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry set out in her statement to the House on Wednesday 29 January a range of measures to be taken by Government, business

and regulators to address the concerns raised following last year's corporate and auditing scandals in the US. This includes measures to address the threats to auditor independence where an audit firm provides non-audit services to an audit client, such as consultancy services. The Auditing Practices Board will be reviewing this further as part of its newly expanded role as standard-setter on auditor independence issues.

Consumer Credit Act

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research she has commissioned into the effectiveness of the Consumer Credit Act 1974; what plans she has to amend this Act; and if she will make a statement. [94411]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* In July 2001 we announced a major review of the UK's consumer credit laws. We have already published the results of our consultations on financial limits and exemptions and we have consulted on early settlement and on-line agreements. On 28 November 2002 I published the Household Survey on the Cause, Extent and Effects of Overindebtedness. This research identified a number of changes that need to be made to the Consumer Credit Act to encourage responsible lending.

On 30 January I launched a consultation on licensing and issued my response to the 2nd Report of the Task Force on Tackling Overindebtedness.

Decisions on where the Act might need to be amended will be informed by these consultations and announced in due course.

British Trade International

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will place the technical note underlying British Trade International's Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if she will make a statement. [94881]

Ms Hewitt: The technical note underlying British Trade International's Public Service Agreement is being finalised and will be published on the website shortly.

Consumer Direct

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether Dudley will be included in the pilot projects for Consumer Direct. [95215]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Local authorities will be invited later this year to prepare collaborative proposals for delivering Consumer Direct, via a regional approach. Pathfinder regions or nations will be selected on the basis of evaluation criteria that will be published at that time. A core specification for the new helpline, setting out eg minimum standards and service levels, is currently being developed.

Credit Cards

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she is taking to ensure transparency in the credit card market. [95434]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 366W.

Directors' and Officers' Insurance

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to make it a statutory obligation for non-executive directors to hold directors' and officers' insurance. [94631]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Section 30 of the Companies Act 1985 allows a company to insure its directors against actions by the company or by third parties. There is no distinction between executive and non-executive directors.

In his "Review of the role and effectiveness of non-executive directors", published on 20 January, Derek Higgs recommends that the Combined Code should be supplemented to include a provision that companies should arrange appropriate "directors' and officers'" insurance.

Fireworks

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to encourage organised firework displays in order to curb misuse of the private use of fireworks. [95243]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have no plans to encourage increases in the number of organised firework displays.

Food Retail Industry

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her policy is on mergers in the food retail industry; and if she will make a statement. [95212]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* Proposed mergers in the food retail industry are considered, like other proposed mergers, under the provisions of the relevant legislation, currently the Fair Trading Act 1973. As a first step, the Office of Fair Trading investigates and then advises the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether a merger raises competition concerns meriting further in-depth investigation by the Competition Commission. The Secretary of State follows the advice of the Office of Fair Trading on whether to refer a merger to the Competition Commission, save in exceptional circumstances.

Gender Pay Gap

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the gap between the average earnings of men and women is in *(a)* the North West and *(b)* Bolton. [95101]

Alan Johnson: In 2002 the gap between the average earnings of men and women in the North West was approximately 18 per cent. compared to the national average of 19 per cent. The North West experienced a narrowing of the pay difference between men and

women by half a percentage point compared to 2001. Unfortunately it is not possible to obtain figures for Bolton.

Nuclear Industry

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total quantity was of plutonium permanently withdrawn from safeguards under the provisions of Article 14 of the 1978 Trilateral Safeguards Agreement between the United Kingdom, Euratom and the International Atomic Energy Agency; and which were reactors of origin of the plutonium. [93907]

Nigel Griffiths: A report provided in July 2000 (28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1094W) set out this information and noted that, other than for the return of military-origin material temporarily brought into safeguards, notifications for permanent withdrawals from safeguards involved a total of less than 10 grams of plutonium. This conclusion still holds.

When nuclear material is subject to commercial bulk process like reprocessing, material from different origins becomes mixed in the plant and hence loses its separate identity. For each plutonium isotope, the atoms involved are also indistinguishable and thus regarded as interchangeable. This means that it is not possible to make a definitive statement about the reactors in which the plutonium concerned was produced.

Police Forces (UK Airports)

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of whether the disparity in the charging and cost regimes operated by different police forces in respect of UK airports *(a)* constitutes a distortion in the market and *(b)* conflicts with UK and EU competition policies; and if she will make a statement. [94523]

Miss Melanie Johnson: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, in his reply of 3 February, in response to my hon. Friend's question number 94476, *Official Report*, column 34W, outlined the current arrangements for charging for police services at airports, noted the recent review of the policing of airports by Sir John Wheeler and noted the work that the Home Office and the Department for Transport are doing in response to this review. Any competition implications will be given full consideration as part of the policy process.

TRANSPORT

Congestion Tax

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment the Government have made of the imposition of a congestion tax under the terms of the Transport Act 2000 upon those working in *(a)* the office cleaning services, *(b)* the hotel or catering industries, *(c)* the entertainment industry, *(d)* retail businesses, *(e)* health and ancillary services, *(f)* the teaching professions, *(g)* the security services, *(h)* the fire services and *(i)* the police. [95545]

Mr. Jamieson: It is for individual local authorities or, in London, the Mayor to assess the impact of any congestion charging scheme that they propose to introduce under the powers available to them in the Transport Act 2000 or the Greater London Authority Act 1999.

Freight Facility Grants

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his oral statement of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 712, whether the budget for freight facility grants covers *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* 2003–04. [95049]

Mr. Jamieson: My hon. Friend said in the House on 28 January that freight facility grants and track access grants in 2003–04 will account for some £40 million of expenditure, which is additional to expenditure in 2002–03.

Fuel Cards

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many fuel cards issued by him have been listed as lost or stolen since 1997. [95295]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport does not issue fuel cards; and neither did its predecessor Departments since 1997.

Government Car Service

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many departmental civil servants were supplied with a motor vehicle as part of their employment package in each year since 1997. [95292]

Mr. Jamieson: None.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many civil servants in his Department received a fuel card supplied with a motor vehicle as part of their salary package in each year since 1997. [95294]

Mr. Jamieson: There are no staff in the Department supplied with a fuel card or a motor vehicle as part of their salary package. This was also true of predecessor Departments since 1997.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the make and cost of each motor vehicle supplied to *(a)* himself, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, *(d)* Special Advisers and *(e)* departmental officials as part of their employment package or terms of office in each year since 1997; and how many have been lost or stolen. [95293]

Mr. Jamieson: No Ministers or officials in my Department are supplied with cars as part of their employment package. Ministers, including myself, and the Permanent Secretary have the use of cars for official business during their term of office. During 2002 cars supplied in this way were as follows:

(a) Secretary of State, Rover 75, £18,796

(b) Minister of State, Rover 75, £17,188

(c) Under-Secretary of State, Nissan Primera, £14,239

(d) Vehicles are not supplied to Special Advisers

(e) The Permanent Secretary, Ford Mondeo, £11,068

No vehicles have been lost or stolen.

Under Machinery of Government changes the Department has only been in existence since 29 May 2002 and comparable figures for previous years cannot be given.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many insurance claims have been *(a)* lodged and *(b)* paid out by insurance companies as a result of motor vehicles supplied to (i) himself, (ii) Ministers of State, (iii) Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, (iv) Special Advisers and (v) departmental officials as part of their employment package or terms of office having been lost or stolen in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [95296]

Mr. Jamieson: One claim has been lodged with the Government Car and Despatch Agency as a result of the use of a motor vehicle supplied to Ministers or officials in the Department. This claim is for an incident in 2003. None of the vehicles has been lost or stolen. Under Machinery of Government changes the Department has only been in existence since 29 May 2002. Information for predecessor Departments is not available.

London Underground

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what agreements he has reached with the Mayor of London about the London Underground; and if he will make a statement. [95057]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government and TfL have agreed to work together to secure the transfer of the underground to TfL concurrently with, or as soon as possible after, Metronet reaching financial close for the deals to modernise the Bakerloo, Central and Victoria lines and the sub surface lines.

Transfer will only happen ahead of amendments being made to the Greater London Authority Act with the agreement of the PPP bidders and lenders.

This has been made possible by the Mayor's undertaking not to pursue his appeal to the state aid decision or any further legal challenge to the PPP.

Newcastle Central Station

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the decision was taken by the British Transport Police to close the station concourse area at Newcastle Central Station after 11 pm; and what plans he has to continue this arrangement. [95679]

Mr. Jamieson: A station's operating hours are the responsibility of the operator not the British Transport Police (BTP). The decision to close Newcastle Central Station at 11.30pm, after the last passenger service has departed, was taken in 1990–91 by the British Railways Board and was continued by Great North Eastern Railway. The station does partially re-open during the night to cater for passengers arriving and departing on overnight services. The BTP advised in 1993–94 that the taxi rank on the station concourse should move to council property after 11.30pm because the station was no longer open and the rank was attracting large crowds that had no connection with the station.

Office of the Rail Regulator

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the Office of the Rail Regulator's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94210]

Mr. Jamieson: Under Treasury guidelines, a Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) is no longer required for the Office of the Rail Regulator (ORR). However, ORR does produce an annual business plan and an annual report: the business plan sets out the activities and targets for the coming year and how ORR expects to deliver against its objectives; the annual report is an account to Parliament on previous progress, delivery and achievement against objectives. Both meet general SDA requirements.

Rail Freight

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent changes have taken place or are planned to funding arrangements for freight on the railways; and if he will make a statement on his Department's strategy for increasing rail freight on Britain's rail network. [94595]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority's updated strategic plan, published on 30 January, explains their priorities including those for freight.

The Government published a report on its targets and progress in meeting them in relation to the 10-year plan on 17 December 2002. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

Roads (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the grant to Gloucestershire for roads; what the backlog of road works in Gloucestershire is; and if he will make a statement. [93958]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 28 January 2003]*: For the financial year 2003–04 Gloucestershire county council will receive £8.109 million for the maintenance of roads and bridges.

Based on the asset value of Gloucestershire county council's highways network the backlog of work represents approximately 4 per cent. of their asset value and predominately relates to non-principal roads.

Also, in the LTP 2002 settlement the Government agreed to provide up to £22.235 million for the Gloucester SW bypass.

Strategic Rail Authority (Rural Proofing)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if the Strategic Rail Authority is bound by the commitment in the Rural White Paper 2000, to rural proof its policies and strategies; [94854]

(2) what guidance he has issued to the Strategic Rail Authority on rural proofing its policies and strategies. [94855]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority is covered by the Rural White Paper commitment.

Paragraph 6.8 of the Secretary of State's Directions and Guidance states that the Authority should "ensure that its strategies, its investments (including in passenger franchises) and other expenditures, and its other activities have regard to their economic, social and environmental impacts". This includes, among other things, impacts on rural communities.

Street Lighting

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans his Department has to cooperate with Ofgem and the DTI to speed up the implementation of competition in street lighting connections. [95497]

Mr. Jamieson: The implementation of competition in street lighting connections is the responsibility of the DTI and Ofgem. But my Department is in discussions with them to see what can be done to speed the process up, since competition in this area will greatly assist in tackling the backlogs in street lighting which we are committed to remove under the 10-Year Plan for Transport.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans his Department has to include an indicative amount of funding for street lighting for inclusion into the Local Transport Plan settlement for 2004–05 and future years. [95499]

Mr. Jamieson: The 2004–05 Local Transport Plan settlement for maintenance was announced in December last year without an indicative amount for street lighting. A decision on whether indicative amounts for street lighting will be included in future settlements will be taken at the relevant time in the light of progress in tackling the overall backlogs in local highway maintenance.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to include in the Local Transport Plan highway maintenance settlement funding for street lighting renewal. [95502]

Mr. Jamieson: Local Transport Plan funding can already be used for street lighting renewal, or for any capital purpose across the services a local authority provides.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what support his Department is giving to local authorities to develop detailed inventories and risk management systems in relation to street lighting stock. [95503]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department is encouraging local authorities to develop detailed inventories and risk management systems for street lighting stock. Guidance is being developed within the Lighting Board, which has representatives from all UK highway authorities and the lighting industry. We are also funding relevant research and development.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many outbreaks of bovine TB there were in each county, in each month of the last year. [95063]

Mr. Morley: Statistics by county and month are not available. National statistics for the year 2002 by county will be available on the internet in late summer. Raw data for 2002 for the areas covered by Animal Health Offices are set out in the table. Raw data do not have the same degree of accuracy as national statistics.

Animal Health Office	*Total new herd TB incidents January to December 2002*	*Of which are considered confirmed new TB incidents*
England		
Avon	97	51
Bury	2	0
Carlisle Division (Cumbria)	33	5
Chelmsford	5	0
Cornwall	426	240
Devon	508	252
Dorset	105	43
Gloucester	273	190
Hereford and Worcester	295	188
Leeds	8	5
Leicestershire	33	7
Lincoln Division	9	2
Newcastle Division	30	11
Preston Division	9	0
Reading	13	0
Reigate	16	8
Stafford Division, Cheshire	27	13
Stafford Division Derbyshire	65	37
Stafford Division, Staffs	171	112
Shropshire	64	38
Somerset	161	75
Wiltshire	136	77
Wales		
Clwyd	9	4
Glamorgan, Mid	3	1
Glamorgan, South	2	0
Glamorgan, West	14	5
Gwent	97	54
Gwynedd	7	1
Powys, North	40	18
Powys, South	84	55
Scotland		
Ayr	50	12
Galashiels	5	1
Inverness	3	1
Inverurie	18	1
Perth	13	5

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the number of humans infected by bovine tuberculosis from badgers in the last 10 years. [95329]

Ms Blears: I have been asked to reply.

The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) collects data on the number of cases of M.Bovis. A breakdown of the number caused by cattle or badgers is not available. The number of reported cases of M.Bovis in humans since 1993 are as follows.

Year	Total
1993[1]	37
1994	31
1995	20
1996	30
1997	32
1998	29
1999	31
2000	18
2001[2]	26
Total	345

[1] Figures not held pre 1993.
[2] 2001 is a provisional figure.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the measures her Department is taking on badgers and associated TB disease in the Saltdean area. [95330]

Mr. Morley: The licences granted by Defra under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 for the prevention of serious damage to property in Saltdean were not related to bovine TB control measures. No action on disease control grounds is currently being taken on badgers except within the Krebs trial areas. None of these is near Saltdean.

However given that badgers are susceptible to bovine TB it is important that any proposals to relocate badgers takes into account the risk of the spread of disease. Some five badgers positive to bovine TB were identified between 1984 and 1998 within a five kilometre radius of this sett at Saltdean. Some 55 have been found within a twenty kilometre radius.

Since 1996 there have been intermittent incidents of bovine TB in cattle within a twenty kilometre radius of Saltdean. The figures are as follows:

Year of incident	Within 20km radius of Saltdean	In East Sussex
1996	2	2
1997	4	4
1998	3	3
1999	5	6
2000	2	2
2001	2	3
2002	4	5

A discussion forum on 27 November provided the opportunity for an exchange of views on the Saltdean case. We are currently considering proposals for a way forward in the light of reports received since then.

Capita Group

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the contracts that have been awarded to the Capita Group by her Department. [89967]

Alun Michael: Contracts have been awarded to the Capita Group by the Department for recruitment services; project management work; and for training seminars and courses covering security; records management; knowledge management; Diversity and, Freedom of Information. During the FMD outbreak the Capita Group provided Clerks of Works to manage on-farm services in connection with cleansing and disinfection work.

Coffee Market

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action she is taking to examine the operation of the world coffee market. [94640]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The UK is a member, through the EU, of the International Coffee Organisation (ICO), a United Nations body established to, among other things, "achieve a reasonable balance between world supply and demand on a basis which will assure adequate supplies of coffee at fair prices to consumers and markets for coffee at remunerative prices to producers to facilitate the expansion and transparency of international trade in coffee". The ICO, therefore monitors the world coffee market on an on-going basis and provides its members with market statistics and reports.

The UK contributes to the ICO's examination of its world coffee statistics and reports and to the development of its policies. A major plank of the Organisation's current activity is the Coffee Quality Improvement Programme, which was introduced on 1 October 2002. It requires exports of unprocessed coffee from member countries to comply with minimum standards which should have a positive effect upon supply and demand and, in turn, producer prices. Discussions are also under way within the organisation about how exports of processed coffee should be dealt with.

Committee Reports

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will place in the Library the latest Annual Report of the *(a)* Committee of Investigation for Great Britain, *(b)* Committee of Agricultural Valuation, *(c)* Committee on Products and Processes for Use in Public Water Supply and Swimming Pools, *(d)* Advisory Committee on Pesticides and *(e)* Consumers' Committee for Great Britain under the Agricultural Marketing Act 1958; and if she will make a statement. [93712]

Alun Michael: The Committee of Investigation for Great Britain, the Committee on Agricultural Valuation and the Consumers Committee for Great Britain under the Agricultural Act 1958 are now effectively defunct and have therefore not produced Annual Reports for a number of years.

Copies of the current Annual Reports of the Committee of Products and Processes for Use in. Public Water Supply and the Advisory Committee on Pesticides have now been placed in the Library. Future copies will also be placed in the Library on publication.

Dairy Incomes

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the average net income of dairy farmers was in 2000–01; and what she expects the figure to be in *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03. [94425]

Mr. Morley: Average net farm income:

Net farm income is defined as the return to the principal farmer and spouse for their labour and on the tenant-type capital of the business.

Average net farm income for full-time dairy farms in England was £10,800 in 2000–01, £22,800 in 2001–02 and is forecasted to be £17,000 in 2002–03.

Fair Trade

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what fair trade criteria she sets when deciding upon what suppliers to use. [89908]

Alun Michael: As explained by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 9 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 92W, the Government are committed to supporting ethical trading wherever possible within the boundaries set by the public procurement rules and provides significant support to the Fair Trade Foundation's efforts in promoting the supply and marketing of fair trade products.

This is reflected in Defra's Green Guide for Buyers (http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/sdig/improving/partf/greenbuy/index.htm) and the work that departmental officials are undertaking with Defra's catering contractors. In consultation with them Defra has produced a catering action sheet that, among other things, calls for promotion of fair trade or ethically produced food. I shall shortly receive a report from officials about work on reviewing Defra's catering contracts and working with our caterers to make fair trade tea and coffee generally available within the Department.

Fish Stocks

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much is included in the Environment Agency's budget for the maintenance of fish stocks; and what that figure was in 1992. [95482]

Mr. Morley: In 2002–03 the Environment Agency's total forecast fisheries budget for England and Wales is £26.5 million, of which the Government (Defra and the National Assembly Government) will provide £9.8 million in grant-in-aid, to help meet the Agency's statutory duty in relation to salmon and freshwater fisheries.

In 1992 the total fisheries budget of the National Rivers Authority (the Environment Agency's predecessor) for England and Wales was £23.6 million of which the Government provided £13 million in grant-in-aid.

Flooding

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many homes flooded *(a)* in January 2003, *(b)* in winter 2000 and *(c)* in the previous two major floods in (i) the lower Thames Valley downstream of the Jubilee River, (ii) Surrey and (iii) Spelthorne. [94613]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The number of properties flooded in 2003 is provisional as information is still being gathered. The information for 2000 and 2003 is based on properties known to have flooded internally. The figures for 1968 and 1947 are taken from the historic flood outlines. It is not known how many of the properties affected flooded internally.

All information is the best available to the Environment Agency.

Number of properties confirmed	*River Thames from Windsor to Teddington (downstream of Jubilee River)*	*Surrey (includes Thames, Bournes and Wey)*	*Spelthorne, Borough, (Thames, Colne)*
2003—January	c. 123	c. 231	c. 60
2000—October/November/December	c. 47	c. 333, (also includes River Mole)	c. 40
1968	Not available	c. 4,724	Not available
1947	c. 6,956	c. 7,015	c. 2,114

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the key flood defence systems in the Thames Valley that are not in good condition or better. [95346]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The River Thames is the primary drainage channel conveying river flows through the Thames Valley. Along the stretch of river between Reading and Teddington (the effective tidal limit) the Environment Agency report that there are no riverside flood defence structures that are in worse than good condition. The weirs that primarily control water levels for navigation also have an important function in flood level control, however the condition of the weirs did not contribute to the flooding in the Thames Valley in the New Year period. The Agency advise that eight of these weirs are in worse than good condition and their reconstruction is either in progress or planned in the medium term. These weirs, with provisional reconstruction dates, are listed in the table.

Weirs	*Provisional reconstruction dates*
Marsh Weir (near Henley)	under construction
Sunbury A Weir	2003–05
Shepperton B Weir	2004–07
Romney Weir (near Windsor)	2006–08
Bell Weir (near Runnymede)	2007–10
Molesey B Weir	2007–08
Molesey D Weir	2008–10
Teddington Weir	2009–11

Focus Groups

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what use she has

made of focus group research since June 2001; and if she will identify for each research project the *(a)* topics covered and *(b)* total cost. [93102]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The Department has made use of focus group research as follows:

Project	*Cost (£)*
Consultation requirements on the release of genetically modified organisms	[1]23,000
Views on the management of radioactive waste	[1]56,000
The 2004 Periodic review: Research into Customers Views[2]	25,000
Pilot and customer research on the content and presentation of information which might be made available by water and sewerage undertakers	[1]13,800
The appraisal of the intangible human health related impacts of flooding [3]	[1]285,000
Improving the public awareness and understanding of flood risk[3]	[1]80,000
Water-based Sport and recreation—the facts[4]	[1]139,000
Contribution to the ongoing Woodland Creation Review in England	3,535

[1] Costs relate to total project of which focus groups formed an undifferentiated part.
[2] Used to inform the Initial Guidance from the Secretary of State to the Director General of Water services. 2004 periodic review of water price limits which was published on 21 January 2003.
[3] Research being undertaken by a consortium.
[4] Undertaken by Brighton University—published December 2001.

GM Crops

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures she is taking to halt the approval process for GM rape and maize before the European Commission set out in the European Union Directive of 17 October 2002. [94916]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* The Government are not taking any measures to halt the decision making process for these applications to import and market GM grain in the European Union. We believe decisions on these applications should be taken based on scientific evidence and existing legal obligations laid down in Directive 2001/18 on the release of GMOs to the environment.

Logica

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what contracts have been awarded by her Department to Logica since 1 August 2002, providing in each case the *(a)* title, *(b)* total cost, *(c)* time scale and *(d)* terms of reference on the contract; what the reasons were for awarding each contract; and if she will place copies of the contracts in the Library. [93272]

Alun Michael: From information held centrally, since 1 August 2002 the Department has not awarded any contracts to Logica.

Nobel House

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to refurbish Nobel House; and when the refurbishment is due to take place. [95733]

Alun Michael: The Department is investigating options for the refurbishment of Nobel House but decisions have yet to be taken.

Seals

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what plans she has to improve reporting and monitoring practices in respect of seals; [80855]

(2) how many seals have been killed *(a)* deliberately and *(b)* accidentally by humans in each year since 1972; and of those killed deliberately, how many were despatched pursuant to section 9 of the Conservation of Seals Act 1970; [80857]

(3) if she will make a statement on the discharge of her responsibilities in relation to seals under *(a)* the EU Habitats Directive, *(b)* Article 8 of the Berne Convention and *(c)* the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981; [80853]

(4) what steps she is taking to encourage *(a)* fishermen and *(b)* fish farmers to adopt the use of non-lethal means of seal deterrence; [80854]

(5) what plans she has to review section 9 of the Conservation of Seals Act 1970 [80856]

Mr. Morley *[pursuant to his answer, 26 November 2002, Official Report, c. 240W]:* Paragraph five of my answer was incomplete and should read as follows:

"Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is an offence to use a self-locking snare to trap any wild mammal, including seals."

The rest of the answer remains correct.

Sugar Beet

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for alternative industrial uses of sugar beet; and if she will make a statement. [94894]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Sugar beet has potential for the production of bioethanol and the Government announced in the pre-Budget report that it intends to introduce a 20p per litre reduction in duty on bioethanol compared to ultra low sulphur petrol. Industry and other stakeholders are being consulted about when this incentive should be introduced. Production of bioethanol from lignocellulosic materials is likely to offer additional environmental advantage and the Government will consider best how to give it further support. There is potential to exploit other molecules from sugar beet, some of which have high value, and this is already known to the industry. The Government-Industry

Forum on Non-Food Uses of Crops was set up in 2001 to review market opportunities for non-food crops and make recommendations to Government on policy affecting their use. The Forum has looked at several non-food crop applications, including bioethanol.

Veterinary Inspectors

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures the Department can take to remove veterinary inspectors who misuse their powers. [94515]

Mr. Morley: Veterinary Inspectors are appointed by the Secretary of State under the Animal Health Act 1981.

There are three main categories of veterinarians who are appointed to carry out inspection duties under the Act:

State Veterinary Service (SVS) veterinary staff

Local Veterinary Inspectors (LVIs)

Temporary Veterinary Inspectors (TVIs)

Any breach or misuse of powers under the Act is taken very seriously by the Department. Additionally, the veterinary profession is governed by The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 which provides disciplinary powers under the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons professional code of conduct.

The Divisional Veterinary Manager (DVM) is responsible for work carried out in his/her Division. In instances where LVIs or TVIs infringe or fail to comply with their terms and conditions of appointment, perform duties unsatisfactorily or are guilty of conduct which makes suspension or termination of the appointment desirable they may be suspended and ultimately terminated.

SVS Veterinary Officers are serving civil servants. They are bound by the terms and conditions set out in the Defra Staff Handbook. In addition they are bound by the terms of the Official Secrets Act. Breach of the forgoing may result in termination of appointment and in certain circumstances criminal or civil proceedings.

DEFENCE

Armed Forces (Deployments)

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troops are deployed in Afghanistan; in which regions they are deployed; and what tasks are assigned to them. [95320]

Mr. Ingram: There are some 300 British troops deployed in Afghanistan, mostly with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The ISAF is tasked with maintaining security in support of the Transitional Islamic Authority of Afghanistan, led by President Karzai. Its deployment is limited to Kabul and its immediate environs by UN Security Council Resolution 1444.

Aircraft Serviceability Rates

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what targets have been set for DARA regarding aircraft serviceability rates; and if he will make a statement. [95137]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 4 February 2003]*: The term serviceability has a strict meaning in military aviation and serviceability targets apply only at unit level. Therefore, the Ministry of Defence does not set targets for the Defence Aviation Repair Agency expressed in terms of serviceability. However, as my answer on 23 July 2002, *Official Report*, columns 911–12W, to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Merron) pointed out, the agency works to a range of key targets that are designed to help improve quality, efficiency, and overall performance levels.

Airwave

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects Airwave to enter service. [95177]

Mr. Ingram: Airwave is a Home Office PFI contract with mmO2 managed by the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO). The Ministry of Defence is buying into the service as a Department of Trade and Industry approved public safety user.

The Airwave service is being rolled out across the United Kingdom between 2001 and 2005 to a programme agreed between PITO, mm02, and the Home Office police constabularies. Airwave has already entered service in some of these constabulary areas.

Access to the Airwave service is available now to Ministry of Defence users, through a Defence Communications Services Agency enabling contract. The service is being taken up in accordance with individual project plans, and in line with the service rollout time scales.

Updates to the Airwave service rollout plan can be obtained from PITO.

Armed Forces (Gulf)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what memoranda of understanding have been reached with the United States regarding the command and control of British troops in the Gulf region; what provisions exist for the maintenance of UK national control over operations in the event of hostilities; and if he will make a statement. [94606]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 31 January 2003]*: Should it become necessary to commit British forces to military action against Iraq the Government will ensure that command and control arrangements providing appropriate levels of national direction of British forces are put in place.

Armoured Vehicles

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the investigations into improving the counter-surveillance capability of the Challenger 2 to be completed. [95185]

Mr. Ingram: We continually investigate ways of further improving the counter-surveillance capability of our in-service equipment; Challenger 2 is no different in this respect.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the modifications to the Challenger 2 main battle tank will be completed. [95259]

Mr. Ingram: Modifications to armoured vehicles continue throughout their in-service life, either because of faults that are identified, or new technologies provide improved capability that can be inserted through incremental acquisition. Challenger 2 is no different in this respect. In the case of specific modifications to improve the performance of Challenger 2 in desert conditions, the Ministry of Defence continues to expect measures to be completed in time for possible future operations.

Carrier Programme

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the prime contractor for the carrier programme. [93600]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement made in the House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on Thursday 30 January 2003 *Official Report*, columns 1026–41.

Future Aircraft Carrier

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what policy his Department has on the use of British manufactured goods on the future aircraft carrier. [90431]

Mr. Ingram: It remains Government policy that the fabrication and assembly of new warship hulls for the Royal Navy should be undertaken in United Kingdom shipyards, and this, of course, applies to the construction of the future aircraft carriers. However, the policy does not apply to all of the vessels' sub-systems.

As the Defence Industrial Policy Paper published last October, made clear, competition remains the bedrock of our procurement policy, although the benefit to the UK economy from MOD contracts is taken into account when assessing bids. In order to provide the Armed Forces with the equipment they require at the best value for money for the taxpayer, prime contractors are expected to use competition extensively to select sub-contractors. British industry is well-placed to compete for the equipment and sub-systems that will be required for the future aircraft carrier.

A copy of the Government's Defence Industrial Policy has been placed in the Library of the House.

Fylingdales

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* officials from his Department have had with (i) France, (ii) Germany, (iii) Italy and (iv) Spain regarding the US request to use Fylingdales; and what the outcome was of such discussions. [94288]

Mr. Hoon: I have had no discussions with my counterparts from France, Germany, Italy and Spain about the US request to upgrade RAF Flyingdales. Ministry of Defence officials speak regularly with their counterparts in these countries and keep them informed on United Kingdom defence matters, including those relating to missile defence, as appropriate.

Harrier

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Harrier programme. [94431]

Mr. Ingram: The Harrier GR7 fleet will undergo two upgrade programmes over the next few years. First, 30 aircraft will be upgraded to GR7A standard by the integration of the Rolls-Royce Pegasus Mkl07 engine. This will provide improved performance, particularly for carrier borne operation. This programme is due to be completed by the end of 2005 at a total cost of approximately £150 million.

Secondly, all Harrier GR7 and GR7A aircraft will receive avionics and weapons upgrades to provide the aircraft with a much improved capability, in particular the ability to deliver the new generation of smart weapons that are about to enter service. These aircraft will be designated Harrier GR9 and GR9A. In addition all T10 training aircraft will be similarly upgraded to T12 standard.

The Harrier GR7 and T10 upgrade programme will be carried out by BAE Systems as Prime Contractor. The initial contract awarded late last year is valued at approximately £150 million. Further contracts with BAE Systems as prime contractor are planned for late this year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many jobs he estimates will be *(a)* created and *(b)* maintained as a consequence of the announcement on the Harrier order. [94432]

Mr. Ingram: It is not anticipated that there will be any changes in Ministry of Defence personnel numbers as a result of the recent award of a contract to BAE Systems for the upgrade of the Harrier GR7 and T10 fleet.

Any changes in staff numbers at BAE Systems are a matter for the company.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 551, if he will set out the links between the Iraqi regime and terrorist organisations. [94997]

Mr. Hoon: Iraq has a long record of support for terrorism: this includes support for Palestinian terrorist groups (e.g. Abu Nidhal), payments to the families of suicide bombers and the activities of the MeK against Iran. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on 29 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 871, we also know of links between al-Qaeda and Iraq, although we cannot be sure of their exact extent.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures will be put in place to ensure that, in the event of a war with Iraq, British men and women serving

in that theatre have adequate opportunity to telephone their families at reasonable cost; what discounted rates his Department has negotiated with mobile phone operators for Service personnel on active duty; and if he will make a statement. [95090]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence recognises the importance of regular communication between deployed Service personnel and their families. Consequently, although no decision has been taken to commit HM forces to military action in the Gulf, it is our intention to implement the Operational Welfare Package (OWP) for those personnel deployed to the Gulf region, where the infrastructure and environment allow.

The OWP includes a comprehensive communications element to enable deployed Service personnel to remain in contact with their families. This will entitle personnel to 20 minutes of publicly-funded telephone calls per week, and they will also be able to purchase additional telephone minutes. The cost of additional minutes will vary between locations, reflecting the varying types of communications system that will be installed. However, in most cases, the rate will be lower than that charged by commercial mobile telephone companies.

The OWP will also allow Service personnel to send and receive emails, to access the internet and to send and receive free forces aerogrammes (blueys) and electronic blueys. Finally, deployed personnel and their families will be entitled to concessionary mail and parcel charges, which will allow them to send and receive letters and parcels at subsidised rates.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with the US Administration about planned changes to the Iraqi military in the event of regime change in Iraq. [95174]

Mr. Hoon: I have had no discussions with the US Administration about any specific changes to the Iraqi military.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to increase the number of strike missions by the RAF in the Iraqi no-fly zone. [95190]

Mr. Ingram: None. Coalition aircraft only respond in self-defence to threats from the Iraqi air defence system.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in how many strike missions the RAF was involved in the Iraqi no fly zones in each of the last 12 months. [95260]

Mr. Ingram: We record only those occasions when RAF aircraft release ordnance responding in self-defence to threats from Iraqi air defences. We do not record events in which RAF aircraft are airborne as part of a no fly zone patrol, and when the response is made by other coalition aircraft.

In the 12 months prior to January the totals were:

Month—2002	*Total*
January	0
February	0
March	0
April	0
May	2
June	2
July	1
August	2
September	6
October	4
November	4
December	6

Maritime Assets

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he has made of the ability of Sea Harriers to function in an air defence role in Gulf conditions before deciding not to include them in the task force; [94532]

(2) for what reason HMS Ark Royal is not carrying *(a)* Harrier GR7s and *(b)* Harrier FA2s; [94555]

(3) if he will make a statement on the defence of Royal Navy vessels against air attack during a possible conflict with Iraq. [94531]

Mr. Ingram: Maritime assets are extremely flexible. The decision to deploy HMS Ark Royal in the Landing Platform Helicopter role reflected contingency planning. However, she is capable of operating both naval FA2 Sea Harriers and RAF GR7s and could reconfigure while on deployment. The naval task group includes an escort force matched to the size of the task group. That escort force is able to provide air, surface and underwater protection. Merlin and Sea Kings with their early warning systems are also available. In addition, in the Gulf, force protection is provided jointly across coalition forces. Royal Navy ships have the necessary equipment to ensure that they are able to achieve a high degree of integration with coalition assets. Force protection is an issue that is well practised and understood. The threat to any United Kingdom asset is kept under review.

Missile Defence

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures will be put in place to protect UK interests when the Government give formal consent for the US Government to use RAF Fylingdales in the US Missile Defence System; and what memoranda of understanding and agreements are being drawn up for the formal use of RAF Fylingdales in the US AMD system. [94969]

Mr. Hoon: We will be negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States covering arrangements for the upgrade and for the future operation of the missile defence applications of the radar.

RAF Fylingdales will continue to be staffed, operated and controlled by the Royal Air Force. Existing data-sharing arrangements would continue, applying also to

new missile defence data. The new arrangements will also maintain the existing principle of joint decision-making relating to the use of United States strategic assets based in the United Kingdom.

MOD Installations (Security)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how often security is reviewed at Ministry of Defence installations. [95179]

Mr. Ingram: Security in the Ministry of Defence is a function of command in the case of the military, and of mainstream line management, in the case of civilian staff. It is the business of Commanders and civilian managers at every level. Commanding officers/head of establishments are responsible for keeping protective security in their area of responsibility under constant review, taking into account the changing threat environment and the risks to their operational or business outputs. There is, in addition, a requirement for all establishments to be subject to formal external inspection by security staff; the minimum frequency of such inspections is determined by a system of categorisation which takes into account the threat from terrorism and espionage, and the sensitivity of the establishment concerned.

The details of the system of establishment categorisation, and the associated inspection regime, are classified and withheld in accordance with Exemption 1 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ocean Class Commando Carrier

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he plans to build a second Ocean class commando carrier. [94548]

Mr. Ingram: At present there are no plans to build a second Ocean class ship. HMS Ocean is due to leave service in 2018. We are beginning to investigate how to replace the capability she provides as well as that of the CVS carriers (when tasked in a landing platform helicopter role). No decisions have yet been taken on what form this replacement capability will take.

SA80

Michael Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* troops and *(b)* front line troops being sent to the Gulf are equipped with SA80 Mark 1 unmodified assault rifles. [94617]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 30 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 958W, to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth).

Support Vehicle Programme

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the Ministry of Defence's Support Vehicle Programme. [95188]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 646W to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock).

Theatre Missile Defence

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what submissions his Department has made to NATO as part of its feasibility study on theatre missile defence; and if he will place them in the Library. [94287]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence has been fully engaged in the NATO Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence Feasibility Studies that are about to be completed. We have contributed information gained from our Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme (TRRAP), an unclassified summary of which was placed in the House of Commons Library in February 2002.

Type 45 Destroyers

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the air defence Type 45 Destroyer will have the ability to hit targets on land. [95542]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* The Type 45 Anti-Air Warfare Destroyer, fitted with the 4.5 inch Mk8 Mod 1 gun, will provide the same Naval gunfire support as the current surface fleet capability. However, it is designed and built with significant space and weight margins to enable incremental acquisition should an emerging requirement necessitate a different equipment fit. Under such circumstances, the design could be modified to incorporate improved land attack capabilities including a larger calibre gun or a land attack missile system.

UK Forces (Sierra Leone)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the UK armed forces are serving in Sierra Leone. [95233]

Mr. Ingram: On 31 July 2002 the security situation in Sierra Leone was judged to be benign enough to end Operation Silkman (the overarching operation for United Kingdom forces in Sierra Leone) leaving a self-sustaining UK-led International Military Advisory and Training Team (EVLATT).

The IMATT currently involves some 114 personnel, of which around 100 are members of the UK armed forces. The UK also provides the Chief of Staff, six HQ staff officers and 15 military observers to the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).

SCOTLAND

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what her estimate is of the total expenditure by her Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92482]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Sewel Convention

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the way in which Sewel motions work. [94096]

Mrs. Liddell: The 'Sewel Convention' is a commitment made by the Government during the passage of the Scotland Bill that "the UK Parliament would not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters except with the agreement of the devolved legislature. The Devolved Administrations will be responsible for seeking such agreement as may be required for this purpose on an approach from the UK Government". Proposals for the inclusion of provisions relating to devolved matters in a UK Bill, and therefore the need to invoke the Sewel Convention, arise at the initiative of either the UK Government or the Executive, but in every case, require a process of discussion and agreement between the two Administrations. That process normally involves an exchange of correspondence between the UK Minister who is in charge of the Bill and the First Minister, or the relevant portfolio Minister.

My Department recently provided written evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Procedures Committee on the way in which Sewel motions work. Further information on Sewel motions is provided in Devolution Guidance Note 10, "Post-Devolution Primary Legislation Affecting Scotland", which is published on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's website.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what evidence has been collated by the Government on the education of women in western Afghanistan. [95280]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 573W.

Central Africa

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made towards an evaluation of the humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic. [95279]

Clare Short: Until now, inter-agency missions to assess the humanitarian situation in rebel-controlled areas have not been able to take place due to security concerns. Where assessments of the humanitarian situation have taken place outside of the capital, Bangui, they have been by plane to government-controlled areas in the north-west of CAR. Reports from agencies have stated that in these areas there is not a humanitarian crisis but that there is a shortage of medical supplies.

Recent reports from the UN, however, state that rebels in the north and centre of the CAR have now given approval to a humanitarian assessment mission in the zones under their control this month. Eight UN agencies will assess the humanitarian, health, nutritional, economic and agricultural situation in rebel-held areas, as well as looking at issues relating to education, food security, water facilities, sanitation and human rights.

Food Aid (Africa)

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the levels of theft of food aid stocks in *(a)* Malawi, *(b)* Zimbabwe and *(c)* Zambia. [95282]

Clare Short: The distribution of food aid stocks have been well monitored and policed with very low levels of theft:

Malawi:

No significant reports of theft of food aid stocks from either the World Food Programme (WFP) or NGOs involved in the distribution of food aid.

Zambia:

Theft from food aid stocks, since the start of the relief operation, has mainly been confined to isolated, infrequent, and extremely small-scale incidents of pilfering from remote warehouses, and remains well below the world food programme's 2 per cent. threshold for "loss acceptability". One slightly more significant incident did occur in January, in Sinazongwe district, when 84 MT of transiting WFP food-aid was seized by local villagers who were mistakenly concerned that they would be denied their January ration if the food left their district. The perpetrators have been arrested, some of the food has already been recovered, and the matter remains in the hands of the Zambian police authorities.

Zimbabwe:

The level of losses in Zimbabwe remains very low, and low by comparison with very many other humanitarian operations worldwide.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on food aid requirements in *(a)* Zimbabwe, *(b)* Zambia, *(c)* Swaziland, *(d)* Lesotho, *(e)* Mozambique and *(f)* Malawi. [95283]

Clare Short: The current food aid requirements as detailed in the December 2002—Regional Emergency Food Security Assessment Report from the Southern African Development Community are as follows.

Zimbabwe:

Some 7,180,000 people, who represent 52 per cent. of the population, will require an estimated 345,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through March 2003.

Zambia:

Some 2,770,000 people, who represent 28 per cent. of the population, will require an estimated 133,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through March 2003.

Swaziland:

Some 300,000 people, who represent 31 per cent. of the population, will require an estimated 173,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through March 2003.

esotho:

Some 760,000 people, who represent 34 per cent. of e population, will require an estimated 36,000 tonnes emergency cereal food assistance through March 003.

Iozambique:

Some 650,000 people, who represent 3 per cent. of the opulation, will require an estimated 31,000 tonnes of nergency cereal food assistance through March 2003.

Ialawi:

Some 3,590,000 people, who represent 31 per cent. of ne population, will require an estimated 173,000 tonnes f emergency cereal food assistance through March 003.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for nternational Development what estimate she has made f the number of hunger related deaths in southern frica since November 2002; and if she will make a tatement. [95285]

Clare Short: While there has been some deterioration n the food security situation in southern Africa, global cute malnutrition levels have not been found to be larming. This may be due to a number of factors ndicating that the crisis goes beyond food alone. There ave been few recorded deaths that can be attributed irectly to starvation. However, mortality among those lready sick, particularly people suffering from AIDS, ave increased as a result of poor nutrition.

Iraq

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures the Government are taking for the return of refugees to parts of Iraq following military action in the region. [95165]

Clare Short: A key objective for the international community, including Her Majesty's Government, is to enable and assist refugee populations to return to their own countries and communities as soon as it is safe for them to do so.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what actions are being taken by the Government in conjunction with European partners to deal with the likely increase of Iraqi refugees in Iran in the event of military action in the region. [95167]

Clare Short: We and many of our European partners are in close contact with relevant specialist international agencies about the potential for an increased flow of refugees into Iran and other neighbouring countries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, receives annual core funding from my Department partly to enable them to prepare for such eventualities. They are drawing up appropriate contingency plans, including the prepositioning of food and other basic supplies.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what representations she made to the US Department of State in the development of their contingency plans for humanitarian assistance following military action in Iraq announced by the State Department of the 16 of January; [95169]

(2) if she will make a statement on the contingency plans that have been developed by the Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department for the provision of humanitarian assistance to Iraq; [95171]

(3) what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on *(a)* the problems caused to delivering humanitarian assistance to Iraq posed by Iraqi air defences and *(b)* the provision of British troops in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Iraq; [95170]

(4) what consultation her Department's Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department has had with the Ministry of Defence and the US Department of Defence in the development of contingency plans for providing humanitarian assistance to Iraq in the event of any military action in the region; [95168]

(5) what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the use of British forces to provide protection for relief workers in Iraq. [95176]

Clare Short: My Department is drawing up contingency plans for a range of eventualities in Iraq, and is holding regular discussions about these with other Government Departments, and with international partners. My Department consults regularly with the Ministry of Defence on a variety of issues at official and ministerial level. This includes discussions about DFID's and MOD's contingency planning for a range of eventualities in Iraq, notably the importance of factoring the humanitarian risks of any conflict into military planning, and the provision of humanitarian assistance in a high-risk conflict environment. My Department has regular discussions with US counterparts on a similar set of issues, and coordinates with the MOD and the FCO on discussions they have with their counterparts.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with Iraqi opposition groups as part of the Department's Conflict Reduction Policy in the event of regime change in Iraq. [95172]

Clare Short: None.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessments have been made of the extent of the problem of landmines in Iraq; and what the British Government involvement will be in their removal. [95173]

Clare Short: The UK Government are already involved in landmines work in Northern Iraq through its support to the Mines Advisory Group (currently £1.3 million over two years), who are involved in clearance, training and awareness. Although some international agencies able to operate in the rest of the country have made some assessments of the extent of the land mine problem, comprehensive assessments are not available. In the event of an internationally co-operative Iraqi Government, a priority for the international community, including Her Majesty's Government, will

be to help with assessing the number and scale of landmine affected areas, and to assist the establishment of programmes to make these areas safe.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations have been made by the Government to the UN Sanctions Committee about the provision, by NGOs, of mobile medical units in certain parts of Iraq in the event of future military action. [95175]

Clare Short: None.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the report of the United Nations Office for the co-ordination of humanitarian affairs on integrated humanitarian contingency plans for Iraq and neighbouring countries. [95501]

Clare Short: My Department has regular discussions with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and other international partners, on a variety of issues including contingency planning for a range of eventualities in Iraq. UN plans are as good as they can be given the risks and uncertainties

Madagascar

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the level of malnutrition in Madagascar. [95284]

Clare Short: The latest information we have is that some 22,500 malnourished children are being provided supplementary feeding in Antananarivo. In addition, World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that some 400,000 people in Madagascar are in need of food relief and have scaled up their operations accordingly. However, despite the recent flooding, the UN Agencies report that the worst aspects of last year's crisis are now over.

Due to the fragility of the situation, the potential for a humanitarian crisis exists. My Department will continue to monitor the situation; if it should worsen, or continue for any length of time, we would then consider providing support to the agencies already working in this area, such as the WFP.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what bilateral aid the Government are giving to Madagascar. [95286]

Clare Short: DFID has no development programme in Madagascar. In countries where the UK does not have a bilateral development partnership, such as Madagascar, the UK helps ensure that the international system as a whole is as efficient and effective as possible in meeting common development goals. DFID provides nearly 20 per cent. of EC funds and contributes to the UN and other multilateral agencies. In addition, DFID fund small projects through the British Embassy Small Grants Scheme and the Civil Society Challenge Fund.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what impact the shortage of Ambovombe algae is having on food relief efforts in Madagascar. [95287]

Clare Short: A combination of drought in the south and flooding in the north of Madagascar has led to a shortage of the country's staple food, rice (additionally, in the north, the lack of clean water and latrines increases the risk of disease). The World Food Programme (WFP) has said that substitute foods, of which algae is one, are becoming scarce.

The lack of rice and dietary substitutes means that the potential for a humanitarian crisis exists in Madagascar. The WFP is presently in discussion with partners to identify the most appropriate response to the worsening situation.

The United Kingdom's membership contributions to the United Nations and European Union form part of the resources which the WFP draws upon in such a crisis. If the situation should worsen, or continue for any length of time, my Department would then consider what additional steps to take.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the humanitarian effects of the rising cost of rice in Madagascar. [95288]

Clare Short: The increase in the cost of rice in Madagascar is due to a combination of drought in the south and flooding in the north. In the north the harvest season for rice will begin shortly; if the flooding prevents this taking place, then prices will continue to rise and the food security situation will deteriorate further.

The potential for a humanitarian crisis exists. My Department will continue to monitor the situation; if it should worsen, or continue for any length of time, we would then consider providing support to the agencies already working in this area, such as the World Food Programme.

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by her Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92480]

Clare Short: The information is as follows:

Special advisers

My Department has employed two special advisers in each year since 1997. The salary cost for each financial year is shown in the table:

£

	Salary costs
1997–98	43,250
1998–99	61,387
1999–2000	72,885
2000–01	72,293
2001–02	83,923
2002–03	74,220

The Department for International Development did not exist before 1997. The ODA, which had a more limited remit, had no special advisers in post prior to 1997.

Press officers

The number of press officers employed in my Department and costs from 1996–97 to 2001–02 are shown in the following table:

£

	Number of press officers	*Annual cost*
1996–97	6	195,000
1997–98	6	243,000
1998–99	4	240,000
1999–2000	3.3	100,000
2000–01	4.5	150,000
2001–02	4	148,000

For 1996–97 to 1998–99, the figures are taken from the "Government Information and Communications Service" (HC 770), published by the Select Committee on Public Administration (29 July 1998), and include the Head and Deputy Head of the Information Department, who were not fully employed on press duties, but whose costs cannot be disaggregated from the totals. Separate records have not been maintained by DFID for those years.

From 1999–2000 to 2001–02, the costs include annual salary and pension contributions.

The information for the current year 2002–03 is not yet available.

Sudan

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact which recent violence in the Mayom County of Sudan is having on humanitarian relief efforts. [95278]

Clare Short: No reliable figures have been received on the disruption of humanitarian and relief services following the recent violence in Mayom County, Western Upper Nile. We understand the UN is deploying security and needs assessment teams to the region.

Third World Summit

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether her Department is sending observers to the Third World Social Forum in Porto Alegre; and if she will make a statement. [94255]

Clare Short: One of my officials attended the summit as an observer.

World Food Programme

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response she will make to the World Food Programme appeal of 28 January for *(a)* Mauritania, *(b)* Cape Verde, *(c)* Gambia, *(d)* Mali and *(e)* Senegal. [95289]

Clare Short: The World Food Programme appeal to donors on 28 January urged donors to contribute towards its Emergency Operation Appeal for the Western Sahel. We have already responded to this appeal and are providing a contribution of £1,000,000.

TREASURY

Retirement Green Paper

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether the Government expect an increase in the normal retirement age for public sector pension schemes, as proposed on page 106 of the Green Paper on Working and Saving for Retirement (Cm 5677), to be accompanied by a reduction in accrual rates. [95225]

Mr. Boateng: The higher normal pension age proposed in the Green Paper is likely to be introduced in most public service pension schemes as part of a package of changes. It will not be possible until the proposals for each scheme have been worked up to say what impact, if any, these changes will have on scheme accrual rates.

Accounting Firms

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will announce his decision on Government proposals to introduce the compulsory rotation of accounting firms. [94246]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry explained in her statement to the House on 29 January that the Co-ordinating Group on Audit and Accounting Issues had recommended against compulsory rotation of audit firms, and that the Government agreed with that recommendation.

Budget Statement

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to make an announcement on the timing of the 2003 Budget Statement; and if he will make a statement. [95500]

John Healey: The date of the Budget will be announced in due course.

Euro

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the date by which his Department will have completed its assessment of the five economic tests; what his policy is on holding a referendum on membership of the euro in the current Parliament if the five economic tests are not met by June 2003; and if he will make a statement. [92049]

Ruth Kelly: The Government have made clear that they will complete an assessment of the five economic tests within two years of the start of this Parliament. If, on the basis of the assessment, a decision to recommend joining is taken by the Government, it will be put to a vote in Parliament and then to a referendum of the British people.

Fireams

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many firearms intended for illegal importation were seized by HM Customs and Excise in *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002. [93978]

John Healey: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) on 30 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 1000–04W.

Inheritance Tax (Working Farmhouses)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the treatment for inheritance tax of working farmhouses; what plans he has to change that policy; and if he will make a statement. [95053]

John Healey: The long-standing rule is that farmhouses occupied for agricultural purposes qualify for inheritance tax relief so long as they are of a character appropriate to the property as a whole.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003 *Official Report*, column 55–56W, on the Inland Revenue, what his estimate is of the number of staff who transferred over to the Inland Revenue in 1999 from the contributions and benefits agencies; and if he will make a statement. [95556]

John Healey: The figures requested were published in January 2002 in the Inland Revenue Annual Report for the year ended 31 March 2000. On 1 April 1999, around 8,400 full-time equivalent units of staff joined the Inland Revenue from the Contributions Agency and, on 1 October 1999, 3,700 staff joined the Inland Revenue from the Benefits Agency.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what use has been made of the 80 per cent. the Government has held back from the Landfill Tax; and when he will announce its future proposals for the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. [95067]

John Healey: Since the landfill tax was introduced in 1996, revenue from the landfill tax that has not been claimed as tax credits to support projects through the landfill tax credit scheme has been used to finance a 0.2 per cent. point reduction in employers' National Insurance Contributions.

A statement regarding transition funding arrangements during 2003–04 for ongoing waste projects in England which are currently supported through the landfill tax credit scheme was made to the House on 3 February 2003. This statement also confirmed that in 2003–04 landfill operators may claim a tax credit of up to 6.5 per cent. of their annual landfill tax liability for contributions to local environmental projects, ensuring that the current level of funding for these types of projects is maintained. The Government is considering criticisms of the current landfill tax credit scheme and aims to set out any plans for reform of the continuing successor scheme.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many representations he has received from organisations regarding the potential impact of the new Landfill Tax Credit Scheme on their viability. [95068]

John Healey: The Government have received a range of representations on the reforms to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme announced in the last Pre-Budget Report.

My written statement of 3 February 2003 (Transitional Funding of Landfill Tax Credit Scheme) set out the Government's plans for providing transitional funding during 2003–4 for current on-going waste and recycling projects in England affected by the change.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether, under the reforms to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme, the money earmarked to maintain the current budget for local community environmental projects will continue to support the range of projects which have currently benefited from this sum. [95399]

John Healey: From 1 April 2003, landfill site operators will no longer be able to claim tax credit for contributions to projects under objects C and CC of the scheme. However, the reformed scheme will continue to make funding available for local community environmental projects. The Government are considering criticisms of the current landfill tax credit scheme and aim to set out any plans for reform of the continuing successor scheme on a budget timetable.

Mapeley

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he was informed before the agreement to sell the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise offices to Mapeley that they were to be owned by a company based in a tax haven; what allowance for the cost advantages that gave the company was made in the rent agreed; whether bidding was open to British-based companies; and what access he has to the accounts of the new owner. [94488]

Dawn Primarolo: When they appeared before the Treasury Sub-committee on 11 December 2002, the Chairmen of the Inland Revenue and the HM Customs and Excise explained the background to the STEPS contract and made it clear that Ministers were not informed of the offshore nature of this contract. The transcript of this hearing is publicly available. Ministers do not have access to Mapeley's accounts.

New Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what research he has commissioned into the effect on the British economy of a decision to grant the licence to build two new aircraft carriers for the Ministry of Defence to *(a)* BAE Systems, *(b)* Thales and *(c)* a joint bid from BAE Systems and Thales; [95104]

(2) what discussions he has had with other Ministers regarding a decision to grant the licence to build two new aircraft carriers for the Ministry of Defence; [95105]

(3) what discussions took place between officials from his Department and officials from the Ministry of Defence concerning the division of an order of two aircraft carriers between BAE Systems and Thales; and if he will make a statement. [96212]

Mr. Boateng: The new aircraft carriers will provide our armed forces with a significant improvement in military capability and will create or sustain 10,000 jobs across the United Kingdom. The Ministry of Defence has not yet completed the assessment phase, but at this stage we believe that the best way forward is to combine the strengths of both bidders in an alliance. The statement made to this House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 30 January 2003 clearly sets out the rationale for this strategy. Both bidders have agreed with this proposal and discussions are continuing with them. The final decision to place a contract is planned to be taken in 2004. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has consulted Treasury and DTI Ministers at each significant stage of the project. Discussions between Ministers will continue as the programme progresses, as will discussions between my officials and those in the Ministry of Defence.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on the provision of information on Special Purpose Vehicles; and what guidelines he has issued on how and when companies should disclose profits from work conducted under the Private Finance Initiative; [95097]

(2) what discussions officials from *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Accounting Standards Board have had with (i) Amey, (ii) Amec, (iii) Balfour Beatty, (iv) Jarvis and (v) Laing concerning how and when companies should disclose profits from work conducted under the Private Finance Initiative; [95102]

(3) what discussions officials from his Department have had with representatives of the Accounting Standards Board regarding *(a)* the provision of information on Special Purpose Vehicles and *(b)* guidelines on how and when companies should disclose profits from work conducted under the Private Finance Initiative. [95103]

Mr. Boateng: The provision of accounting information by all companies is a matter for the independent Accounting Standards Board, not for Government. Special Purpose Vehicles are required to abide by the ASB's rules, just as all other limited companies are.

The Accounting Standards Board is an independent body and the Government do not have details of the meetings that the Board and its officials hold with third parties. HM Treasury has observer status on the Accounting Standards Board and has regular contacts with the Board on a range of issues.

Treasury officials frequently meet with PFI stakeholders, including PFI contractors and investors, to discuss a variety of subjects.

Public Service Agreement

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 50W, on the Public Service Agreement, whether the annual planning round of his Department uses Public Service Agreements as a direct measure of the staffing levels required to run his Department; and if he will publish the guidelines used by the Treasury Management Board. [94376]

Mr. Boateng: Our Public Service Agreement Targets are central to how the Department allocates its resources during the annual business planning round. The business planning guidelines used by the Treasury Management Board are being placed in the Library of the House.

Tony Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the guidance provided to Departments on how they should report progress and achievement against their Public Service Agreement targets. [95109]

Mr. Boateng: A copy of the guidance issued for the spring 2003 departmental reports has been placed in the Library. The reports will include reporting against Public Service Agreement targets.

Tony Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what definition he uses of 'partially met' in relation to Departments' reporting of achievement against their public service agreement targets. [95108]

Mr. Boateng: 'Partially met' means that at least one part, but not all parts, of a target has been met.

Tax Offices

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many tax offices there are in the UK. [95432]

John Healey: The Inland Revenue has over 600 offices throughout the UK, ranging widely in size and function.

Tax Returns

Mr. Weir: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of tax returns for the year to 5 April 2002 were sent on behalf of taxpayers to the Inland Revenue by *(a)* chartered accountants, *(b)* certified accountants, *(c)* other agents using the term accountant in their designations and *(d)* solicitors. [96146]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is not available.

Tobacco

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 605W, concerning tobacco, what proportion of travellers previously purchasing at the indicative levels for tobacco were assumed to have an intent to resell illegally in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [95224]

John Healey: Of those travellers purchasing at the previous indicative levels for tobacco, it was assumed that around 7 per cent. were doing so with the intent to resell illegally in the UK.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Licensing (Churches)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations she has received regarding the implications of the new licensing legislation for churches; and if she will make a statement. [94593]

Dr. Howells: We have received many representations from members of the public and religious organisations about the proposal in the Licensing Bill to extend the entertainment licensing requirement for churches beyond Greater London, where it currently applies.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a statement to the House on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, columns 7–8WS, setting out the conclusions of our consideration of the provision of entertainment and entertainment facilities in places of public religious worship and village halls, church halls and other community buildings under the Licensing Bill. The Government have tabled an amendment to the Bill that would exempt secular entertainment provided in places of public religious worship and the provision of entertainment facilities in such places from the need to obtain a licence under the Bill when it is enacted. Music for the purposes of or incidental to a religious service or meeting will remain exempt.

Tourism Industry

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the per capita spend on the tourist industry in England was in 2001–02. [95398]

Dr. Howells: Direct financial support for the tourism industry in 2001–02 totalled £66.5 million, equating to £1.35 per capita in England, although £49.7 million of this was for the British Tourist Authority to promote Britain as a whole. Additionally, much other Government funding, including funding from my Department on, for example, museums and galleries, also benefits tourism.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq (Administration Costs)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the locations in Iraq where the UNMOVIC and IAEA inspectors have found the materials and equipment for weapons of mass destruction set out in the Government's Iraq dossier of 24 September 2002. [95023]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Given the advance publicity about the sites in the dossier the Government did not expect Iraq to leave things to be found. Of the materials and equipment mentioned in the dossier, UNMOVIC and the IAEA have reported uncovering a number of unfilled chemical munitions at a military equipment storage site and a large quantity of nuclear-related documents concealed at the home of an Iraqi scientist. Although not listed in the dossier, the inspectors have also discovered a very large number of rocket motors at a missile production facility. None of these discoveries were made at sites identified in the dossier.

As was made clear in the dossier and in numerous public statements, Iraq has become very adept at concealing its weapons. The inspection teams are continuing their searches at large numbers of locations throughout Iraq.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the interim findings of the UNMOVIC and IAEA Iraq inspection teams as presented in their respective reports to the United Nations Security Council on 27 January. [95022]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement made on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, columns 21–38, by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister regarding the Iraq situation.

Afghanistan Government

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been received by his Department concerning the stability of the coalition Government in Afghanistan. [95314]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have not received any representations about the current stability of the Transitional Authority.

Balkans

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice his Department is giving to travellers wishing to visit *(a)* Kosovo and *(b)* Bosnia-Herzegovina. [93593]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* We are not currently advising against all travel to Bosnia-Herzegovina. We are advising against non-essential travel to Kosovo.

FCO travel advice is available on the FCO's website www.fco.gov.uk and by telephone on 020 7008 0232/0233, by fax on 020 7008 0155/0164 or on written request from the Travel Advice Unit.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many times since 2001 he has taken flights within his departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied him on each trip. [95384]

Mr. Straw: Between January and June 2001, the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Robin Cook), did not undertake any UK travel on departmental business. Since June 2001, I have travelled within the UK on departmental business on three occasions-once on an RAF aircraft; once by commercial flight in business class; and once by helicopter. The details requested are as follows.

27 July 2002:

I travelled from London to Manchester in business class on a commercial flight to attend the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games. I was accompanied by my daughter (whose ticket I paid for myself) and by a Special Branch Protection Officer.

27 August 2002:

I travelled to Edinburgh and Belfast on EU-related regional visit on an RAF HS125. I was accompanied on this aircraft by my Private Secretary; a special adviser; three officials and a Special Branch Protection Officer.

6 September 2002:

I travelled on an RAF helicopter from London to Birmingham to a speech. Travel had originally been scheduled by train. At less than 48 hours notice, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia despatched his Foreign Minister to deliver a message to the Prime Minister. At the Prime Minister's request, I hosted the meeting on the morning of Friday 6 September. The only way to get to Birmingham in time to deliver the long-planned speech was by helicopter which was provided by the RAF. I was accompanied by my Private Secretary and by a Special Branch Protection Officer.

Pakistan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Pakistan authorities on democracy in that country; and if he will make a statement. [95230]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We welcomed the holding of multi-party elections in Pakistan on 10 October. In November my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wrote to President Musharraf and Prime Minister Jamali and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary wrote to Foreign Minister Kasuri. They made clear our readiness to assist in promoting democracy in Pakistan and confirmed our commitment to remain engaged with Pakistan throughout this transition. We place great importance on the transfer of power to the National Assembly and continue to believe that sustained strengthening of the judiciary, the rule of law and respect for human rights is the best long-term guarantee of Pakistan's democracy.

Terrorist Organisations (Funding)

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports his Department has received concerning the funding of terrorist organisations since 11 September 2001. [95323]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The FCO discusses terrorist financing with a wide range of countries and in multilateral fora including the EU and UN. The FCO receives reports from the UN 1390 Monitoring Group on the implementation of sanctions against al-Qaeda.

West Africa

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to address problems of regional instability in the Mano River region of West Africa, with particular reference to *(a)* the presence and conduct of Liberian and Sierra Leonean mercenaries in Cote d'Ivoire and other neighbouring countries and *(b)* the progress on decommissioning of small arms and light weapons in Liberia and Sierra Leone. [93406]

Mr. Rammell: Stability in Sierra Leone is threatened by conflicts in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire. We are supporting international and regional initiatives to resolve the conflict in Liberia especially through our membership of the International Contact Group and in Cote d'Ivoire.

Liberia remains a centre of gravity for mercenaries and armed groups in the region. Liberia continues to ignore the demands of the UN Security Council by sponsoring armed groups in the region. We aim to continue to contain the activities of the Liberian regime by maintaining effective UN sanctions against Liberia. We remain concerned about reports of Liberian involvement in the rebellion in Cote d'Ivoire.

We have taken steps to limit the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the sub-region through UN arms embargoes in Liberia and Sierra Leone, a disarmament programme in Sierra Leone and support for the ECOWAS Small Arms monitoring Mechanism.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Congestion Charge

Mr. Gale: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission what assessment the Commission has made of the impact of the imposition of a congestion tax under the terms of the Transport Act 2000 upon shift-working staff employed by the House. [95577]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: The implications of the congestion charge for staff of the House who have to work unsocial hours have been considered carefully. As I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) on 20 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 151W, the Commission will continue to keep an eye on developments, but has no current plans to reimburse employees.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many claimants of disability living allowance there were in each year since its introduction, broken down by local authority area. [93998]

Maria Eagle: The information has been placed in the Library.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many deaf people had access to a qualified British Sign Language interpreter at their aural tribunal for disability living allowance; and on how many occasions the expenses of a British Sign Language interpreter have been met by the Appeal Board; [92808]

(2) how many appeals by deaf applicants for disability living allowance have been taken to an aural tribunal in each year since 1997. [92809]

Maria Eagle: This is a matter for Neil Ward, Chief Executive of the Appeals Service. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Neil Ward to Mr. Malcolm Bruce dated 27 January 2003:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your questions regarding appeals in respect of Disability Living Allowance from deaf people and their access to a qualified British Sign Language interpreter at the oral tribunal hearing where requested.

Any party to a tribunal hearing who is profoundly deaf may request a sign language interpreter. Where such a request is made the Appeals Service will meet the associated costs and aim to provide a qualified, registered interpreter. No information is available on the number of appeals by deaf appellants in respect of Disability Living Allowance. During 2001–02 over £363,000 was spent on the provision of interpreters but this includes language translation where someone is not able to understand English. This financial year, up until 30 November 2002, £326,000 has been spent on the provision of interpreters.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Further Education Students

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether lump sum payments from school sixth form and college access funds used for living costs are treated as income or capital. [90914]

Malcolm Wicks: The treatment of access fund payments in the income-related benefits depends on whether the payment is made as a lump sum or in regular instalments and whether or not the payment is intended to meet general living costs.

Lump-sum payments not intended to form part of a series of payments are treated as capital. Where the payment is intended for items other than living costs it is disregarded provided it has been spent within 52 weeks, at which point the student will be contacted to verify their current savings.

Payments made on a regular basis are treated as income. Where the payments are intended to meet living costs the first £20 a week is ignored. Regular payments made for other purposes are disregarded in full.

National Insurance

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will ensure that employees are notified *(a)* of the amount received in respect of each employee annually for national insurance by his Department and *(b)* whether it is a qualifying year for pension purposes; and if he will make a statement. [95100]

John Healey: I have been asked to reply.

Employers are required to provide their employees with a notice showing the amount of contributions they have paid each year. A contributor can request a statement of their national insurance account from the Inland Revenue's National Insurance Contributions Office, and if a particular year is not a qualifying year then the contributor is advised how much to pay to make it a qualifying year.

Public Service Agreements

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will publish the annual targets for each major business on accuracy, unit costs and customer service underlying his Department's technical note on its public service agreement; and if he will make a statement. [94876]

Mr. McCartney: Annual targets for each of the Department's Executive Agencies will be published in their respective business plans in due course. Copies will be laid before the House and placed in the Library.

Unallocated Funds

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the total unallocated funds within his departmental expenditure limit *(a)* at the start of the financial year and *(b)* to date. [93411]

Mr. McCartney: The Departmental Unallocated Provision at the start of the financial year was £94.088 million and remains so at 31 December 2002.

HEALTH

Unlawful Sexual Activity

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what target he has set for the reduction in *(a)* under-16 conceptions and *(b)* the incidence of unlawful sexual activity among under-16s. [89577]

Ms Blears: Our teenage pregnancy strategy, launched in 1999, has a goal of halving the under-18 conception rate and setting a firmly established downward trend in the conception rate for under-16s by 2010. There is an interim target within the NHS Plan of a 15 per cent. reduction by 2004.

The teenage pregnancy strategy is multi-faceted and based on the best available evidence. Integral to the strategy is helping young people to resist pressure to have early sex through improved sex and relationship and personal social and health education programmes in schools and out of school settings, and supporting parents in talking to their children about sex and relationships issues.

Early signs of the strategy's impact are encouraging with latest data for 2000 showing a 6.2 per cent. reduction from 1998 in both under-18 and under-16 conception rates.

Accident and Emergency Services

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospitals in the Greater London area provide accident and emergency services; and if he will make a statement. [94322]

Mr. Hutton: There are 27 national health service trusts in London with 24 hour accident and emergency (A&E) departments. These are spread over 32 hospital sites.

Changes in the configuration of A&E departments are made in response to local circumstances to ensure that people have the right balance of emergency care services locally. When changes are made, clinical advice is taken about safety and quality.

Adolescent Mental Health Unit, Tooting

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the new adolescent mental health unit will open at Springfield hospital in Tooting. [93639]

Mr. Hutton: It is anticipated that the adolescent mental health unit will open in June 2003.

Beef (Spinal Cord)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the European Union's Beef Management Committee to discuss the practical problems of identifying spinal cord in frozen carcasses; and if he will make a statement. [92637]

Ms Blears: The European Union's Beef Management Committee has so far not discussed the practical problems of identifying spinal cord in frozen carcasses. Instead, it is foreseen that the EU's Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health will be the appropriate forum for discussing this and other specifically veterinary aspects of the supply of beef from intervention.

The United Kingdom raised this and other related issues at the meeting of this committee on 22–23 January. Those member states which have previously sent ex-intervention beef to the UK with specified risk material still attached gave assurances about the enhanced measures put in place to prevent a recurrence.

Cancelled Operations

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cancelled operations in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Wakefield and Pontefract hospitals have been attributed to a lack of capacity of high dependency and intensive care beds in the last 12 months for which statistics are available. [93792]

Mr. Hutton: Quarterly data are collected on the number of operations cancelled by the hospital for non-clinical reasons at the last minute, that is, on the day patients are due to arrive or after arrival in hospital, or on the day of their operation and on the day of surgery. These data are not broken down into the reasons for cancellation.

Cancelled operations data at England level and by national health service trust are available in the Library and on the Department's website at www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity/data_requests.htm.

Cancer

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to place his cancer funding tracking exercise on a permanent footing. [94516]

Ms Blears: The current work to identify investment in cancer services is an exceptional exercise.

We are devolving power from the centre to locally run services, to allow the freedom to innovate and improve care for patients. The increased resources that we have made available and will continue to make available to support the implementation of the Cancer Plan will move to the national health service frontline.

Primary care trusts will have freedom to decide where NHS resources are best spent, but they will need to account publicly for how they have used resources against the test of high clinical standards and good value for money.

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations for cancer patients have been cancelled on two or more occasions in the last available 12 month period. [93793]

Mr. Hutton: Quarterly data are collected on the number of operations cancelled by the hospital for non-clinical reasons at the last minute, that is, on the day patients are due to arrive or after arrival in hospital or on the day of their operation and on the day of surgery. These data are not broken down into which specialties patients were cancelled under, nor do they show if a patient's operation has been cancelled more than once.

The NHS Plan cancelled operations guarantee has been in place since 1 April 2002. It states that if a patient's operation is cancelled by the hospital on the day of surgery for non-clinical reasons, the hospital will have to offer another binding date within a maximum of the next 28 days, or fund the patient's treatment at the time and hospital of the patient's choice.

Cancelled operations data are available in the Library and on the Department's website at www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity/data requests.htm.

Chiropodists

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Health Professions Council on the use of protected titles of chiropodist and podiatrist; and if he will make a statement. [93915]

Mr. Hutton: I met with the President and chief executive of the Health Professions Council (HPC) on 4 December 2002; at which meeting all aspects of the HPC's proposals were discussed. However, it is for the HPC to propose and the Privy Council to determine the protected titles that will be associated with the parts and sub sections of the health professions register.

The aim of registration is to assure the public of the competence of registered healthcare professionals. The HPC consulted about which titles should be protected by law and restricted to use by those registered. These titles indicate that those registered have met HPC's standards of competence. Anyone who does not meet those standards may practise using an unprotected title.

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will recommend to the Health Professions Council that they institute a sub-register to enable chiropodists to practise by using an unprotected title; and if he will make a statement on the need for protected titles other than chiropodist. [93916]

Mr. Hutton: The aim of registration is to assure the public of the competence of healthcare professionals and, when necessary, to protect them. The Health Professions Council consulted about which titles should

be protected by law and has undertaken extensive market research to understand the public's perception of titles currently in use by health professionals. The introduction of a sub register would not serve the aims of registration and would be likely to lead to confusion and would not assist the public when trying to make informed choices about whom to consult about their health.

Correspondence

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 1 November 2002 from the hon. Member for Northavon regarding Mr. G. S., DoH reference PO 1019156. [93964]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* A reply was sent to the hon. Member on 30 January.

Doctors (International Recruitment)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the international recruitment of doctors to the NHS. [95472]

Mr. Hutton: The international recruitment of doctors continues to make an important contribution to the expansion of the medical workforce. At the end of 2002 further advertisements were placed in European journals to encourage applications.

General Practice

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reasons are for the delay in publishing the proposals for the new GP contract; and what steps have been taken to prevent further delay. [91506]

Mr. Hutton: The Government supports the decision of the National Health Service Confederation and the General Practice Council to change the timetable for publication of the new general medical services contract and is committed to doing all it can to support them in reaching a swift conclusion to the negotiations.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the proportion of patients who have put off visit to a GP in the last 12 months because of inconvenient opening hours *(a)* for each NHS region and *(b)* in total for England, in each of the last five years. [89649]

Mr. Hutton: There are no suitable regular data collections to inform such estimates.

Mr. David Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on single hander GP practices. [91148]

Mr. Hutton: Small practices are an important part of primary care, as the new general medical services contract framework makes clear. No one practice model has a monopoly on quality of care and single-handed practices continue to make a major contribution to the provision of excellent patient care.

Health Professions Council

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information the Health Professions Council provided to the Department on its proposed transitional arrangements regarding *(a)* the circumstances in which it intends to test applicants, competence to practise, *(b)* the likelihood of undertaking such a test and *(c)* the estimated number of such tests in the two year period allowed; and if he will make a statement. [93913]

Mr. Hutton: As part of the consultation process the Health Professions Council (HPC) undertook between July and September 2002, it provided the Department of Health with three documents:

"The Future, a Paper for consultation", published in July 2002

"Your responses", published in December 2002

"Key decisions", published in December 2002

The documents contained the HPC's proposals for transitional arrangements and set out the circumstances in which the HPC intends to test applicants' competence to practise.

The number of such likely tests is not known, as it depends on the number of currently unregistered practitioners who decide to apply for registration.

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department has had with the Health Professions Council on the training that new entrants to the register will need to ensure that they will be competent to the required minimum standard within the two year period; and if he will make a statement. [94232]

Mr. Hutton: I met the president and chief executive of the Health Professions Council (HPC) on 4 December 2002; at which meeting all aspects of the HPC's proposals were discussed. It is for the HPC to decide on standards for proficiency to be attained by all new entrants to the register. Training requirements may vary for individual applicants depending on their current proficiency.

Health Protection Agency

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to define the individual responsibilities of the various agencies responsible for responding to acts of bioterrorism are clear once the Health Protection Agency is established. [95695]

Mr. Hutton: Our proposals to combine responsibility for functions of various bodies into a unified Health Protection Agency (HPA) offer a coherent, co-ordinated approach to providing specialist support for health protection and health emergency planning. It is intended that the HPA will take responsibility for providing or commissioning the specialist support that the various bodies currently provide. The unified HPA will be equipped to deal with a range of emergencies and to provide a national response. The roles and responsibilities of other national health service organisations have been made available on the Department's emergency planning co-ordination unit's website.

Homeless People

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of the use of *(a)* accident and emergency and *(b)* GP services by homeless people. [87472]

Ms Blears: The Department does not collect information about the cost of the use of accident and emergency and general practitioner services by homeless people.

Hostels

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on health facilities for people living in hostels in Greater London. [94319]

Mr. Hutton: Primary care trusts (PCTs) have a duty to reduce inequalities in their local areas and if there is a significant homeless/hostel population in their area they will be expected to have developed, or be developing plans to provide appropriate and timely access to healthcare for these people.

In addition, the new requirement of local authorities to carry out a review of homelessness in their area and develop a homelessness strategy with local partners such as PCTs will help to identify gaps in services and ensure that there is appropriate mainstream and specialist health care for homeless people.

One way of targeting this group is through personal medical services pilots, where primary care is specifically targeted to meet a particular local need. Many general practitioners and nurses in London also work closely with hostels and day centres to provide health care services to homeless people and often provide health sessions in the hostel or centre.

In addition, we are generally trying to improve access for all through a variety of different access routes, for example, through walk-in-centres, diagnosis treatment centres and one-stop-shop facilities.

Junior Doctors

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the impact of the introduction of the New Deal for junior doctors and the resources made available to support its implementation. [89245]

Mr. Hutton: The New Deal has gradually reduced the hours worked by junior doctors since its inception in 1991. However the New Deal targets have changed and become tougher, making direct comparison across the years misleading.

In 1991, to comply with the New Deal a junior doctor had to work less than 82 hours a week; in 1993, 72 hours a week and in 1995, 56 hours a week. The introduction of stricter rest requirements in 1998 and of the new junior doctors' pay system in December 2000 led to temporary increases in non-compliance. The overall trend, however, has been a substantial reduction in the hours worked by junior doctors from 73 per cent. complying with the 82 hour limit in 1991, to 70.6 per cent. complying with the 56 hour limit in 2002. This has been accompanied by a steady increase in the number of junior doctors working for the national health service: 23,875 in September 1991; 31,777 in September 2002.

Implementation of the New Deal has been supported by New Deal task forces and their successor bodies, the regional action teams, who have worked with trusts to tackle long hours.

By the summer of 2003 approximately £31 million will have been made available to the NHS over three years, to support initiatives to help reduce junior doctors' hours and improve their living and working conditions. In addition, £150 million was made available over the same three-year period to support the introduction of the new junior doctors' contract, which was designed to incentivise trusts to comply with New Deal hours and rest requirements.

Local Government Grant Formula

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to alter the children's formula used in the local government grant formula. [94634]

Jacqui Smith: We have just completed a review of the formulae that will be used to allocate personal social services resources between local authorities from 2003–04. This resulted in the introduction of a new foster care element of the children's formula. Local government representatives were fully involved in the review and there was a public consultation last summer.

Male Health Workers

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of *(a)* nurses and *(b)* health care assistants employed by the NHS are men. [93950]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is shown in the table.

Health care assistants and other health care support workers work across the range of clinical national health service services. The Department and the NHS have developed titles used to identify them over a period of time. Groups identified in the table comprise the total group of clinical health care support staff working in the NHS.

NHS hospital and community health services (HCHS): qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, and other specific staff groups by gender in England as at 30 September 2001

	Qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff	*Health care assistants*[1]
Number of staff (head count)		
All staff	330,535	204,925
Male	31,451	24,357
Female	268,626	153,437
Unknown	30,458	27,131
Percentages		
Male	10.5	13.7
Female	89.5	86.3

[1] Includes health care assistants and support staff in acute, elderly and general, paediatrics, maternity, psychiatry, learning disabilities, community services, chiropody, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, radiography, speech and language therapy, pathology and other STT staff; nursing assistants/ auxiliaries and STT helper/assistants.

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figures exclude learners and agency staff.

Percentages are based on data which excludes staff for whom gender is unknown.

Source:

Department of Health non-medical workforce census.

Morning After Pill (Safeway Supermarket)

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which branches of Safeway supermarket are involved in the trial distribution of the morning after pill to girls under the age of 16. [95114]

Ms Blears: The information requested is not collected centrally. Arrangements for national health service provision of emergency contraception through community or supermarket pharmacies are a matter for local decision by primary care trusts.

NHS Bodies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the allocated budgets are for *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06 for (i) each executive non-departmental public body, (ii) special health authority and (iii) tribunal non-departmental public body (A) in cash terms and (B) on a full resource budgeting basis. [95772]

Mr. Lammy: Allocations for these bodies have not yet been decided.

NHS Finance

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his statements of 11 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 269, and of 8 January, *Official Report*, column 190, what percentage of the total Department of Health Budget in cash terms, is represented by the resource and capital allocations to primary care trusts, NHS trusts and strategic health authorities. [94775]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is shown in the table.

	Percentage of total NHS expenditure		
	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
Primary care trust revenue allocations[1]	73.5	73.1	72.5
Capital Allocations[2] to:			
Primary care trusts	0.1	0.1	0.1
NHS Trusts	1.2	1.2	1.2
Strategic health authorities[3]	1.3	1.3	1.3

[1] As announced in the 11 December 2002 HSC

[2] As announced in the 8 January 2003 HSC

[3] For allocation later to PCTs and NHS trusts to fund larger capital projects which required business case approval.

It is not appropriate to show total revenue and capital allocations as a percentage of the national health service budget. This is because NHS trust capital allocations are financed through primary care trust (PCT) revenue allocations. Adding the two allocations together would mean double counting this element of expenditure.

In addition to PCT revenue allocations, a number of revenue budgets currently held centrally will be issued to PCTs later, such as those for personal medical service pilot schemes. These will mean that PCTs will control more than 75 per cent. of the NHS budget from 2003–04 onwards.

NHS Treatment Abroad

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost is to his Department of setting up, researching and administering the pilot scheme to treat 234 NHS patients in France and Germany. [92557]

Mr. Hutton: Set up costs to the Department for the overseas treatment pilot in France and Germany is broken down as follows:

	£
Set up and project administration	150,730
Legal fees	278,000
Evaluation and research	40,000
Total	468,730

The learning from this project, including legal advice, has shaped the development of our policy on overseas treatment and current arrangements for commissioning this. It has therefore been of value beyond the scope of the initial project.

Nurses

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what data his Department has collated on the pay of *(a)* practice nurses and *(b)* NHS nurses; and if he will make a statement. [94141]

Mr. Hutton: The Department's 2000 national health service earnings survey collected detailed earnings data for about 500,000 staff, including nurses directly employed by around 190 NHS trusts and 50 health authorities in England.

Staff employed by independent contractors, such as general medical practitioners, including most practice nurses, are not included in these surveys and data relating to their earnings is not available centrally.

Data for the 2002 NHS earnings survey have been collected and are currently being processed and analysed. We plan to publish the results later in the year.

Copies of the 2000 NHS earnings survey results are available in Library.

Nursing and midwifery staff who are directly employed in the NHS have their pay determined by an independent pay review body. The Government have accepted in full and implemented the recommendations of the independent pay review body for nursing staff for the last four years without staging pay awards. From April 2002, all nursing staff directly employed in the NHS will have received an above inflation increase of at least 3.6 per cent.

Occupational Stress

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment has been made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress among health service employees. [93671]

Mr. Hutton: Research carried out in 1998 by the University of Sheffield and the psychological therapies research centre, University of Leeds, suggests that the incidence of work related stress in national health service employees is in the region of 26 per cent. The

causes most strongly associated with stress were, work demands; ability to influence work; lack of feedback and role conflict.

The Department of Health, through its Health at Work in the NHS Campaign, has issued a number of publications to NHS managers to assist them in identifying the causes of workplace stress and work with all staff to minimise their effect.

Overseas Nurse Advice Line

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 17 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 794W, on the overseas nurse advice line, what budget he has allocated for 2002–03 for *(a)* the overseas nurse advice line, and *(b)* the ethical nurse recruitment code of conduct. [95078]

Mr. Hutton: The indicative budget for the national health service overseas nurses advice line is £25,000.

Maintenance of the code of practice is baseline departmental activity which is paid from running costs.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 17 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 794W, on the overseas nurse advice line, when decisions on future funding will be made; and what assessment he has made of the success of the line. [95079]

Mr. Hutton: We intend to continue to fund the national health service overseas nurses advice line.

Latest figures of calls received by the overseas nurse advice line indicates an increase of 118 per cent. since December 2002. This suggests that the target audience is being reached and that the advice line is fulfilling its objectives.

Paediatric Pathologists

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many paediatric pathologists were employed in each health authority in each year since 1997; and how many established posts there were in the same period. [92518]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not collected by the Department. The work force census collects data at specialty level only, it does not collect data at sub-specialty level. Paediatric pathology is a sub-specialty of pathology.

Palliative Care

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have completed training as a consultant in palliative care in each of the last three years. [93267]

Mr. Hutton: Figures from the Department's work force census suggest that the number of consultants in palliative care has increased by around 90 per cent. since 1997.

The Department does not collect data on the number of specialist registrars completing training. The table shows the number of consultants in palliative care over the last three years.

Hospital medical consultants in palliative care

	Headcount
As at 30 September[1]	*Number*

Hospital medical consultants in palliative care

	Headcount
As at 30 September[1]	*Number*
2002	150
2001	120
2000	110
1999	90

[1] Data as at 30 September, except for 2002, which is at 31 March.

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Board

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Board will require overseas doctors applying to work in general practice in the UK to undergo familiarisation training as at present. [94403]

Mr. Hutton: There is at present no legal requirement for overseas doctors to undergo familiarisation training. However the Joint Committee on Postgraduate Training for General Practice normally makes this requirement of overseas doctors who apply to it for a certificate entitling them to practise in the United Kingdom.

The draft Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Board legislation similarly puts no legal obligations on the Board to require familiarisation training. Once the board is constituted, it will decide how to maintain high standards.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures the Government will take to ensure that the interests of general practice are properly represented on the Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Board and its subcommittees. [94402]

Mr. Hutton: We agree that general practice should be properly represented on the board and its sub-committees. Appointments to the board will be made in an open and fair manner. There is a wide range of bodies with an interest in the board's work, such as the Medical Royal Colleges, including the Royal College of General Practitioners and other bodies concerned with medical education and training, management of the national health service, patient and carer groups, universities, educationalists, and other health professionals.

The body must carry out all the duties assigned to it in legislation, particularly the supervision of postgraduate general practice education and training and setting of standards. It will therefore need general practitioner representation in order to do so properly.

PPP/PFI Projects

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total value of all NHS PPP and PFI projects has been since 1997. [93637]

Mr. Hutton: Data are not held centrally on the value of all service contracts held by national health service bodies with private sector organisations and could be collected only at disproportionate cost.

Information is held centrally on the value of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes with a capital value over £1 million. 103 NHS PR schemes, with a total capital value of £3.096 billion, have reached financial close since May 1997. This total includes major hospital rebuilding or reprovision projects as well as a range of smaller projects, e.g. for equipment.

Primary Care Trusts

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the £15 million annual investment in consultant sabbaticals starting in 2005–06 will come from the funds allocated to primary care trusts announced on 11 December 2002. [94142]

Mr. Hutton: The resources in primary care trust allocations, announced on 11 December, did not include the £15 million annual investment in consultant sabbaticals that is to be made available by 2005–06 under the plans announced by the Department on 23 January. The additional resources will be made available separately.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the allocations improving rewards for NHS consultants were included in the original allocations to primary care trusts announced on 11 December 2002. [94143]

Mr. Hutton: Resources for implementing the proposed new framework of incentives and rewards for National Health Service consultants have been included in the allocations to primary care trusts for 2003–04 to 2005–06, announced on 11 December 2002.

Additional funding will be made available to introduce a new system of consultant sabbaticals. Some additional funding may also be made available to NHS employing organisations that choose to implement the new consultant contract.

Professional Practitioners

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Health Professions Council will assess whether a health professional practitioner has practiced lawfully, safely and effectively; and if he will make a statement. [93914]

Mr. Hutton: This is a matter for the Health Professions Council, who will be coming forward with their assessment proposals shortly.

Severance Agreements

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many employees of NHS acute hospital trusts have been given severance agreements in excess of £100,000 in each of the past three years. [93641]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not held centrally.

Specialised Service Consultation

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to make public the forthcoming report on commissioning arrangements for specialised service consultation. [94602]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* We plan to publish the results of the consultation shortly.

Waiting Lists

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients waited more than one year for in-patient treatment in the last period for which figures are available. [92040]

Mr. Hutton: At the end of November 2002 there were 12,500 people who had been waiting more than 12 months for admission to hospital.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been on waiting lists in England and Wales for *(a)* more than 12 months and *(b)* more than 18 months; and if he will make a statement. [93921]

Mr. Hutton: At the end of November 2002, there were 12,515 patients on waiting lists for admission to hospital who were the responsibility of English primary care trusts (PCTs) and who had been waiting for more than 12 months. There are no patients, for whom English PCTs are responsible, who have been waiting 18 months or more.

Women Doctors

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of doctors employed by the NHS are women. [93951]

Mr. Hutton: The table shows the percentage of National Health Service female doctors in England as at 30 September 2001.

	Numbers (head count)	*Percentage*
All NHS doctors[1]	100,319	100
Of which female	36,562	36

[1] Excludes hospital practitioners and medical clinical assistants, most of whom are also GPs working part-time in hospitals.
Notes:
Data as at 30 September 2001.
Sources:
Department of Health general and personal medical services statistics.
Department of Health medical workforce census.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that the UK is implementing its responsibilities under the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention. [94585]

Mr. Denham: The Government are fully committed to meeting our obligations under the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which was implemented under the Biological Weapons Act 1974. More recently, we

took new powers to deal with noxious substances. Sections 54 and 55 of the Terrorism Act 2000 (as amended in Section 120 of the Anti-terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001) make it an offence to provide, receive or invite another to receive instruction or training in the making or use of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons. In addition, section 113 of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001 makes it an offence to use any noxious substance or thing with the intention of causing serious harm to public or property, and section 114 creates an offence of hoaxing using alleged noxious substances. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has taken forward initiatives—including the Green Paper laid before the House in April 2002—intended to strengthen international efforts, and mechanisms, to counter proliferation.

Crown Prosecution Service

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place the technical note underlying the Crown Prosecution Service Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [94882]

The Solicitor-General: I have been asked to reply.

The Crown Prosecution Service's Public Service Agreement targets are cross-cutting criminal justice system targets. The Home Office Public Service Agreement technical note, which covers the Crown Prosecution Service's Public Service Agreement targets, will be published shortly, and a copy will be placed in the Library,

Accommodation Centres

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for the Isle of Wight will receive a reply to his question of 22 January about searches for accommodation centres and induction centres. [95351]

Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 30 January 2003.

Algerian Asylum Seekers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Algerian nationals have sought asylum in each of the last four years; and how many cases are awaiting determination from each year. [94443]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: The table shows the number of Algerian nationals applying for asylum in each of the last four years for which figures are available, and the number of initial decisions made in these periods. The number of Algerian asylum applicants awaiting an initial decision for each of these years are not available, and could be obtained at disproportionate cost only by examination of individual case records.

Asylum applications received in the United Kingdom, and initial decisions, excluding dependants, nationals of Algeria[1]

Year	*Applications*[2]	*Initial decisions*[3,4]
1998	1,260	500
1999	1,385	905
2000	1,635	1,935
2001[5]	1,145	2,665

[1] Figures rounded to nearest five '*' = 1 or 2
[2] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January 1999 and March 2000
[3] Information is of initial decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions
[4] Decision figures do not necessarily relate to applications received in the same period
[5] Provisional

Information on the number of asylum applications is published quarterly on the Home Office website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html. The next publication will be available from 28 February and will cover the final quarter of 2002.

Area Cost Adjustment

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with his colleagues in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister about the impact of *(a)* the changes to the Area Cost Adjustment and *(b)* the new approach to Resource Equalisation on police funding in Essex; and what estimate he has made of the impact in financial terms. [93286]

Mr. Denham: Ministerial discussions during the recent review of funding formulae covered a range of subjects including the Area Cost Adjustment (ACA) and Resource Equalisation.

Any change to funding formulae will result in winners and losers. We carefully considered the impact that all the options for change would have on all police authorities before any final decisions were taken.

The way the ACA is calculated has been revised to make it much more sensitive to local circumstances. It now recognises that there can be high cost areas outside the South East and it recognises the evidence that there are variations within London and the South East.

The previous Resource Equalisation system recognised the different abilities of authorities to raise their own resources, but used an unrealistic assumption of council tax to do it. The new system assumes a national council tax that is close to what authorities actually charged in 2002–03 plus a small extra amount for inflation so that high need, low taxbase authorities are not unfairly penalised.

All police authorities have been protected from excessive fluctuations in grant by the application of floors and ceilings which ensure that every police authority will benefit from a minimum increase in general grant of 3 per cent.

Assets Recovery Agency

Colin Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Assets Recovery Agency. [94826]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Assets Recovery Agency came formally into being on 13 January, and its Director, Jane Earl, took up post on 3 February, as did her Assistant Director for Northern Ireland, Alan McQuillan. I have signed a commencement order to bring the Agency's powers of civil recovery, taxation, investigations and data sharing into force on 24 February, and the criminal confiscation provisions of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, which include powers for the Director, will come into force on 24 March.

Jane Earl and her staff will have my full support in their efforts to reduce crime. They will do this by making sure that those in our communities who seek to live off of the misery and suffering caused by crime are not allowed to enjoy their ill- gotten gains.

Asylum Accommodation (Scotland)

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the sites which are being considered for asylum seeker accommodation centres in Scotland. [95281]

Beverley Hughes: The current position on sites under consideration is as we announced in May 2002.

Site searching has continued since we made our initial announcement as we said it would. We will not be putting into the public domain details of any sites unless and until they are considered to be a serious prospect for the siting of an accommodation centre.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* private and *(b)* public consultation took place between the National Asylum Seekers Support Service and constituents of Sittingbourne and Sheppey with respect to the decision to open a refugee and asylum reception centre at the Coniston Hotel in Sittingbourne; and if he will make a statement. [91357]

Beverley Hughes: Prior to the meeting on 24 January there has been no public consultation between the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and constituents in Sittingbourne and Sheppey. On 12 September 2002 NASS wrote to the Chief Executive of Swale Borough Council to advise that NASS was considering a tender for use of bedspaces at the Coniston Hotel. The letter from NASS made it clear that the information was at that time "Commercial in Confidence" since the tender to which it related was still being evaluated. It was suggested in the letter that Swale Borough Council liaise with other agencies to consider matters which fell outside their responsibility, such as 'Police/Crime and Disorder concerns'. The Chief Executive was asked to provide specific information and also invited to provide any additional information he felt would be appropriate or relevant to local or regional circumstances. Two written replies were received from Swale Borough Council.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the hotels and guesthouses in the Gatwick area which are providing accommodation to asylum seekers, together with *(a)* the number of individuals in each case and *(b)* their country of origin; and what the average cost per week has been to public funds. [94609]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) does not currently accommodate any asylum seekers in hotels or guesthouses in the Gatwick area. NASS does not have a central record of hotels used by local authorities providing housing for asylum seekers. Some people who were transferred from Sangatte are being temporarily housed in the Gatwick area.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what checks are made on the accuracy of addresses provided by asylum seekers as their place of residence in the UK *(a)* at the time when they make new application for asylum and *(b)* at subsequent stages of their application. [94921]

Beverley Hughes: Immigration officers at ports of entry would normally seek to verify any address which is provided by an asylum seeker as his or her place of residence in the United Kingdom. If the asylum seeker will be staying with friends or relatives, every effort is made to contact the person concerned. In addition the friend or relative's personal details and address may be checked against Home Office records, including the Warnings Index. Similar checks are run on applicants who claim in-country.

The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) also requires its accommodation providers to confirm in writing that an asylum seeker has arrived at accommodation which is being provided as part of a support package.

All claimants' addresses are entered on the Case Information Database (CID) which includes a postcode check mechanism to double-check the address.

The onus is on all claimants to notify any changes of address which will be entered on CID.

The ability to maintain contact with all asylum seekers is a primary objective of measures in the Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and through the establishment of induction, accommodation and reporting centres. Asylum seekers will be informed of their obligations to provide up-to-date address details, and to report as required, during the induction process. The Immigration Service will actively manage the contact process: through the eight designated reporting centres, by using police stations and by visiting asylum seekers at their accommodation.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes were committed by asylum seekers, broken down by type of offence, in the most recent year for which information is available. [94924]

Mr. Denham: I regret that the information requested is not available from existing data collection systems.

Information on the number of asylum applications is published quarterly on the Home Office website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html. The next publication will be available from 28 February and will cover the final quarter of 2002.

Body Armour

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of the acceptability of body armour to the police; [93660]

(2) what assessment has been made of the number of lives saved through the use of protective body armour by the police; [93659]

(3) what guidance he gives to police forces on the occasions on which body armour is to be worn by the police. [93665]

Mr. Denham: All police forces in England and Wales operate within the Health and Safety (Police) Act 1997 and must, therefore, conduct (and maintain) risk assessments into the roles of their officers. Where a risk is identified, body armour is one of the measures that should be considered. There are a variety of levels of protection which can be offered according to the perceived threat and a risk assessment will normally establish the level of protection required. The use of protective equipment is ultimately a matter for chief officers of police.

All forces in England and Wales have access to dual-purpose body armour (knives and ballistic) either as a general or pool issue. All firearms units in England and Wales have access to overt heavy-duty body armour. In May 2002, the Home Office Police Scientific Development Branch set up a database to record instances when body armour has saved an officer from death or serious injury.

Coniston Hotel

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether the consultation on the Coniston Hotel as an asylum centre will be conducted independently of the NASS. [95544]

Beverley Hughes: On 20 January I announced that there will be an independent inquiry into the operation of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) which will include its general procurement processes. However, consultation on individual sites identified as potential accommodation for asylum seekers, whether on a short or longer term basis, will be carried out by NASS.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department why he has not replied to the letter to him dated 26 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Yimika Walker. [94694]

Beverley Hughes: I replied to my right hon. Friend on 4 February 2003.

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his officials at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate will answer the letters from the hon. Member for Vauxhall of 18 October 2002 and 13 December 2002, about a constituent, A466054. [94711]

Beverley Hughes: An official from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate wrote to my hon. Friend on 30 January 2003. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Council Tax

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the use of custodial sentences for *(a)* non-payment of council tax and *(b)* pensioners who have failed to meet council tax payments. [94941]

Mr. Leslie: I have been asked to reply.

Before seeking committal warrants, local authorities must have tried other enforcement measures and before sentencing a council tax debtor to a term of imprisonment, the Court must first determine that there has been wilful non-payment. Magistrates also have the power to remit all or part of a debt if they consider this is justified.

The Government believes that pensioners should be treated in the same way as any other person who has failed to pay their council tax. This includes the need for the Court to determine whether the debtor has the means to pay.

Committal to prison for the wilful non-payment of council tax provides an incentive to encourage payment. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to abolish it.

Public Transport (Crime)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with Transport for London regarding crimes committed on *(a)* the London Underground and *(b)* London buses; and if he will make a statement. [94203]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has not held any recent discussions with Transport for London on these matters he has however discussed transport crime with the Commissioner and the Mayor.

The Government takes tackling transport related crime along with tackling all forms of crime very seriously. Steps that we are taking to help to reduce violent crime, anti-social behaviour, and fear of crime as well as youth crime would all impact on helping to reduce transport related crime.

The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the Commissioner for Transport for London have set up a Transport Operational Command Unit. The unit has specific responsibility for policing agreed corridors on the London bus network.

A partnership has also been formed to fight crime on buses and coaches in England and create a safe environment for crews and passengers. The panel, entitled Safer Travel on Buses and Coaches Panel (STOP) has brought together bus operators, unions, transport and local authorities, the police, passenger groups and officials from Government Departments, including the Home Office. It is charged with considering how to combat assaults, anti-social behaviour and vandalism on vehicles and property.

The British Transport Police (BTP) work with Transport for London, London Underground, local police forces and other agencies to deliver a safe railway environment free from disruption and the fear of crime. The BTP also play a key role in the Secure Stations Scheme which encourages train operators, including London Underground, to improve security and gain national accreditation. London Underground has a number of its stations accredited under the scheme. Central funds amounting to £1.36 million have also been provided to the BTP to support their participation in the Street Crime initiative. This will help BTP step up operations on and around transport, targeting stations and their car parks, station approaches and concourses as well as on tubes and trains.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many reported cases of domestic violence there have been in *(a)* the west midlands and *(b)* England and Wales in the last four years; and how many of those cases resulted in a conviction. [84398]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 2 December 2002]:* Domestic violence is not separately identified in recorded crime statistics collected by the Home Office.

The British Crime Survey (BCS) provides national trend information on the number of incidents of domestic violence. The BCS figures are derived from a sample and so are subject to sampling error. Moreover, the BCS is carried out by face-to-face interviews and some respondents may be unwilling to reveal experience of domestic violence to interviewers.

The 1996 BCS included a self-completion component on domestic violence to encourage disclosure. Results were published in Home Office Research Study No. 191; copies are available in the Library.

The BCS defines domestic violence as all violent incidents, excluding mugging, in which the offender is a current or former partner, household member or other relative. For the 1996 self-completion module the coverage was limited to violence involving current or former partners.

The national BCS figures are as follows:

Number of BCS incidents of domestic violence, 1997 to 2001–02
BCS interviews England and Wales

Thousand

1997	*1999*	*2000*	*2001–02*
826	787	514	635

BCS figures for west midlands are available only for 2001–02 BCS interviews as the sample size in previous BCS reports was too small to provide reliable regional results. The 2001–02 west midlands figure is available only as a rate: 96 incidents per 10,000 adults.

Drug Treatment and Testing Orders

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug treatment and testing orders have been issued since the scheme was introduced; what the cost of each drug treatment and testing order is per person; what percentage of those issued with drug treatment and testing orders complete the course; and what percentage of those issued with drug treatment and testing orders have re-offended. [95115]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Between 1 October 2000, when the order was first rolled out to all courts in England and Wales, and 31 December 2002, 10,525 drug treatment and testing orders (DTTOs) were made. 46 per cent. of orders that commenced during this time were revoked for failing to comply, for a further conviction or for other reasons. 12 per cent. of orders have been completed, and 42 per cent. of orders are still continuing.

The assessed national average unit cost of a DTTO is £6,000, of which, in England, £3,600 per order is transferred to the Department of Health pooled treatment budget to cover treatment and related costs.

Information as to re-sentencing in respect of revoked orders is not available.

GBH Drug

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Government will make the drug GBH illegal. [95271]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has recommended that 4-Hydroxy-n-butyric acid, otherwise known as gammahydroxy-butrate or GHB, should be controlled as a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Following a public consultation, I have accepted the Advisory Council's recommendation.

It is expected the matter will come before Parliament in a few weeks' time and that the drug will become controlled by early summer.

Kent Policing Model

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make an assessment of the importance of patrolling within the Kent Policing Model. [95037]

Mr. Denham: Kent Police use a model of intelligence led policing to drive operational performance. Uniformed police patrol focused by intelligence is a fundamental constituent of this model. Kent Police has been subject to regular inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary at force and Basic Command Unit (BCU) level and has met its efficiency target for the last three years.

Lincolnshire Police Force

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* police civilian staff the Lincolnshire police force had in each year since 1997. [94245]

Mr. Denham: The table gives police officer and support staff strength in Lincolnshire police force in each year from 1997 to 2002.

	March					
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Police Officers	1,196	1,191	1,140	1,115	1,202	1,198
Support Staff	521	541	517	516	561	600

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offences were recorded by the Lincolnshire police force in each year since 1997, broken down by category. [94201]

Mr. Denham: The number of offences recorded by Lincolnshire police force, for the years requested, are given in the tables.

There was a change in counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998, which would have the tendency to increase the number of offences counted. Numbers of offences before and after this date are therefore not directly comparable.

Lincolnshire police force adopted the principle of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in March 2002, one month earlier than it was officially introduced across England and Wales. The aim of the Standard is to promote greater consistency between forces in the recording of crime and to take a more victim-orientated approach to crime recording.

Number of recorded offences in Lincolnshire, from 1997 to 2001–02, by offence group

	Total	Violence against the person	Sexual offences	Robbery	Total violent crime
1997[1]	43,381	3,051	329	107	3,487
1997–98[2]	41,792	3,112	331	105	3,548
1998–99[3]	46,670	4,239	393	149	4,781
1999–2000	46,170	3,866	325	178	4,369
2000–01	44,884	3,743	281	191	4,215
2001–02[5]	49,797	4,812	414	251	5,477

	Burglary	Theft and handling stolen goods	Fraud and forgery	Criminal damage	Drug and other offences
1997[1]	10,551	20,085	1,382	7,145	[4]731
1997–98[2]	9,495	19,875	1,144	7,019	[4]711
1998–99[3]	10,257	19,328	2,723	7,728	1,853
1999–2000	10,719	19,551	1,641	8,391	1,499
2000–01	9,583	18,938	1,662	9,078	1,408
2001–02[5]	9,592	19,728	1,968	11,282	1,750

[1] Recorded on a calendar year basis.
[2] The number of crimes recorded in that financial year using the coverage and rules in use until 31 March 1998.
[3] The number of crimes recorded in that financial year using the expanded offence coverage and revised counting rules which came into effect on 1 April 1998.
[4] Before 1 April 1998 the only drug offence was "trafficking".
[5] Figures for this year may be slightly higher due to Lincolnshire adopting the principle of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in March 2002.

Motor Vehicle Pursuits

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many documented motor vehicle pursuits the police made in each year since 1997, broken down by police force; how many *(a)* fatalities, *(b)* collisions and *(c)* injuries occurred as a result of these pursuits; and if he will make a statement. [94275]

Mr. Denham: Information is not held centrally on the total numbers of police vehicle pursuits.

The tables, by police force area and for the years 1997–98 to 2001–02, the numbers of police vehicle collisions and of police and civilian fatalities and injuries that occurred during the course of a pursuit or an immediate/emergency response have been placed in the Library.

The Government welcomes the recognition by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) that they must work to reduce the number of collisions involving police vehicles.

Measures already in place include a new police driver training course, launched in December 2000, which introduced a universal standard for driving in England and Wales. An essential element of the course is that officers should recognise the need to give priority to public safety above all other considerations, such as attending an incident or apprehending a suspect. Where pursuits are concerned, there is a nationally agreed ACPO Pursuit Code of Practice and it is already police policy to consider continuously the consequences of a pursuit and whether to break it off. In addition, all forces have adopted some or most of the recommendations from the 1998 Lind Report on Police Pursuit Driver Training.

ACPO are working closely with the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) to identify why there appears to be an upward trend in police vehicle collisions and how this might be reversed. Useful information can be expected from the increasing use by forces of Automatic Data Recorders (ADR) and Vehicle Accident Data Recorders (VADR). These operate in a similar way to aircraft black boxes, providing data on such issues as speed, gear changes, braking, and the use of blue lights.

Mr. Mario O'Brien Clarke

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers are assigned to the investigation of the killing of Mr. Mario O'Brien Clarke in Hackney on 26 December 2002; how many interviews have been conducted in connection with this investigation; how many statements have been taken; how many persons interviewed have previous convictions for drug-related offences; and how many serving soldiers have been interviewed. [94719]

Mr. Denham: I am informed by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that officers undertaking this investigation have so far taken 77 statements and that, as this investigation is still on-going, disclosure of precise details of the progress of the investigation may prove prejudicial to the outcome of current inquiries.

Mr. Nick Woodward

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the result was of the police investigation into the circumstances of the death of Mr. Nick Woodward of the Royal Military Police outside Aldershot Barracks in November 2002; how many military personnel have given statements; how many persons were travelling in the car alleged to have

been involved in the fatal accident; what criminal charges have been brought; and on how many occasions investigators have travelled to Deepcut Barracks. [94720]

Mr. Denham: I am informed by Hampshire Constabulary that the police investigation into the circumstances of the death of Mr. Nick Woodward is incomplete at present. An inquest review is due to be held on 18 March 2003. I understand that three military personnel have given statements in connection with the investigation and that one person was travelling in the car alleged to have been involved in the accident.

Hampshire Constabulary have advised that the driver of the car is currently on bail for the offence of "Causing Death by Dangerous Driving". He is due to return to Aldershot Police Station on 10 March 2003. There is no connection between this investigation and Deepcut Barracks and therefore no investigators have travelled to Deepcut Barracks.

National Intelligence Model

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the principal objectives are of the National Intelligence Model; and if he will make a statement on progress on implementation of the model. [95035]

Mr. Denham: The National Intelligence Model (NIM) is designed to ensure that operational policing is focused on policing priorities. It is informed by an evidence-based assessment of the crime or disorder occurring and the options for dealing with it. In this way policing effort can have a disproportionate impact on crime and disorder. It is an entire process for policing, developed by the service itself and is fully supported by the Home Office, which has to date invested £11.1 million.

NIM is a key part of the Police Reform programme, and implementation is being strongly led by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), to ensure NIM is fully implemented across all 43 forces by April 2004. The ACPO-led implementation team is on track to achieve this milestone.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will define *(a)* Level 1, *(b)* Level 2 and *(c)* Level 3 crimes under the National Intelligence Model; and what purpose this framework serves. [95036]

Mr. Denham: In order to ensure consistency and a common standard, within National Intelligence Model (NIM) level 1 is defined as usually crime, criminals and other problems affecting a basic command unit or small force area. Level 2 is defined as usually the actions of a criminal or other specific problems affecting more than one basic command unit, a group of basic command units, neighbouring forces or a group of forces. Level 3 is defined as serious and organised crime, usually operating on a national and international scale.

Official Engagements

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the official engagements in *(a)* his and *(b)* Ministers in his Department's diaries for the weeks beginning (i) 27 January, (ii) 3 February and (iii) 10 February. [95048]

Mr. Blunkett: Ministers in my Department have numerous official engagements with a wide range of organisations and individuals as part of the process of policy development, analysis and implementation. Details of these engagements are covered by Exemptions 1, 2 and 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and are thus confidential. The diary is planned weeks and in some cases months in advance.

Operation Antler

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost of Operation Antler, led by Wiltshire constabulary has been; and if he will make a statement. [92757]

Mr. Denham: The Chief Constable informs me that Wiltshire Police Authority costs for Operation Antler, since it commenced in August 1999, have been as follows:

Year	£
1999–2000	223,457
2000–01	715,823
2001–02[1]	718,188
2002–03[2]	366,739
Total	2,024,207

[1] Adjusted figure (previously reported as £742,002)
[2] To 31 December 2002

The current police staffing level is seven police officers and four support staff.

In addition, Ministry of Defence (MOD) costs for staff seconded to Operation Antler since 1999 have been as follows:

Year	£
1999–2000	76,097
2000–01	193,311
2001–02	187,251
2002–03[1]	47,226
Total	503,885

[1] To 31 December 2002

These figures do not include costs of MOD civilian staff working to support the police.

The Ministry has funded two MOD police officers and five military investigators who were attached to the inquiry at the request of the previous Senior Investigating Officer. At present, only one MOD police officer is working on the inquiry.

(Cleveland) Police Force

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers serve in the Cleveland police force; what percentage of these officers are from ethnic minorities; and if he will make a statement. [94272]

Mr. Denham: On 31 March 2002 Cleveland police force had 1,461 police officers, of which 1.3 per cent. were minority ethnic. In England and Wales on 31 March there were 129,603 police officers, of which 2.6 per cent. were minority ethnic.

Police Numbers

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* full time police officers and *(b)* Special Constables have been on duty in (i) Cheshire Constabulary and (ii) Macclesfield police division in each of the last 10 years. [92949]

Mr. Denham: Information on the number of officers on duty in forces and divisions is not collected centrally. The number of officers on duty is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and will vary from day to day.

The table sets out the number of officers in the Cheshire Constabulary and Special Constabulary for the last 10 years.

For the latest centrally collected information on the number of officers in Macclesfield, I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 2 December 2002 to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), *Official Report*, column 589W, setting out police strength for each Basic Command Unit for each force in England and Wales as at 31 March 2002.

Cheshire Constabulary and Special Constabulary

Year (as at 31 March)	*Police officer (number)*	*Special Constabulary (number)*	*Civilian support staff*
1993	1,908	[1]274	554
1994	1,902	[1]387	581
1995	1,932	[1]321	615
1996	1,998	274	689
1997	2,045	475	735
1998	2,042	459	781
1999	2,071	407	785
2000	2,011	350	823
2001	2,002	290	833
2002	2,059	191	884

[1] Figures for 1993 to 1995 are from the Annual Report of HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary. For 1993 they are those for 31 December 1992 and for 1994 they are those for 31 December 1993 as the Annual Reports before 1994–95 were on a calendar year basis.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were serving in the Hertfordshire constabulary on *(a)* 1 January 2001, *(b)* 1 January 2002 and *(c)* at the most recent date for which figures are available. [93323]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is set out in the table.

Hertfordshire constabulary

Year	*Police strength*	*Civilian support staff*
31 January 2001	1,954	952
31 January 2002	1,851	n/a
31 March 2002	1,825	1,121

Following the change to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) boundaries, which took effect on 1 April 2000, a total of 184 MPS officers were seconded to Hertfordshire. The majority had returned to the MPS by 31 March 2002.

Police Officers (University Fees)

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the conditions under which police officers may obtain *(a)* payment of (i) university fees and (ii) other expenses and *(b)* the repayment of university-related debts incurred before joining the police service; how many (A) men and (B) women obtained such payments in the last academic year; and what the total cost of such payments was. [94482]

Mr. Denham: Police authorities may nominate police officers for a full-time course of university study. It is for the police authorities to decide whether to reimburse fees and expenses for nominated officers. It would be for police authorities to decide whether to repay any university-related debts incurred by a police officer before joining the force.

The Police Regulations 1995 make provision for the pay and conditions under which "university scholars" serve. These are in most cases the same as those enjoyed by officers on normal duties.

Figures for the number of police officers undertaking such courses of university study and the payments of fees and expenses to them are not maintained centrally.

The Home Office is currently funding the student fees for 144 police officers who enrolled in October 2002 for the first intake of a pilot Foundation Degree in Police Studies provided by the University of Portsmouth. It will also fund the fees of about 100 who will enrol for the second intake in February 2003 and up to 250 who will enrol for further intakes in 2003–04. There is no commitment to provide funding beyond the pilot project.

Police Precept

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the policy of his Department is on the maximum permitted increase in the police precept for each English local authority in 2003–04; what the policy of the Government is on the use of capping powers in respect of the police precept; and if he will make a statement. [92083]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* The levels at which police precepts are set in 2003–04 are local decisions for individual police authorities to determine.

Since we introduced the reserve capping powers in the Local Government Act 1999, we have been clear that they should only be used in exceptional circumstances. In making decisions about the use of reserve powers, a major consideration has been evidence of how local taxpayers have been engaged in decisions about council tax increases. Over the next few years we will consider the impact of this policy on those who use and those who pay for local services.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to encourage the recruitment of police officers from all sectors of society. [93473]

Mr. Denham [*holding answer 30 January 2003*]: We have this month published progress on the recruitment of minority ethnic officers in "Race Equality—The Home Secretary's Employment Targets". Progress is measured against the 10-year employment targets

published in the Dismantling Barriers document, which sets out the overall increase in representation for each force to be representative of the community it serves. Forces have until 2009 to reach these targets. There is annual monitoring of performance; jointHome Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularyreviews of those forces facing the biggest challenge to meet their targets are underway with the objective of agreeing action plans with Chief Constables by 1 April.

The recruitment, retention and progression sub-group of the Lawrence Steering Group, is reviewing performance, identifying and addressing barriers to success with a view to the identification and dissemination of good practice employment policies.

We support the aims of the Gender Agenda, one of which is "to achieve a gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation balance across the rank structure and specialisms consistent with the proportion of women in the economically active population". The National Policing Plan provides that Police Authorities should take account of these aims in their force Human Resource plans.

We are developing national procedures for recruitment which ensure that objective, role related criteria are used at all stages of the process. Information for applicants makes it clear that the police service welcomes applications from all sections of society and offers case studies of minority ethnic, mother returner and part time officers.

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Police Service (Equal Opportunities)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he has taken to encourage more members of the ethnic minorities to join the police service; and if he will make a statement. [94273]

Mr. Denham: We have this month published progress on the recruitment of minority ethnic officers in "Race Equality-The Home Secretary's Employment Targets". Progress is measured against the 10-year employment targets published in the Dismantling Barriers document, which are intended to ensure that forces are representative of the communities which they serve by 2009. There is annual monitoring of performance. Joint Home Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) reviews of those forces facing the biggest challenge to meet their targets are under way with the objective of agreeing action plans with the Chief Constable by 1 April.

Further impetus is provided by the work of one of the sub-groups of the Lawrence Steering Group, looking at the recruitment, retention and progression of minority ethnic staff. The group is looking at current force performance, identifying and addressing any barriers to success and the identification and dissemination of good practice employment policies.

We are developing national procedures for recruitment which ensure that objective, role related criteria are used at all stages of the process. The associated information makes it clear that the police service welcomes applications from all sections of society and offers case studies of minority ethnic, mother returner and part time officers.

Police Service (Local Accountability)

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what definition he uses of *(a)* operational and *(b)* policy issues in relation to the police service and its accountability to local communities. [94487]

Mr. Denham: Under the Police Act 1996, a police authority is responsible for ensuring an effective and efficient police force for an area. It sets an annual policing plan and a three-year strategy setting out the priorities and targets for the policing of the local area. In doing so, it must consult local people and have regard to the National Policing Plan issued by the Secretary of State. The Chief officer of police is responsible for the direction and control of the force to enforce the law and to deliver the objectives of the local policing and three-year strategy plans. Local policing policy is a matter for both the police authority and the chief officer. Operational direction and control resides with the chief officer of police. The Secretary of State, consulting where appropriate, sets strategic priorities for policing in England and Wales in the National Policing Plan. He may issue regulations, codes of practice and non-statutory guidance where he believes this to be in the interests of the efficiency and effectiveness of the police.

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Police Stations (Lincolnshire)

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the police stations in Lincolnshire in each year from 1997 to 2002. [94264]

Mr. Denham: The Chief Constable of Lincolnshire Police has provided a list of the 43 police stations in Lincolnshire in March 1997. There are now 41. Long Sutton was closed during 1997–98 and North Somercotes in 2001–02.

Lincolnshire Police Stations at March 1997 and March 2002

Alford
Bourne
Bracebridge Heath
Boston
Caythorpe
Caistor
Coningsby
Colsterworth
Gainsborough
Holton Le Clay
Crowland
Lincoln
Horncastle
Donington
Market Rasen
Ingoldmells
Grantham
Nettleham
Kirton
Heckington
North Box
Louth
Holbeach
North Hykeham
Mablethorpe
Long Bennington
Saxilby
Skegness
Market Deeping
South Box
Spilsby
Ruskington
Welton
Wainfleet
Sleaford
Long Sutton
Woodhall Spa
Spalding
North Somercotes
Wragby
Stamford
Billingborough
Birchwood

The decision to open or close a police station or restrict opening hours is an operational matter for the Chief Constable in the light of local circumstances and not one in which it would be appropriate for the Home Office or Ministers to become involved.

Prisoner Incidents (Inquiries)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to give the Chief Inspector of Prisons responsibility for conducting inquiries into deaths and serious injuries in prisons. [93331]

Hilary Benn: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary launched a three-year safer custody programme in April 2001 aimed at reducing deaths, self-harm and violence in prisons. The programme targets the highest risk prisoners in the highest risk locations, concentrating on six pilot sites. As part of this programme the Prison Service is considering how it can improve and strengthen investigation procedures into deaths in custody to determine not only what happened in an individual case but also how practice might be improved in future to try to prevent further deaths.

The Prison Service has conducted a wide-scale consultation exercise, considering a number of options (including asking Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons to conduct such inquiries) to make investigations into deaths in custody more independent. Ministers are also considering whether to give responsibility for investigating deaths in prison custody to the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman. In the interim, the Prison Service is working to strengthen and improve the current system of investigating deaths.

Section 5A(4) of the Prison Act 1952 permits the Home Secretary to refer specific matters connected with prisons and prisoners to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and direct her to report on them. Similarly, the Home Secretary can ask the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman to investigate and report on any prison matter.

Prisons (Mother and Baby Units)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to increase the number of mother and baby unit places for prisoners; and what estimate he has made of the number of mother and baby unit places in 2003. [93297]

Hilary Benn: Two new mother and baby units (MBU) are under construction. One is at Eastwood Park in Gloucestershire and the other at Askham Grange in York. These units will provide an extra 22 places and are due to be completed in September 2003. This will bring the total number of places to 90 by the end of 2003.

Two new prisons at Ashford and Peterborough will also have accommodation for mothers and babies and they are scheduled to be completed by October 2004. Between them they will provide 24 additional places.

Probation Service

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many probation officers were in post, excluding probation service officers, in each year since 1997; and how many *(a)* offences and *(b)* offenders the probation service dealt with in each year since 1997. [94489]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is as follows:

Numbers of Probation Officers[1,2]

England and Wales	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Probation Officers	7,149	7,193	7,519	7,571	7,506
Probation Service Officers	1,919	2,027	2,502	2,869	3,566
Total	9,068	9,220	10,021	10,440	11,072

[1] Numbers shown as whole time equivalents
[2] Information shown taken at 31 December

(b)

Persons starting supervision by the Probation Service

England and Wales	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Number of offenders	165,222	174,046	175,879	168,529	165,491

Notes:
All figures have previously been published
Source:
Figures obtained from RDS Probation Statistics 2001

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases in Avon and Somerset magistrates courts in the last year have been postponed because of late probation reports. [95119]

Hilary Benn: Information is not collected centrally on the number of court cases postponed due to late probation reports. However, I am aware that in the last eight months the Avon and Somerset probation area has had difficulty in meeting the demand of the magistrates courts for court reports

The National Director of the National Probation Service has recently issued revised guidance on the prioritisation of work and the Chief Officer and the Probation Board of the Avon and Somerset probation area are carefully monitoring the position. Action has been taken by the Chief Officer to manage and improve the situation, including prioritising certain categories of case, redeploying some staff from other service delivery areas and recruiting and training new staff subject to budget limitations. The Probation Board reviews the probation area's performance at regular intervals and received a report on the provision of reports to court at it's meeting in January and will receive a further report on progress being made in April.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the average time taken for probation officers to submit reports to courts in 2002; and in what time probation officers are required to deliver such reports to courts; [95124]

(2) what over the last three years has been the average time for probation reports to be made, broken down by police force area in the UK. [95122]

Hilary Benn: Information is not available centrally on average times for probation officers to submit reports to courts, but is collected to record performance against the National Standards target which requires that pre-sentence reports are to be prepared within 15 working days of the request by the court (National Standards for the Supervision of Offenders in the Community 2000 (revised 2002)). The National Probation Service currently has a target to produce 90 per cent. of Pre-Sentence Reports within 15 days. The latest figures, which relate to magistrates courts, show that for all probation areas in 2001–02 79 per cent. of reports were provided within the 15 day target.

Stray Dogs

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what allocation he has made for 2003–04 to fund the management of stray dogs, broken down by police authority. [93596]

Mr. Denham: Police grant is allocated according to a formula largely based on an assessment of needs for broad categories of police service. It is for the Police Authority and Chief Constable to determine detailed application of funds for particular purposes.

Recorded Crime

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* robberies and *(b)* snatch thefts were recorded each month by the police in each police force area in England and Wales between April 2001 and September 2002. [93336]

Mr. Denham: The Home Office does not routinely publish national statistics on recorded crime on a monthly basis. Annual national statistics on recorded crime, including robbery, will be published in July 2003 for the period April 2002 to March 2003. This will provide a direct comparison with the previous year (April 2001 to March 2002), of the level of robbery offences for each police force area in England and Wales.

A quarterly update on recorded crime was published early in January and covered the 12 month period to September 2002. This showed that recorded robbery in England and Wales fell by an estimated 10 per cent. in July to September 2002, compared with the same period the previous year. However the quarterly update does not provide a force by force breakdown.

Snatch theft is not a standard Home Office offence category, although information on snatch thefts has been collected from April 2002 for the 10 forces currently taking part in the Government's Street Crime Initiative. The results of the initiative were published in October 2002, and include figures on snatch theft. A copy is available in the Library.

Travellers

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will reform the law in relation to travellers. [94642]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* In July 2002 we announced proposals for new eviction powers for the police so that they can deal with unauthorised encampments. These new powers will allow the police to take firm action against unauthorised encampments without the pre-conditions found in the current legislation, where local authorities have made adequate site provision. We will bring forward amendments to the legislation when parliamentary time allows.

Violence against Animals

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research he has evaluated on the extent to which people convicted of crimes of violence have previously been involved in violence against animals. [95133]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* There has been no research undertaken on this by the Home Office. However from a sample of 11,049 offenders sentenced in 2000 and convicted of violent offences, only

six offenders appeared to have a previous criminal conviction for the summary offence of 'cruelty to animals'.

Young Offenders

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average time taken to fast-track young offenders through the courts in Shropshire was in each year since 1997. [93083]

Hilary Benn: The average time taken to fast track persistent young offenders through the magistrates courts in Shropshire since 1997 is as follows:

	Arrest to sentence (days)
1997	148
1998	111
1999	68
2000	57
2001	62

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Service Agreements

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will place the technical note underlying the Lord Chancellor's Department's Public Service Agreement in the Library; and if she will make a statement. [94883]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The technical note will be published shortly, and a copy will be placed in the Library.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor's Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94119]

Ms Rosie Winterton: My Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published shortly

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in the Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for the Department; and if she will make a statement. [93505]

Ms Rosie Winterton: This information is as follows:

(a) Details on absenteeism other than sick absence, are not available, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

(b) Departmental sickness absence figures (excluding non-departmental public bodies) are published in the annual report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service" published by the Cabinet Office. The most recent of which (for calendar year 2001) was announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002 and copies placed in the Libraries of the House. The figures for 2002 will be announced in due course. The 1999, 2000 and 2001 reports are available on the Cabinet Office website at: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/civilservice/publications/sickness/index.htm.

Rates of sick absence (in working days per staff year) for my Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies, are as follows:

Days

Year	*LCD Headquarters*	*Court Service*	*Public Trust Office/ Public Guardianship Office*
1993[1]	11.8[2]	—	—
1994	10.7[2]	—	—
1995	8.7	11.6	14.7
1996	8.1	11.0	9.7
1997	7.8	10.9	12.4
1998	7.7	10.3	11.8
1999	8.0	10.2	11.9
2000	6.2	10.2	12.0
2001	5.3	9.4	9.6

[1] Sick absence data is not available before 1993
[2] Whole of LCD

Non-departmental public bodies

Year	*Days*
Office of the Information Commissioner	
The only available figures are:	
1996–97	7.4
1997–98	7.06
1998–99	8.98
The Legal Services Commission (formerly the Legal aid Board)	
The only available figures are:	
October 2000 to September 2001	7.66
October 2001 to September 2002	8.64
The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)[1]	
July to December 2001	7.86
January to December 2002	10.26

[1] CAFCASS was established in April 2001

My Department is committed to managing sick absence effectively and in meeting the 2003 target for reducing sickness absence in our Service Delivery Agreement. The 2003 target of 6.5 days is a corporate target that includes the Northern Ireland Court Service, the Public Record Office and HM Land Registry.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Licensing Provisions

Mr. Key: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment the Commissioners have made of the provisions of the Licensing Bill. [95163]

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman will have been pleased to learn that the Government tabled an amendment to the Bill ensuring that Church buildings will be exempt from the requirement for public entertainment licensing.

I am making available to the hon. Gentleman the Church of England's press release on the issue, which demonstrates how welcome the Government's proposed exemption is to the Church.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Horticultural Polytunnels

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the Government's policy is on the application of planning rules to horticultural polytunnels. [95056]

Mr. McNulty: The application of statutory planning regulations is a matter for local planning authorities in the first instance. In the case of polytunnels, where they are placed temporarily, without any permanent fixings, on agricultural land and used for horticulture, they may be deemed to be a use of land for agriculture and therefore exempt from planning controls under the provisions of section 55 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

Where the erection of polytunnels is deemed to constitute 'development' under the provisions of the 1990 Act, 'permitted development rights' under part 6 of the General Permitted Development Order (GPDO) 1995 may be available. In certain cases, these permitted development rights cannot be exercised unless an application has been made to the local planning authority for a determination as to whether their prior approval will be required for certain details relating to the siting, design and appearance of the development.

In other cases where the erection of polytunnels is deemed to be 'development' and permitted development rights cannot be exercised, an application for planning permission must be made to the local planning authority. The authority will determine the application in accordance with policies in the development plan, taking account of national planning policies.

The Government's national planning policies on development related to agriculture, including horticulture, are set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 7 (PPG 7), "The Countryside".

Whether the erection of any particular polytunnel is deemed to constitute development will depend on the facts of each case. Ultimately, this is a matter for the courts who are likely to place weight on several factors that may indicate the degree of 'permanence' of the structure. These factors are reflected in the advice given in paragraph C11 of Annex C to PPG7.

Affordable Homes

Matthew Green: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many affordable homes for *(a)* rent and *(b)* low cost home ownership were completed in 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [94212]

Mr. McNulty: In England, during 2001–02, completions of dwellings to rent by Registered Social Landlords and local authorities totalled 14,470. A further 7,400 dwellings were provided in through Registered Social Landlords shared ownership and other low cost schemes.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will issue a top-up grant of £464,058 to the East Riding of Yorkshire Council for the provision of nursery school places to 381 applicants for this academic year following the migration of these children into the county subsequent to the allocation of the 2002–03 nursery education grant. [93846]

Maria Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

On 11 December 2002, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills announced that all three-year-olds will be entitled to receive a free part-time early education place from April 2004. This is six months earlier than originally planned. Currently around 70 per cent. of three-year-olds are able to access a free place.

Funding for the provision of free early education places is made available to local education authorities on the basis of financial, rather than academic, years. During the 2002–03 financial year, we have made £275 million of Nursery Education Grant funding available for the provision of free places for three-year-olds. Funding has been allocated to local education authorities primarily according to their position on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Index of Multiple Deprivation. East Riding of Yorkshire Council has been allocated £1,353,198 to fund 1,111 places. Local education authorities are responsible for devising eligibility criteria for the distribution of free places in their area according to social need and without exceeding their allocation.

At the end of the autumn term, the Department for Education and Skills reallocated Nursery Education Grant funding from authorities who were unable to use their full allocation to authorities who were able to use additional funding. East Riding of Yorkshire received anadditional £283,794 as a result of this exercise.

Also, the audit of Nursery Education Grant in the East Riding of Yorkshire for 2001–02 showed that there was an underspend of £198,670 which ought to be returned to Department for Education and Skills. In light of the circumstances currently faced by East Riding of Yorkshire Council, the Department for Education and Skills has exceptionally allowed them to carry over this amount to 2002–03. Therefore, East Riding of Yorkshire Council has received a total of £482,464 additional funding for the spring term 2003.

From the 2003–04 financial year, funding for the provision of free places is being transferred into Education Formula Spending as part of an overall £500 million transfer of DfES grant funding into general funding. A total of £319 million Nursery Education Grant funding is being transferred into the under fives sub-block. The funding for authorities such as East Riding of Yorkshire who have not yet achieved universal provision is being calculated to ensure that they have sufficient funding to provide a free place for 85 per cent. of their three year old population. 85 per cent. is the DfES planning assumption for universal provision for three-year-olds.

Housing (Rural Areas)

Andrew George: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many affordable housing units were *(a)* in use and *(b)* unused in (i) England and (ii) local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90832]

Mr. McNulty: Numbers of residential dwellings and vacancy levels in stock owned by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) are reported by local authorities annually on Housing Investment Programme returns, and since 1993 by RSLs on Housing Corporation RSR returns. Data for RSL vacant stock at LA level between 1979 (the earliest available data) and 1992 are not as complete as in later years, and consequently figures for rural authorities will be slightly underestimated.

Regional estimates, distinguishing the position in local authorities regarded as rural, as at 1 April for each of the past ten years, and for selected years back to 1979, are in a table that has been placed in the Library of the House.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to reform the system whereby council tenants contribute to the cost of housing benefit for other tenants. [95741]

Mr. McNulty: Council tenants' rents are not used at present to meet housing benefit costs. What really happens is that assumed Housing Revenue Account surpluses are captured and put towards Housing Revenue Account subsidy for other authorities who are unable to meet reasonable expenditure on their housing stock from their assumed rental income. This is done by offsetting the assumed Housing Revenue Account surplus against the subsidy for rent rebates due to that authority.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recognises that this system is not transparent or well understood and is addressing this in the Local Government Bill currently before Parliament, through which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister proposes to remove rent rebates from the Housing Revenue Account and subsidise them separately in the General Fund.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 958W, whether he intends to continue to update the basis for the formula spending share in line with actual spending by local government. [95554]

Mr. Leslie: The Government have already announced the absolute increases in service control totals for 2004–05 and 2005–06 as part of 2002 Spending Review. The next planned re-examination of service control totals will be part of the 2004 Spending Review. Actual spending levels is one of the matters we would expect to take into account in the 2004 Spending Review.

Parish Councils

Mr. Evans: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many parish councillors he has been told have *(a)* retired and *(b)* resigned as a result of the Parish Council (Model Code of Conduct) Order 2001. [93266]

Mr. Leslie: There is no requirement for local authority members to inform us of retirements or resignations, for whatever reason. However, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Standards Board for England together have been informed of 95 resignations by Parish Councillors who were unwilling to accept the code of conduct, out of an estimated total of some 70,000 parish councillors.

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister during the committee stage of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill, how many *(a)* clauses and *(b)* schedules were (i) fully, (ii) partly and (iii) not debated. [95612]

Mr. McNulty: The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill was considered by Standing Committee G over 12 sittings between 9–28 January. Of the 90 clauses in the Bill 22 were fully debated, four were partly debated and 64 were not debated. Of the six schedules, one was fully debated and five not debated.

Rural Housing

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the standard size of settlement is that is used for *(a)* village shop rate relief, *(b)* the Right to Buy scheme and *(c)* the Right to Acquire scheme; if he will list those areas that are designated under the Right to Buy scheme; when they were designated; for each of them, what size of settlement is exempt; how many council houses each involves; and how many qualifying registered social landlord houses each involves. [94405]

Mr. McNulty: Settlements below a certain size qualify for special treatment under the following schemes:

(a) village shop rate relief scheme—a rural settlement is one with a population of 3,000 or less.

(b) Right to Buy—social landlords may impose restrictions on resales of properties originally sold under the Right to Buy scheme where these are located within national parks or areas of outstanding natural beauty, or in areas designated by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister as rural for this purpose. Such designated areas exclude settlements with 2,000 inhabitants or more. 24 areas were designated between 1981 and 1990, and one more was designated in 2002. A table describing these areas, with dates of designation, is as follows. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 22 January 2003 that the exclusion limit for new designations would rise to 3,000 inhabitants, with immediate effect.

Information on how many council or registered social landlord properties are located in the 25 designated areas is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

District	Designated areas	Date designated
Alnwick	The parishes of Acklington, Glanton, Hauxley, Hedgeley, Netherton, Rennington and Togston	14 April 1981
Berwick-upon-Tweed	The whole borough, with the exception of the area of the former borough of Berwick-upon-Tweed	14 April 1981
Eden	The whole district, with the exception of the area of the former urban district of Penrith	14 April 1981
South Lakeland	The whole district, with the exception of the towns of Grange-over-Sands, Kendal and Ulverston	14 April 1981
Craven	The parishes of Bank Newton, Bentham, Bolton Abbey, Burton in Lonsdale, Clapham cum Newby, Coniston Cold, Embsay with Eastby, Gargrave, Giggleswick Halton East, Hellifield, Ingleton, Langcliffe, Lawkland, Long Preston, Otterburn, Rathmell, Settle, Stirton with Thorlby, Thornton-in-Lonsdale, Wigglesworth	22 December 1988
Scarborough	The parishes of Brompton-by-Sawdon, Cloughton, Folkton, Gristhorpe, Lebberston, Muston, Reighton and Snaiton	29 October 1986
North Norfolk	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Cromer, Fakenham, Holt, North Walsham and Sheringham	15 February 1982
Caradon	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Callington, Liskeard, Looe, Saltash and Torpoint	14 April 1981
Carrick	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Falmouth, Feock, Penryn and Truro	14 April 1981
Kerrier	The whole district, with the exception of the area of the former urban district of Camborne-Redruth and the town of Helston	14 April 1981
North Cornwall	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Bodmin, Bude-Stratton, Launceston, Padstow and Wadebridge	14 April 1981
Penwith	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Hayle, Penzance and St.Ives	14 April 1981
Restormel	The parishes of Colan, Grampound, Lanlivery, Luxulyan, Mawgan-in-Pydar, St. Ewe, St. Stephen-in-Brannel and St. Wenn	14 April 1981
East Devon	The whole district, with the exception of the area of the former urban district of Exmouth and the parishes of Honiton, Seaton and Sidmouth	14 April 1981
Mid Devon	The whole district, with the exception of the Towns of Crediton, Cullompton and Tiverton	31 July 1981
North Devon	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Barnstaple, Fremington and Ilfracombe	14 April 1981
South Hams	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Dartmouth, Ivybridge, Kingsbridge and Totnes	14 April 1981
Teignbridge	The whole district with the exception of the parishes of Dawlish, Kerswells, Kingsteignton, Newton Abbot and Teignmouth	22 March 1982
Torridge	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Bideford, Great Torrington and Northam	14 April 1981
West Devon	The whole borough with the exception of the parishes of Tavistock and Okehampton	19 July 1990
Purbeck	The parishes of Affpuddle, Bere Regis, Bloxworth, Chaldon Herring, East Stoke, Morden, Moreton, Turners Puddle and Winfrith Newburgh	14 April 1981
West Dorset	The whole district, with the exception of the parishes of Chickerell, Dorchester and Sherborne	14 April 1981
Ribble Valley	The parishes of Balderstone, Bashall Eaves, Chatburn, Clayton le Dale, Dinckley, Dutton, Gisburn, Great Mitton, Horton, Hothersall, Little Mitton, Mearley, Middop, Newsholme, Osbaldeston, Paythorne, Ramsgreave, Read, Ribchester, Rimington, Salesbury, Simonstone, Waddington, West Bradford, Wiswell, Worston	6 August 2002
West Somerset	The whole district, with the exception of the area of the former urban district of Minehead and the parishes of Watchet and Williton	14 April 1981
New Forest	The perambulation of the New Forest	14 April 1981

(c) Right to Acquire—in areas designated as rural, properties owned by registered social landlord are exempt from the right to acquire scheme. Such areas are generally settlements with a population of 3,000 or less.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many houses have been bought in *(a)* the Right to Buy scheme and *(b)* the Right to Acquire scheme in the last six years; and what proposals he has to amend the exemptions in rural areas in either scheme. [94406]

Mr. McNulty: During the six years between April 1996 and September 2002, 241,237 houses and 59,997 flats have been sold under the Right to Buy scheme, a total of 301,234 sales. There are no plans to amend the current exemptions from the Right to Buy.

Under the Right to Acquire scheme during the last six years, up to December 2002 there have been a total of 115 completed sales. There are no plans to amend the current exemptions from the Right to Acquire.

Seaside and Country Homes Scheme

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many properties used by the Seaside and Country Homes scheme in 1979 were subsequently transferred to *(a)* the local housing authority and *(b)* sold on the open market. [95138]

Mr. McNulty: None.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many applicants were on the waiting list for a nomination to a property under the Seaside and Country Homes scheme in each year since 1979: and what the average length of time was between an application for rehousing under the Seaside and Country Homes scheme and nomination to a property in each year since 1979. [95140]

Mr. McNulty: On 31 March 2002 there were 450 people on the waiting list and this had risen to 562 by 31 December 2002. Historical figures have not been kept.

The average length of time for rehousing under the Seaside and Country Homes scheme was:

1 July 1999 until 31 March 2000: 322 days

1 April 2000 until 31 March 2001: 194 days

1 April 2001 until 31 March 2001: 129 days

1 April 2002 until date: 98 days

Management of the Seaside and Country Homes was taken over by HOMES in July 1999 and figures prior to this are not held centrally.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to promote the Seaside and Country Homes scheme more widely to tenants in the social rented sector. [95142]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to promote the scheme, except as part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's general promotion of housing mobility related opportunities. However management of the scheme will move from HOMES to the Housing and Employment Mobility Services (HEMS). We are in discussions with bidders for HEMS as to how they might promote Seaside and Country Homes and other mobility initiatives to achieve the maximum number of moves.

Spring Supplementary Estimates

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the uses were of the change in spending in the Spring Supplementary Estimates 2001–02, Cm5354, section 1, subsection xix under sub head A1; and if he will make a statement. [92794]

Mr. Alexander: I have been asked to reply.

Funding was provided to strengthen the Government's ability to deliver change in the public services and to enhance security arrangements and the resilience of communications systems, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Adult Skills (Consultation Process)

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when he expects to commence public consultation on the proposals outlined in the Strategy Unit Report In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21st Century-Part 2. [94033]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: There are no plans to conduct a formal public consultation on the report, which is a statement of cross-Government policy. However, there was widespread involvement of interested parties following the publication in December 2001 of the first report and in preparing the second report. Many of the proposals in the report will be taken forward in the Skills Strategy, to be published in June, on which there has already been consultation through Regional Skills Summits, and through DTI's current review of innovation, which will involve consulting with a wide range of stakeholders.

Modern Apprenticeships (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimate he has made of the number of people in the Warrington, North constituency who are undertaking modern apprenticeship schemes. [94372]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: On 28 July 2002, there were nearly 550 people living in the Warrington, North constituency on advanced modern apprenticeships or foundation modern apprenticeships in England.

Nursery Schools

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the Government's targets are for nursery school places for each local education authority; and how many local education authorities have met this target. [92850]

Maria Eagle: Since 1998 all local education authorities (LEAs) have been under a statutory duty to provide a free part-time nursery education place for all four year olds whose parents want one. Funding for three year olds provision was made available in 1999. A PSA target was set for increasing the number of nursery places for three year olds to 66 per cent. by March 2002, this target was met in advance of the agreed date. Significant progress has been made to achieving universal provision for three year olds, currently around 70 per cent. of three year olds are able to access a free place.

65 of the most deprived local education authorities already offer a free place to all three year olds whose parents want one, these are listed below. The remaining authorities are responsible for devising eligibility criteria for the distribution of free places in their area according to social need.

The Secretary of State recently announced that all three year olds will be entitled to receive a free place from April 2004. This is six months earlier than our manifesto commitment of September 2004.

From 2003–04, Nursery Education Grant funding is being transferred into Education Formula Spending as part of an overall £500 million transfer of DfES grant funding into general funding. A total of £319 million Nursery Education Grant will be added to the Under fives sub-block. We have also updated the baseline we use to calculate the control totals for the schools sub-blocks which has resulted in a further substantial increase to the Under fives sub-block.

Local authorities at universal provision

Greenwich

Hammersmith and Fulham

Lambeth

Southwark

Wandsworth

Ealing

Newham

Waltham Forest

Coventry
Walsall
Knowsley
St Helens
Wirral
Manchester
Rochdale
Tameside
Sheffield
Calderdale
Wakefield
Newcastle upon Tyne
South Tyneside
Isles of Scilly
Middlesbrough
Stockton on Tees
NE Lincolnshire
Derbyshire
Durham
Brighton and Hove
City of Leicester
Halton
Plymouth
Blackpool
Telford and Wrekin
Hackney
Islington
Lewisham
Tower Hamlets
Bexley
Haringey
Redbridge
Birmingham
Sandwell
Wolverhampton
Liverpool
Sefton
Bolton
Oldham
Salford
Doncaster
Bradford
Leeds
Gateshead
North Tyneside
Sunderland
Hartlepool
Redcar and Cleveland
Kingston upon Hull
City of York
City of Derby
Darlington
Southampton
Stoke on Trent
Warrington
Blackburn with Darwen
City of Nottingham

Schools (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how much investment has been made in schools in Chorley since 1997; [94907]

(2) how much is being spent per pupil in Chorley in *(a)* 2003 and *(b)* 1997. [94908]

Mr. Miliband: The following table shows the education standard spending assessment (ESSA), and total DfES revenue and capital grants allocated to Lancashire local education authority for the financial years 1998–99 and 2002–03. The local government reorganisation means that data for financial year 1997–98 does not conform to current boundaries so comparable figures are not available. 2002–03 figures are to date and provisional. It is not possible to identify separately the amounts for individual constituencies.

Education standard spending assessment, revenue and capital grant

£

	1998–99 (cash)	*2002–03 (cash)*	*Cash change*
Total ESSA	444,776,000	534,997,000	+90,221,000
ESSA per pupil	2,490	2,990	+500
Total revenue grant	18,921,170	85,415,020	+66,493,850
Revenue per pupil	40	360	+320
Total capital grant	14,950,000	51,519,000	+36,569,000
Capital per pupil	107	294	+187

Notes:
1. ESSA figures exclude funding for 4-year-olds at private, voluntary, and independent institutions.
2. Revenue grant figures include school standards grant, standards fund, nursery education grant, Teachers Pay Reform grant and Education Action Zone funding.
3. The pupil numbers used are the maintained pupils underlying the ESSA settlement calculations.
4. 2002–03 ESSA figures include an element for LSC allocations in respect of sixth forms.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when the *(a)* Sure Start, *(b)* Childcare and *(c)* Early Years service delivery agreements for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94116]

Maria Eagle: A single service delivery agreement will cover the work of the Sure Start Unit, which embraces Sure Start local programmes, early years and childcare issues. It will be published shortly.

Special Advisers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92448]

Mr. Charles Clarke: For the number of special advisers employed, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 31 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 1056W.

We are unable to provide information on the number of press officers employed by the Department in 1994–95 without incurring disproportionate costs. Information dating for 1996–97 to 1998–99 is available from

appendix 10 of the Sixth Report from the Select Committee on Public Administration, entitled Government Information and Communication Service, published on 29 July 1998 (www.publications.parliament.uk).

Figures for 1999 to 2002 are set out in the table but the figures for 2002–03 are not yet available.

£

	Number of press officers	*Actual salaries spend*
1999–2000	28	1,110,589
2000–01	28	1,246,588
2001–02	23[1]	1,266,626

[1] Excludes the transfer of five members of staff to the Department for Work and Pensions as part of the machinery of government changes following the general election.

Specialist Schools

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on his objectives of *(a)* increasing the number of specialist schools and *(b)* moves towards a broader curriculum. [94315]

Mr. Miliband: Specialist schools are a central part of this Government's overall framework for raising standards in secondary education in England. The Specialist Schools Programme helps schools to establish distinctive identities through their chosen specialisms and achieve their targets to raise standards. Besides their specialist work, specialist schools are working to raise levels of achievement across the curriculum and collaborating with other schools and the wider community for the benefit of all pupils. We are challenging schools to deliver high quality plans and targets that drive improvement, whether they are new entrants to the scheme or seeking to renew their status.

In relation to the Government's curriculum objectives, the Secretary of State announced the publication of the policy document 14–19: opportunity and excellence, in his statement on 21 January.

We maintain our commitment to ensuring that during their period of compulsory education, all young people should follow a broad and balanced programme. We intend to introduce greater flexibility and choice in the Key Stage 4 curriculum so that schools can offer programmes that better meet young people's individual needs and strengths, whilst ensuring they acquire the core of general learning and experience essential to later learning and employment.

We have announced a Working Group, to be chaired by Mr. Mike Tomlinson, to advise us on three key areas of long term work: the need for a much stronger vocational offer; the requirement for more manageable assessment, which recognises all of a young person's achievements; and the aim of broadening choice and stretching students, with a unified framework of qualifications designed to provide opportunities for young people of all abilities.

Union Learning Representatives

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when he expects to activate that part of the Employment Act 2002 giving union learning representatives statutory rights to paid time off to carry out their duties. [94569]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We intend to bring Section 43 of the Employment Act into effect in spring this year, following Parliamentary approval of the revised ACAS Code of Practice on Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities. This has recently been amended to include guidance on time off and training for Union Learning Representatives.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 6 February 2003

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Demountable Classrooms (Colchester)

14. **Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will visit the St. Andrew's Infant and Junior Schools in Colchester to inspect the demountable classrooms. [95758]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: While I am always very pleased to visit schools, I understand that Local Authority officials have met this week with the St. Andrew's Infant and Junior Schools to discuss accommodation issues and future developments. It might be best if we wait to see the outcome of that meeting before a visit is planned.

University Terms

15. **Andrew Mackinlay**: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what *(a)* guidance he gives to universities and *(b)* evidence he collates on the length of university terms. [95760]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The standard academic year is 30 weeks and student support arrangements are based around this. The Student Loans Company collects information from institutions on term dates for the purposes of administering the student support system. However I do not give guidance nor does my Department collect any additional information on the length of university terms.

Top-up Fees

16. **Dr. Evan Harris**: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, what recent representations he has received from Oxford University about the impact of top-up fees on the socio-economic backgrounds of applicants. [95761]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have received a number of enquiries from a variety of sources since the launch of the White Paper and expect to receive more during the period for comment.

University Admissions

17. **Vernon Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, what recent assessment he has made of the impact of the quality of teaching at secondary level on the rate of admission of pupils from poor backgrounds to university; and if he will make a statement. [95762]

Mr. Miliband: We know that the main reason for the social class division in higher education participation is differential attainment in schools and colleges. We are reforming education in secondary schools and our 14–19 strategy will promote higher aspirations and levels of attainment by age 19.

Access Regulator

18. **Tony Baldry** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, when he will appoint the Access Regulator for universities. [95763]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Access Regulator will be in place in good time to carry out the functions ascribed to him or her in the White Paper "The Future of Higher Education".

Headteachers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures he will take to ensure that headteachers of schools are *(a)* provided with details of how much they are set to receive, and when, following spending reviews and *(b)* better able to plan on a long-term basis and provided with details about future funding. [94910]

Mr. Miliband: The Government announced the provisional level of local education authorities' education formula spending shares on 5 December. Final figures are due to be confirmed on 3 February. It is for each authority to determine the level of resource that their schools receive via the local formula funding methodology, although the Secretary of State has power to determine a minimum size of an authority's total schools budget. On 10 December, a letter from the Department confirmed the Government's policy of encouraging authorities to move towards giving schools indicative three year budgets. We told LEAs that we would publish as much information as possible about future funding on a three year basis, so that authorities could commit themselves to issuing three year indicative budgets to their schools in return for more detailed controls on local school balances. A technical note was included in the letter to allow authorities to begin the process of drawing up three year budgets.

Higher Eduction (Family Incomes)

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what percentage of students in full-time higher education are from families whose family income is *(a)* £10,000 or less, *(b)* £10,001 to £15,000, *(c)* £15,001 to £20,000 and *(d)* over £20,001 using the same definition of income as he proposes to use in assessing eligibility for a maintenance grant. [94722]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In my Statement to the House on Higher Education on 22 January I said that 30 per cent. of students would benefit in full from the new Higher Education Grant of £1,000, available for those whose income was below £10,000. I have since received more up-to-date data which indicate that within the 30 per cent. of students to be supported, we may be able to afford to raise the threshold for the full grant higher than the proposed £10,000. The revised data are currently being checked and validated and I will make a further statement to the House when this has been completed. I shall also write to my hon Friend at that point with a more detailed answer to her question.

Home Economics Lessons

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans he has to reintroduce the teaching of home economics into schools. [95197]

Mr. Miliband: All primary pupils have to study design and technology, including work with food and textiles within the national curriculum. Typically primary pupils learn food preparation and cooking skills, including food hygiene, and are encouraged to develop positive attitudes to healthy eating and food choice. The Government strongly encourage secondary schools to offer pupils the opportunity to study food technology, and around 90 per cent. do so. Food, nutrition and healthy eating are also taught within science and personal, social and health education (PSHE) at both primary and secondary level. Many secondary pupils also have the opportunity to study textiles through both design and technology and art and design. Home economics is still available as a GCSE title and includes food and nutrition, textiles and child development. Both food technology and textiles technology GCSE courses have proved extremely popular and more young people now take these courses, than previously entered for home economics before the introduction of the national curriculum.

Learning Support Assistants

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the cost is of training learning support assistants to become primary teachers in this financial year; and if he will invest in such training in areas of substantial teacher shortage on the fringes of London. [95759]

Mr. Miliband: In 2002–03 funding for higher education based postgraduate primary teacher training is £5,400 per trainee. Postgraduate trainee teachers may also be eligible for a £6,000 bursary. Training providers receive £4,400 for each year of training for undergraduate primary trainee teachers.

For the Graduate Teacher Programme route into teaching, grants of up to £17,500 are available towards trainees' salary, training and assessment costs. So far this academic year, 770 former teaching assistants have begun training through this route.

My Department's recent consultation paper "Developing the roles of school support staff" proposes ways of improving career progression routes for teaching assistants and other support staff, including routes to qualified teacher status (QTS). Funding will be provided to support training for those who wish to take on higher-level roles and the training they receive will provide a first step towards QTS for those who wish to progress further.

Sector Skills Development Agency

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the likelihood of the Sector Skills Development Agency meeting its target of licensing eight sector skills councils by 31 March; and if he will make a statement. [95540]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* No target for the licensing of Sector Skills Councils has ever been set. My Department has told the Sector Skills Development Agency from the outset that they should work to a standard, not a deadline. It is more important that they take the time to ensure that applicants develop their proposals properly, with full involvement of sector employers, and so have the ability to deliver our ambitions for the new network. Good progress is being made in developing the network. Five trailblazer Sector Skills Councils were announced in December 2001 and nine further sectors are in the final phase of developing Sector Skills Council proposals for consideration by the Sector Skills Development Agency. We expect the first SSCs to be licensed early in 2003.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many telephone helplines are sponsored by his Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95722]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department for Education and Skills currently sponsor 16 national telephone helplines. 12 of these lines are available on 0800 numbers and therefore are available free to the public.

A further three helplines, Laptops for Teachers—a helpline aimed to help increase teacher's personal access to ICT, Curriculum On Line—a helpline which is designed to give teachers easy on line access to digital learning products to support their teaching across the curriculum and the Department's Public Enquiry Point (PEU)—the official contact point for members of the general public seeking information on all areas of the Department for Education and Skills activities are all available on national rate (0870) numbers.

Prolog is the Department's telephone helpline for individuals to order publications or respond to consultations or specific advertising campaigns and is available at local rate charge (0845).

In addition the Department regularly works with outside partners during the year to set up, or provide temporary support for, helplines for specific campaigns. These helplines are all available free to callers (0800). Those planned for this year are:

One Life:revision (25–27 March): a national helpline run in conjunction with Radio 1 to help young people as they prepare for their GCSE/A/AS level/Standard and Higher examinations.

Adult Learners' Week (12–16 May): an annual national helpline, linked to learndirect for those individuals who want information and advice about returning to learning.

One Life:travel (10 and 11 May): a national helpline supporting Radio 1 and offering listeners information and advice on vocational, training and educational opportunities at home and abroad.

One Life:results (12–22 August): another national and annual helpline which supports Radio 1 and offers information and advice to students as they receive their examination results.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89896]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An estimate of the cost of theft and fraud to my Department in 2001–02 is £70.077 million. The amount is made up as follows.

	£million
Individual Learning Accounts	67.000
TEC/Training Providers	2.827
Teachers Pensions	0.242
Thefts in DfES	0.008

The estimated loss on Individual Learning Accounts has been accepted by the NAO and appears in the DfES's 2001–02 accounts. The amounts due in respect of TECs and Training Providers was recovered during the settlement negotiations following closure of the TECs.

Information in relation to NDPBs is not collected centrally.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Lenient Sentences

21. **Andrew Selous:** To ask the Solicitor-General what recent representations she has received from victims of crime about the review of unduly lenient sentences. [95768]

The Solicitor-General: In the last year 33 victims have contacted the Attorney and myself personally complaining of unduly lenient sentences. Of those we referred six cases to the Court of Appeal which increased the sentence in three. In addition to those cases raised directly by victims, we have considered 325 other cases of unduly lenient sentences of which we referred 151 to the Court of Appeal.

Victim Impact Statements

23. **Ms Coffey**: To ask the Solicitor-General what assessment she has made of the use of victim impact statements by the Crown Prosecution Service. [95770]

The Solicitor-General: Victim Personal Statements, were introduced in October 2001 to give victims the chance to explain how the crime has affected them. They help the court when sentencing. The CPS also use these statements to identify those victims who may need special help in giving their evidence. The Home Office are leading an evaluation of them.

Plea Bargaining

24. **Mr. Allen:** To ask the Solicitor-General what guidance she gives to the Crown Prosecution Service relating to not proceeding with murder charges in return for a plea of guilty to manslaughter; and if she will make a statement. [95771]

The Solicitor-General: Cases of murder are conducted under the guidance of the Code for Crown Prosecutors. The code sets out the circumstances in which guilty pleas to less serious charges can be accepted. In such cases the prosecution should be prepared to explain their reasons in open court and speak to the victim's family, take their views into account and to explain the situation.

PRIME MINISTER

Judge William Taylor

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Prime Minister when his officials intend to respond to the request for funding made to them by Judge William Taylor on 2 February. [96522]

The Prime Minister: As far as I am aware, my office has not yet received a letter from Judge William Taylor.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Pike: To ask the Prime Minister if he discussed at his recent meeting with the President of South Africa the situation in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [96135]

The Prime Minister: I met President Mbeki on 1 February. We had discussions on a wide range of issues, including Zimbabwe. We shared our understanding of the problems faced by Zimbabwe. President Mbeki said his government are engaged in dialogue with the Zimbabwe authorities to address the difficulties in the country. The UK's position has always been that there must be a return to democracy and the rule of law. We will continue to assist in tackling the humanitarian crisis in the country.

Kate Hoey: To ask the Prime Minister what recent discussions he has had with the South African President about Zimbabwe. [95957]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike).

TRANSPORT

Channel Tunnel (Central Railway)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the maximum number of train paths per year through the Channel Tunnel is that would be allocated to Central Railway under their proposals. [94893]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Paths through the Channel Tunnel are made available according to the general rules applying to all train operators requesting capacity. The available allocation for any operator will depend on the characteristics of the paths requested and also on the demand from other users.

Congestion Charges

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 27 January, *Official Report*, column 523W, on congestion charges, whether exemptions or concessions under his uniform minimum standard will apply to *(a)* parents taking young children to school, *(b)* night workers, *(c)* key workers in the public services, *(d)* small business and *(e)* residents living a short distance outside a charge zone. [95029]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* We will consult on the scope of a uniform minimum standard of exemptions and concessions in due course once we have had an opportunity to take into account the experiences gained from road user charging schemes in London and Durham.

Empty Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* have now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92917]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was formed on 29 May 2002. As at 31 December 2002, the Department owned 577 dwellings, all of which were held by the Highways Agency. The table shows the breakdown by the Highways Agency regional office.

Highways Agency vacant residential properties at 31 December 2002

Branch	Total stock	Vacant	Habitable and vacant	Habitable and vacant over six months	Uninhabitable (vacant)
Bedford	117	18	9	2	9
Birmingham	124	27	12	3	15
Dorking	96	19	8	2	11
Exeter	54	9	3	0	6
Manchester	186	27	9	0	18
Totals	577	100	41	7	59

Note:
Columns 3 to 5 are not in addition to column 2. Of the 100 vacant properties 41 were habitable and vacant (column 3) of which seven were vacant over six months (column 4) and 59 were vacant and uninhabitable (column 5).

The Department undertakes a continual review of its property needs and takes measures to dispose of property which is surplus to business needs in accordance with Government Accounting Regulations. The Highways Agency manages its portfolio to minimise the number of unoccupied houses, maximise the rental income and safeguard the value of its properties. The Highways Agency has been in discussion with both Transport and Housing Ministers about making more of its houses available to social housing groups and key workers in areas of housing need and will work in partnership with social housing groups to achieve this. Any property, which the Agency has acquired, that is not needed for road operation is sold to obtain best economic, social or heritage value.

The Highways Agency is already subject to the following targets, which it successfully achieved in the last year: that no more than 15 per cent. of its housing stock is vacant on 31 March in any year; and that no more than 3 per cent. of habitable properties are empty for more than six months.

Although the number of vacant properties as at 31 December 2002 exceeds the 15 per cent. target (17.3 per cent.) it is not uncommon to be above the target level at that time of year and current forecasts indicate that the target is likely to be reached by 31 March 2003.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the *(a)* technical and financial contracts, *(b)* technical consultants used on a call-off basis and *(c)* financial consultants used on a call-off basis by (i) the Health and Safety Commission and (ii) Health and Safety Executive relating to railway matters since April 2002, the nature of the assignment for each consultant, and the value of work done by each consultant. [93238]

Mr. Jamieson: The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) does not commission its own work as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), set up under the terms of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, has executive responsibility for commissioning appropriate work on HSC's behalf.

The HSE does not let financial contracts and therefore has no information in respect of financial contracts or financial consultants.

The technical contracts commissioned by HSE (including HMRI) in relation to railway matters since April 2002 are as follows:

External research

Contractor	Title
ABB Eutech Ltd.	Control and Protective systems: Assessment methodology
Scientifics Ltd.	New requirements for the transport of dangerous goods by rail
BOMEL	Evaluation of railway safety case regulations
Business Strategy Group	The relationship between the railways industry and HSE
University College, London	FN curves and criterion lines for railways and other transport modes
AEA Rail	Classification of railway schemes
Competence Assurance Solutions Ltd.	Classification of railway schemes
National Economic Research Associates	Review of the economic aspects of the ERTMS project team Report

External support

Contractor	Title
Mr. P. Grant	Safe movement of trains—independent evaluation of initial drafting
External support—Call-off agreements	
NEL[1]	Technical review of the ERTMS project team report
WS Atkins	Technical aspects of SPAD investigations
Serco Assurance	Potters Bar investigation
Serco Assurance[1]	West Ealing Derailment—Forensic examination of track

External support—Framework Agreements

Project No	*Title*	*Contractor*
191[1]	Technical review of the ERTMS project team report	NEL
192	Technical aspects of SPAD investigations	WS Atkins
199	Potters Bar investigation	Serco Assurance
234[1]	West Ealing Derailment—Forensic examination of track	Serco Assurance

[1] These projects were commissioned by Directorate/Divisions of HSE other than HMRI.

The values of individual contracts are commercially confidential, but the total cost of these contracts to date is £998,534.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92457]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 4 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 144W.

From 1997–97 to 2001–02 transport formed part of the DETR and DTLR. For information relating to that period, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for DTLR (Dr. Whitehead) to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on 29 January 2002, *Official Report*, columns 178–79W). Transport specific information for previous years is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Government Car Service

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many motor vehicles supplied to *(a)* himself, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, *(d)* Special Advisers and *(e)* departmental officials as part of their employment package or terms of office will have the congestion charge paid out of public monies. [95297]

Mr. Jamieson: Ministers at this Department, including myself, and the Permanent Secretary have the use of cars for official business while they are in office. These cars are supplied by the Government Car and Despatch Agency and the cost is met by the Department. As it has been for many years and over successive Governments.

Hire Boats

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what arrangements are in place to ensure *(a)* that all boats which ply for hire, offer pleasure trips, offer sea angling trips or are available for private hire are seaworthy, *(b)* that the skipper is competent and *(c)* that satisfactory public and passenger liability insurance is held; [96145]

(2) what the role of the Marine and Coastguard Agency is in relation to the registration and licensing of passenger vessels, which ply for hire, offer pleasure trips, offer sea angling trips or may be hired privately; [96147]

(3) what authority is charged with the licensing of boats carrying 12 or fewer passengers in Scotland. [96144]

Mr. Jamieson: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) is responsible for matters relating to the safety of sea-going passenger vessels which ply for hire privately around the UK coast. The vessels must be surveyed, operated and certificated to specific standards.

The MCA Codes of Practice cover commercially operated vessels under 24 metres in length, operating with up to 12 passengers. The MCA or an authorised Certifying Authority will issue Code Vessel Certificates.

The skipper of such a vessel is required to hold a qualification appropriate to its operation. The MCA does not require insurance as part of the issue of a Code Vessel Certificate, but insurance is strongly recommended.

Vessels that have Code of Practice certificates are not required to hold Local Authority licences. However, under the provisions of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982, Local Authorities may still issue licences provided that the vessel has a UK Load Line or Load Line Exemption Certificate. Such licences are acceptable in place of certificates issued to vessels under the relevant MCA Code of Practice.

There is no requirement for a vessel to be registered at the Registry of Shipping and Seamen.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport which government organisation is responsible for enforcing the national minimum wage legislation on UK registered ships; what efforts are being made to ensure compliance; and how many cases were dealt with by the relevant body in each year since the legislation took effect. [95676]

Mr. Jamieson: Enforcement of the national minimum wage is carried out by the Inland Revenue's National Minimum Wage Compliance Teams, on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry.

Compliance Officers investigate every complaint received about employers failing to pay their workers the minimum wage. This includes complaints from individual workers and from third parties. They ensure that the appropriate minimum wage is being paid and that the workers receive any arrears of wages due to them. The officers also investigate other employers identified as being most at risk of non-compliance.

There are no figures of the number of inspections carried out on employers of UK registered ships.

If workers have reasonable grounds to believe that they are entitled to the national minimum wage but are not receiving it, they can contact the National Minimum Wage Helpline (0845 6000 678) for further advice and assistance.

Office of the Rail Regulator

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the *(a)* technical and financial contracts, *(b)* technical consultants used on a call-off basis and *(c)* financial consultants used on a call-off basis by the Office of the Rail Regulator, since April 2002, the nature of the assignment for each consultant, and the value of work done by each consultant. [93221]

Mr. Jamieson: The following table shows contracts that have been awarded by the Office of the Rail Regulator since April 2002.

Consultant	*Purpose*
Accenture	Provision of advice on the acquisition of Railtrack plc by Network Rail
Booz Allen Hamilton	West Coast Route Modernisation: assessment of efficient costs
Accenture	Interim review economic advice on expenditure by Network Rail
Booz Allen Hamilton	Economic advice on small enhancement schemes
Mason Communications	Railtrack renewals and efficiency review (periodic review)—assessment of Railtrack's mobile telecoms installation program (GSM-R)
CDL	Assessment of, and advice on, Network Rail's compliance with licence condition 24 asset register
OXERA	Interim review regulatory economic advice
MVA Consortium	Railtrack performance review for control period 2
NERA	Economic advice on competition questions
Needlemans	Incremental output statement (stations enhancement)—advice
RSM Robson Rhodes	General corporate finance advice on Railtrack/Network Rail and industry
Mason Communications	Railtrack renewals and efficiency review (periodic review)—assessment of Railtrack's fixed line telecoms installation program (FTN)
IMR Solutions	Regulatory accounting and financial modelling advice
CDL	Assessment of, and advice on, Network Rail's compliance with licence condition 24 asset register
NERA	Review of incentive framework for Network Rail
Mason Communications	Railtrack renewals and efficiency review (periodic review)—Data Room for GSM-R (Railtrack Telecoms)
Sciotech	Advice on freight vehicle usage costs
Horton 4 Consulting	General economic advice
Shell IT International	Asset register advice
AEA Technology	Capacity Map Software—to assist in determining the allocation of capacity under the track access approval regime
NERA	Specific competition economics advice
D. Burford	Accountancy services
Countrywide Porter Novelli	Risk Assessment Workshop
Europe Economics	Economic advice on liability regime for new track access contracts
DTZ Pieda Consulting	Advice on network licence condition 26: land disposals
Europe Economics	Regulatory economic advice relating to rail freight
NERA	Review of industry licence fees

The value of individual contracts is confidential for commercial reasons, but the total expenditure to date is £1,379,281.

Railways (External Consultants)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the *(a)* technical and financial contracts, *(b)* technical consultants used on a call-off basis and *(c)* financial consultants used on a call-off basis, by Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate since April 2002, the nature of the assignment for each consultant, and the value of work done by each consultant. [93228]

Mr. Jamieson: The Health and Safety Executive does not let financial contracts and therefore has no information in respect of financial contracts or financial consultants.

The technical contracts commissioned on behalf of HMRI since April 2002 are as follows:

Contractor	*Title*
(a) External and Internal Research	
ABB Eutech Ltd.	Control and Protective systems: Assessment methodology
University College, London	FN curves and criterion lines for railways and other transport modes
AEA Rail	Classification of railway schemes
Competence Assurance Solutions Ltd.	Classification of railway schemes
National Economic Research Associates	Review of the economic aspects of the ERTMS project team report
Mr. P Grant	Safe movement of trains—independent evaluation of initial drafting
(b) External support—Call-off arrangements	
WS Atkins	Technical aspects of SPAD investigations
Serco Assurance	West Ealing Derailment—forensic examination of track

The values of individual contracts are commercially confidential, but the total cost of these contracts to date is £337,904.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the *(a)* technical and financial contracts, *(b)* technical consultants used on a call-off basis and *(c)* financial consultants used on a call-off basis by (i) the Rail Delivery Directorate, (ii) the Railways Restructuring Directorate and (iii) other directorates within his Department carrying out work relating to the railways, since April 2002, what the nature of the assignment was for each consultant, and what the value of work done by each consultant was. [93237]

Mr. Jamieson: Since April 2002 the Department has been using the following consultants to give the advice listed:

Consultant	*Advice*
On a call-off basis	
Saxton Bampfylde Hever plc	Advice on senior recruitment
Eversheds	Advice on rail pension issues
Leeds Institute for Transport Studies	Advice on the prevention of railway accidents
Other contracts	
Arthur Andersen	Accountancy advice
Citigroup (Schroder Salomon Smith Barney)	Financial advice
CMS Cameron McKenna	Legal advice on rail matters
Faber Maunsell	Development of a national rail model
Finsbury Limited	Specialised communications work
KPMG	Accountancy and taxation advice
Mercers Management Consulting	Management consultancy advice
Mott Parsons Gibb	Project representatives for the channel tunnel rail link
Partnerships UK	Advice on matters relating to rail policy
PKF	Accountancy advice
Saunders and Dolleymore	Trade mark services
Transport and Travel Research	Development of a framework for research into attitudes, perceptions and expectations of rail travel
United Kingdom Accreditation Service	Development of an assessment regime.

The value of work done by individual consultants and advisers is commercially confidential but, for all of them together, expenditure so far this financial year amounts to £21.7 million.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many telephone helplines are sponsored by his Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95714]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport has 134 helplines of which 66 are charged at national rate, three at premium rate and five at local rate. The details are in the following table:

	Telephone numbers	*Rates*
DfT central		
South East Regional Airports Study (SERAS)	0845 100 5554	Local
DfT executive agencies		
Driving Standards Agency		
Booking Enquiries	0870 010 1372	National
Theory Test, Enquiries and Complaints	0870 241 0204	National
Vehicle Inspectorate		
National Enquiry Line	0870 606 0440	National
MOT Enquiry Line	0845 600 5977	Local
Police Enquiry Line	0845 600 5978	Local
Maritime and Coastguard	0870 600 6505	National
Highways Agency	0845 750 4030	Local
DVLA—local offices		
Wimbledon	0870 600 6767	National
Stanmore	0870 241 1269	National
Chelmsford	0870 241 2147	National
Manchester	0870 241 2146	National
Reading	0870 241 5161	National
Leeds	0870 240 3514	National
Nottingham	0870 241 1876	National
Luton	0870 240 3515	National
Sidcup	0870 240 3516	National
Maidstone	0870 240 3517	National
Birmingham	0870 240 3518	National
Portsmouth	0870 240 4730	National
Bournemouth	0870 240 4731	National
Brighton	0870 240 4732	National
Exeter	0870 240 4734	National
Truro	0870 240 6278	National
Aberdeen	0870 240 6279	National
Northampton	0870 240 8228	National
Edinburgh	0870 240 6281	National
Dundee	0870 240 6280	National
Inverness	0870 240 6283	National
Peterborough	0870 240 8229	National
Oxford	0870 240 8230	National
Ipswich	0870 240 8231	National
Norwich	0870 240 8232	National
Carlisle	0870 240 0691	National
Sheffield	0870 240 1315	National
Preston	0870 240 0692	National
Stockton	0870 240 0695	National
Newcastle	0870 240 0669	National
Lincoln	0870 240 0671	National
Beverley	0870 240 1316	National
Bristol	0870 240 1317	National
Chester	0870 240 1318	National
Shrewsbury	0870 240 1223	National
Cardiff	0870 240 1224	National
Bangor	0870 240 1225	National
Swansea	0870 240 1320	National
Worcester	0870 240 1319	National
DVLA—general		
Drivers	0870 240 0009	National
Vehicles	0870 240 0010	National
Car Hire	0906 139 3837	Premium
Telephone Relicensing	0870 240 2288	National
Date of Liability	0906 165 7585	Premium
Dealerline	0906 185 8585	Premium

	Telephone numbers	Rates
DSA	0870 241 2415	National
Post Office Line	0870 600 0301	National
Photo On Line	0870 600 6661	National
Motorcycle Vehicle Excise Duty	0870 241 2145	National
Small Islands	0870 241 5674	National
Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN)	0870 241 1878	National
Heavy Goods Vehicle Rebate Line	0870 607 6688	National
Graduated Vehicle Excise Duty Rebate	0870 241 2449	National
Mandatory V5	0870 240 6415	National
Local Office address system	0870 243 0444	National
Web Vault	0870 241 5803	National
Registration Number Plate Supplied form filler	0870 240 6424	National
V5 form filler	0870 240 6426	National
Registration Number Plate Supplied form filler documentation	0870 240 6425	National
Driver Medical (DM) Ordinary Drivers Licence	0870 600 0301	National
DM Diabetes line	0870 241 5450	National
DM Vocational Drivers	0870 241 1879	National
DM General Practitioner	0870 241 1875	National
Motor Cycle Consultation	0870 600 1016	National
Test Reminders	0870 240 3052	National
London Regional Transport Customer Service Centre (Underground)	0845 330 9880	Local

Underground Safety

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when London Underground were first informed of the problem of motors breaking free on high speed underground trains; what subsequent reports they received; and what action was taken. [95085]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* I understand from London Underground that they first became aware of problems on the Central line train fleet on 3 September 2001 during a routine maintenance check at Hainault depot, when a train was found to have a dislodged motor. London Underground carried out an immediate ultrasonic examination of the relevant area on other motors, which revealed no further instance of failure.

An independent investigation commissioned by London Underground concluded that the problem was loose bolts. A check of motor bolts on all Central and Waterloo & City line trains was immediately carried out and revealed one instance of a motor with fractured bolts, where the motor was held in place by its safety bracket. The whole fleet was initially fully checked twice, after which a regime of checking all bolts at least once every 3 months was instigated.

On 20 September 2002, a train which was not in service but was entering Loughton sidings was derailed when a motor dropped off. An investigation revealed that the motor bolts had fractured and the safety bracket had failed to retain the detached motor as it was designed to do.

Because of this, the most stringent checking regime possible was introduced with each train being checked every 5 days as a rolling programme across the fleet.

Further independent investigation was also undertaken as a result of the Loughton incident. This highlighted a new concern over the safety bracket bolts and these were specifically included within the 5-daily check regime.

The HSE are also conducting a full investigation.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CDC Capital Partners

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the specialised funds proposed under the reorganisation of CDC Capital Partners which will manage the investment activities of CDC Capital Partners targeting private business in *(a)* South Asia and *(b)* Africa in the (i) power and (ii) SME sector. [95616]

Clare Short: CDC has recently launched three funds for the SME sector in West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. Further funds will be launched by CDC this year.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the cost of cancellation of the total global debts of the heavily indebted poor countries. [95655]

Clare Short: This information is not yet available. Until the World bank has conducted Debt Sustainability Analyses for all the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), particularly those affected by conflict, it is not possible to calculate the total cost of debt cancellation for these countries under the HIPC Initiative.

Vehicle Fleets

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the annual rate is at which her Department renews its vehicle fleet, by *(a)* volume and percentage for each category of vehicle, *(b)* type of power unit and *(c)* type of fuel; and what progress has been made on the replacement of vehicles on a lower emissions basis in each of the last three years. [96560]

Clare Short: DFID does not operate a vehicle fleet. The only official cars used are the three cars hired through the Government Car Service for Ministers and one Senior Official. All three are LPG-fuelled.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she next intends to meet representatives of the Zimbabwean opposition. [96156]

Clare Short: I have no plans to meet with the Zimbabwe opposition at the present time. DFID and FCO officials in Harare maintain dialogue with Government representatives where possible, political parties including the MDC, non-governmental organisations, and other civil society representatives.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND THE REGIONS

Animal Welfare

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps the

Government is taking to ensure that animal welfare is a prime consideration in discussing reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. [94966]

Mr. Morley: The Government will argue for the inclusion of measures which make a genuine contribution to improving animal welfare in Council discussion of the European Commission's legislative proposals for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, published on 22 January. We will study closely the opportunities and practical implications of the specific measures proposed by the Commission.

Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will help to improve the EU's chances of securing a successful outcome to the WTO negotiations, including on its proposals for recognition of animal welfare measures.

Bovine TB

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with representatives from *(a)* New Zealand, *(b)* Ireland and *(c)* the Netherlands on the search for a cattle vaccine against bovine TB. [95064]

Mr. Morley: During 2002, the Independent Scientific Group (ISG) Vaccine Scoping Study Sub-Committee (VSSSC) met six times and will report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the spring on the feasibility for pursuing a TB vaccination strategy for cattle or wildlife. As well as ISG members and other leading academics, Defra and DARDNI officials sit on the VSSSC.

The VSSSC has heard presentations from and questioned Dr. Eamonn Gormley from Ireland and Dr. Leigh Corner from New Zealand on the bovine TB vaccination research being carried out in their own Countries. Members of the ISG and Defra officials have visited Ireland to discuss the Irish work programme and see their experimental facilities. Defra's Veterinary Laboratories Agency has active research links with both the Irish and New Zealand workers researching bovine TB. Officials are in regular contact with the Instituut voor Dierhouderij en Diergezondheid in Lelystad, the Netherlands. This is the official laboratory of the Netherlands for the testing of tuberculin's.

Climate Change Agreement

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the performance of the pig and poultry sectors in complying with the terms of the climate change agreement. [95052]

Margaret Beckett: There are climate change agreements with sectors for intensive pig rearing, intensive rearing of poultry for meat production and intensive rearing of poultry for egg production. Sectors with climate change agreements have until noon on Monday 17 February to submit information. No information has yet been supplied to me in respect of these sectors.

Cloned Animals

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the Government's policy is on the import of animal eggs, embryos or semen from cloned animals for breeding purposes. [94979]

Mr. Morley: With regard to animal health controls on the importation of live animals and their genetic material it is Government policy that, where trade has not been harmonised under EU rules such imports remain prohibited except under the authority of an import licence issued in accordance with bilateral agreements. All imports of such commodities have to be accompanied by health certification in accordance with the legislation in place. These rules would also apply in the case of cloned animals and their eggs, embryos or semen.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent representations have been made to her Department by scientists involved in the cloning of animals; whether the representations have discussed products from cloned animals reaching the food chain; and what assessment the Government has made of the use of cloning technologies in the production of food. [94980]

Mr. Morley: No recent representations have been made to Defra by scientists requesting financial support for research to advance animal cloning technologies or for application of the technology to the livestock products food chain.

The Government has commissioned several advisory reports on livestock cloning, including "The implications of cloning for the welfare of farmed livestock" from Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2002. The Government accepts the findings of this report that the cloning of livestock is ethically acceptable, providing it is carried out within the framework of the general principles laid down in the Banner Committee's report of 1995, which considered the 'Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Breeding of Farm Animals'. This reiterates the Government's view that all animals (whether domestic, farmed or used for scientific purposes) should be kept to the highest possible welfare standards.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what research has been conducted into the use of cloned animals for the production of food in the United Kingdom; and if she will make a statement. [94983]

Mr. Morley: Research at Roslin Institute, Edinburgh, that led to the development of animal cloning by nuclear transfer, and used to produce Dolly the sheep, was supported by MAFF between 1990 and 1999. No further research has been supported by MAFF or Defra to apply the technology to livestock product production.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the use of cloning technology for the production of domestic farm animals. [94978]

Mr. Morley: Animal cloning technologies are inefficient, resulting in greatly increased production cost for livestock breeders. This has inhibited the uptake of livestock cloning in the UK. The Government ensure that cloning procedures are carried out within the

framework of the general principles laid down in the Banner Committee's report of 1995, which considered the 'Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Breeding of Farm Animals'. This reiterates the Government's view that all animals (whether domestic, farmed or used for scientific purposes) should be kept to the highest possible welfare standards.

Commercial Whaling

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government is taking to ensure that no commercial whale hunting will resume within EU waters; if the Government will take steps to ensure that EU waters are made a whale sanctuary; and if she will make a statement. [93070]

Mr. Morley: All cetaceans are fully protected in EU waters under the EU Habitats Directive. While we do not oppose the creation of an EU whale sanctury, we believe that the current measures afford the necessary safeguards which a whale sanctuary would provide.

COTES Regulations

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects to complete her review of the 1997 COTES regulations. [95375]

Mr. Morley: We published a consultation paper on the review of the COTES regulations on 15 January, in which we proposed a number of measures to combat wildlife crime. The closing date for responses is 4 April. How soon we can complete our review will depend on what emerges from the consultation, and to what extent further discussions, including with the devolved Administrations, are needed, but we are very keen to take our proposals forward as quickly as possible at every stage.

Deer Culling

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total cost has been in each of the last five years of deer culling programmes undertaken by the Forestry Commission in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* elsewhere in the UK. [95507]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission's deer management costs throughout Great Britain for the last three years, together with the forecast for the current financial year, are given in the following table. The figures include costs such as provision of deer fencing as well as culling.

It has not been possible to identify the costs for the years 1997–98 and 1998–99, as these were included with protection and maintenance costs for other activities.

£ million

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*[1]
Scotland	4.6	5.2	5.2	5.8
England	1.7	1.6	1.7	1.9
Wales	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2

[1] Forecast

Fisheries

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what discussions have been held between British officials and UK Ministers regarding compensation from the European Commission for those affected by the decisions at the December Fisheries Council; [93881]

(2) what advice British officials have given UK Ministers regarding compensation from the European Commission for those affected by recent cuts in fishing quotas and the implications of this on the annual UK rebate from the European Union. [93979]

Mr. Morley: The question of additional funding from the EC Budget to compensate those affected by the recovery measures for cod did not arise during the negotiations at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in December.

The European Parliament approved the 2003 EC Budget in December 2002. The relevant Category of expenditure has already been budgeted up to the agreed spending ceiling.

The European Commission did propose as part of the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy that 32 million Euro of new money from the EC Budget should be made available during 2003 for an emergency vessel scrapping fund. The UK supported the proposal for this fund, provided that the Community financing could be found within the limits of the Berlin Financial Perspective. The Commission has yet to come forward with a fund that meets this condition.

The Commission also requested that member states consider re-prioritising their existing allocations of EC Structural Funds to provide socio-economic measures, such as compensation, under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG). The Commission noted that funds would be freed in some member states if the Council curtailed aid paid for building new vessels. Unlike some member states, the UK does not use EC aid towards building new vessels, so this was not an avenue which freed financing for the UK.

I considered this position, as did my colleagues in the Scottish Executive and the department for Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland. Our combined conclusions resulted in the substantial packages of aid announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 28 January, and the related packages introduced in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Together, they provide aid worth over £60 million to the UK fishing industry.

The UK rebate was not an issue in these discussions.

Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she will take to give British fishermen socio-economic aid under the amendments to article 12 of European Union Document No. 2369/2002 of 20 December 2002, Council Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No. 2792/1999. [95494]

Mr. Morley: Since the December Fisheries Council, Fisheries Departments have announced financial aid to the UK fishing industry worth over £60 million

Support for re-training can be provided through the existing regional mechanisms.

Flooding

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the progress of the investigation aimed at providing an accreditation system for local temporary defences and aiding their more effective use referred to in Cm 5512 of May 2002. [95344]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The accreditation system referred to relates to a 'publicly available specification' (PAS) standard being developed for temporary flood defences, funded by Department of Trade and Industry, Defra and the Environment Agency among others. I understand that details of the scheme are to be launched shortly.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to her answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 102W, if she will provide a breakdown of expenditure of the Environment Agency in England on managing flood risk from main rivers and the sea in *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02 and *(c)* 2002–03, by (i) local authority area and (ii) Environment Agency regional area. [95081]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The breakdown by Region of Environment Agency expenditure in England for managing flood risk from main rivers and the sea is:

£000

	Actual		Forecast
EA Region	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Anglian	58,540	62,205	68,162
Midlands	31,611	40,244	39,427
North East	27,679	39,016	47,571
North West	24,461	31,390	32,243
Southern	27,078	35,383	43,829
South West	20,137	30,649	39,296
Thames	69,956	68,884	78,600
Total England	259,462	307,771	349,128

I regret that a breakdown of this expenditure by local authority area could not be provided without incurring disproportionate cost.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much is owed to Cumbria county council in respect of reimbursement payments relating to foot and mouth. [88603]

Mr. Morley: The Department does not owe Cumbria county council any money in respect of reimbursement payments relating to foot and mouth. However, the Department received an inquiry from the council on 13 December 2002 about possible reimbursement of allowances for some of its Trading Standards staff who worked for the Department during the foot and mouth outbreak.

The council claimed no specific amount, as they wanted clarification as to whether they were eligible for reimbursement, before submitting a claim. The Department wrote to the council on 2 January 2003 saying it was looking into the details provided in their letter and would give a full reply as soon as possible.

Although the Department does not owe the council any money directly the council does own trading companies who provided services to the Department during the foot and mouth outbreak. Defra is in serious commercial dispute with these companies and has instructed external lawyers.

Farm Incomes

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total income was from farming in *(a)* 2000 and *(b)* 2001 including FMD compensation and other FMD payments; and what she expects it to be in 2003. [94424]

Mr. Morley: The latest estimates of farm income released on 30 January show Total Income from Farming (Tiff) in real terms (at 2002 prices) at £1.80 billion in 2000, £2.07 billion in 2001 and £2.36 billion in 2002.

Neither the losses due to foot and mouth nor the compensation are recorded in the aggregate agricultural income account. This is a consequence of the decision by the Office for National Statistics to treat destroyed livestock as "exceptional losses", as defined in the European System of Accounts 1995. Exceptional losses are shown in the other changes in the volume of assets account and compensation is treated as capital transfers and not part of income. FMD compensation payments totalled £1.1 billion.

Beyond 2002 commodity prices and exchange rates, and hence incomes, are highly uncertain. Estimated projections are given in Section f of the publication "Farming and Food's Contribution to Sustainable Development" which accompanied the publication of "The Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food" in December. This is available at http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/newstrategy/econ/section1.pdf

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her latest estimate is of the cost of compensation to farmers for the slaughter of cattle as a result of foot and mouth disease in the last three years. [95593]

Mr. Morley: The latest estimate of the cost of compensation to farmers for the slaughter of cattle as a result of foot and mouth disease is £674,694,849.

Forestry Commission (Scotland)

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to review the operations of the Forestry Commission in Scotland. [95506]

Mr. Morley: The operations of the Forestry Commission in Scotland are, of course, the responsibility of the Scottish Executive. However, in August last year, the forestry Ministers in England, Scotland and Wales each announced the outcome of the Forestry Devolution Review of administrative arrangements for the delivery of sustainable forestry policies in the three countries. The review concluded that those arrangements need to be updated, without

legislation, to achieve greater integration of forestry with other rural policy work while retaining a collaborative approach to common issues.

Work is now taking place on implementing the review's recommendations, and further announcements will be made in due course of the specific changes to be made in each country.

Internal Drainage Boards

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) when a decision will be made regarding the future of the internal drainage boards and their role; [95707]

(2) when a decision will be made regarding the flood and coastal defence review. [95706]

Mr. Morley: The future role of internal drainage boards is part of the flood and coastal defence funding review. I am currently considering the outcome of the review with ministerial colleagues and will make an announcement as soon as possible.

Livestock Movements

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received concerning the workability of the six day standstill rule, given the ban on livestock staying overnight in auction marts. [95204]

Mr. Morley: We propose to reduce the whole farm standstill to six days from 4 March. This has been welcomed by the main livestock industry organisations and we expect them to co-operate in ensuring that the new rules are effectively implemented.

We intend to consult soon on a number of further proposals-including a ban on livestock staying overnight on market premises-for possible introduction later this year, aimed at improving biosecurity and disease detection.

Mawdesley to Warrington Pipeline (Farmers' Compensation)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with Transco on compensation payments for farmers affected by the Mawdesley to Warrington gas pipeline; and what estimate she has made of *(a)* the loss of income to farmers and *(b)* the number of compensation claims that are still outstanding as a result of the construction of the Mawdesley to Warrington gas pipeline. [92297]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* None. These are matters for my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Meat Import (Quality Standards)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the measures for the prevention of importation of substandard meat and bushmeat into the UK introduced on 1 January. [95206]

Mr. Morley: On 1 January, following sustained pressure from the UK Government, new rules were introduced prohibiting all personal imports into the European Union of meat, meat products, milk and milk products from the majority of non-EU countries. This includes bushmeat, which is the meat of any wild animal hunted for food. The rules for other animal products and plants have not changed. The relevant legislation has been implemented in the UK and new publicity materials are available to notify travellers of the changes in the rules. It is still too early to make a proper assessment of the impact of these changes.

Sheep Tagging

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received on the practicality of double tagging sheep under the EU Directive on sheep identification with particular reference to *(a)* the ease with which such tags are lost and *(b)* the difficulties in reading the tags. [95205]

Mr. Morley: The European Commission published proposals on identification and registration of sheep and goats on 13 December 2002. Discussion on these proposals are still at a very early stage and we are consulting stakeholders including those from the sheep industry on their implications. The proposed rules on tagging are one of the main concerns being raised and we shall be taking all the comments made into account as we attend EU discussions.

Underground Petrol Tanks

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what financial assistance available for petrol retailers seeking to upgrade underground petrol tanks. [95476]

Mr. Morley: There is no financial aid available in England and Wales for this type of capital expenditure. However, help is available in the form of guidance and advice, and the Environment Agency is working with the petroleum retailers industry to ensure that this reaches those who need it. Given that underground petrol tanks may, in the course of maintenance, need replacing, the Downstream Oil Industry Forum, which is made up of Government and industry representatives, is currently looking into the cost and safety of re-lining as an alternative option for such tanks. The Forum is due to report later this year.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many reported leakages of fuel from underground storage tanks there were in each year since 1999. [95477]

Mr. Morley: Information from the Environment Agency's database for these years will take a little time to compile but will be made available to the Library of the House as soon as possible. I will write to let the hon. Member know when that is.

Waste

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to review the Government's Best Value indicators for waste management. [89613]

Margaret Beckett: All best value indicators are reviewed annually and the indicators for 2003–04 have been published recently.

Government will need to take a number of factors into account when reviewing waste indicators for 2004–05.

A key aim will be to maintain consistency over time as far as possible, to enable robust performance data to be accumulated. However, one of the recommendations in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit's recent report "Waste Not Want Not" was that alternative indicators for waste should be considered.

Government will respond to this and other recommendations in due course. If changes are to be made then Government would expect to go out to consultation with local government and others during August.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Al-Qaeda Cells

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with international intelligence organisations concerning the number of current al-Qaeda terrorist cells in different countries and how many operatives they have; and what their weapons capabilities are. [95324]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have regular discussions with our international partners about the threat posed by al-Qaeda and related groups.

Ambassadors

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice is given to Her Majesty's ambassadors about *(a)* inviting and *(b)* receiving persons who are convicted fugitives from the law in diplomatic properties. [94964]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our Heads of Mission overseas use diplomatic premises for the furtherance of HMG objectives, and are able to exercise appropriate discretion in doing so.

Bangladesh

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has met representatives from *(a)* the Bangladeshi Government and *(b)* the Awami League to discuss the subject of political violence in Bangladesh. [95066]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I discussed law and order in Bangladesh, including political violence, with a cross-party group of Bangladeshi MPs, and with Sheikh Hasina, Leader of the Awami League, last July. Our High Commission in Dhaka regularly raises with the Bangladesh Government the need for all allegations of political violence to be fully investigated and for perpetrators to be brought to justice. We urge all parties to work together in the interests of democracy.

British Council (Budget)

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the budget is for *(a)* the British Council, *(b)* British Trade International spending which falls under his Department and *(c)* publications, displays and events overseas, as defined on page 86 of his June 2002 Annual Report, Cm5413, in 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [95216]

Mr. Rammell: The information requested is as follows:

(a) The FCO grant in aid to the British Council for 2003–04 will be £166.461 million.

(b) The FCO's 2003–04 budget for British Trade International has not yet been set. In 2001–02, the most recent full Financial Year for which figures are available, British Trade International activities consumed £136.290 million of FCO resources. This figure is further broken down in Schedule 5 of the FCO's 2001–02 Resource Accounts (HC324).

(c) Public diplomacy budgets for 2003–04 have not yet been set but are expected to be about £5 million.

Diplomatic Premises

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those diplomatic premises which are shared with *(a)* EU diplomatic delegates and *(b)* other EU member state delegates. [95958]

Mr. Rammell: The UK Missions which share facilities with other EU member states or the European Commission are: Almaty (France, Germany), Ashgabat (France, Germany), Astana (France, Germany, European Commission), Dar es Salaam (Germany, Netherlands, European Commission), Freetown (France), Gaborone (France), Minsk (Italy), Nicosia (Italy), Pyongyang (Germany), Quito (Germany), Sofia (European Commission).

FCO Officials (Nairobi)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason interviews with FCO officials have been suspended in Nairobi for Somali nationals seeking family reunion with relatives who have been granted settlement in the UK. [95653]

Mr. Rammell: Due to the current security situation in Nairobi, access to the High Commission may be granted only to those with adequate confirmation of their identity. These provisions apply to all visitors and are not aimed specifically at a particular nationality. Somali nationals continue to be interviewed but are affected by these restrictions. The High Commission keeps the security situation under constant review and the current restrictions will be in place no longer than absolutely necessary.

Guantanamo Base

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Government officials

have visited the Guantanamo base in Cuba; and if he will place copies of the reports of their visits in the Library. [94762]

Mr. Rammell: The officials were from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Security Service. I am withholding the information requested under Exemptions la and 15 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, I am unable to publish the names of the officials.

Iraq/al-Qaeda (Links)

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been received by his Department concerning links between *(a)* Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, *(b)* Osama bin Laden and *(c)* the al-Qaeda organisation. [95315]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received inquires from the press and public and parliamentary questions but not representations as such. We have received information from various sources.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps are being taken by his Department to investigate links between *(a)* Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, *(b)* Osama bin Laden and *(c)* the al-Qaeda organisation. [95316]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We will continue to evaluate such information as we may receive on any links between the Iraqi regime, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Israel

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action is being taken by the Government to ensure that goods produced in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza and Golan, are not imported to the EU under the preference terms of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. [94741]

Mr. MacShane: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury gave on 4 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 181W.

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether Israel has breached its obligations as an occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Convention; and what actions the UK is taking, as a high contracting party to that Convention, to secure full compliance by Israel. [94768]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories are contrary to Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. We have repeatedly called on Israel to freeze all settlement activity.

Collective punishment is also contrary to the Fourth Geneva Convention. In certain circumstances this can include the demolition of homes of suicide bombers; the closure and curfew regime, denial of access for humanitarian and medical agencies to those in need. We have raised our concerns at the highest levels of the Israeli Government and have requested they take immediate steps to address concern about the situation in the Occupied Territories.

In accordance with the Declaration adopted at the Conference of High Contracting Parties in Geneva on 5 December 2001 the UK continues to meet its responsibility to encourage all parties to the conflict to ensure respect for the Geneva Conventions in all circumstances.

Jordan

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received about the cases of Rawan and Fadi Husam Rasmi Jibreen and Siham Quandah; what representations he has made to the authorities in Jordan; and if he will make a statement. [95004]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have received representations from UK Non-Governmental Organisations and Members of both Houses of Parliament. Staff in the British Embassy in Amman have raised this case with the relevant Jordanian authorities and continue to follow this case closely.

Middle East

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process. [95126]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In January my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary chaired the 'London meeting' on Palestinian reform a key element of any final settlement.

Britain remains committed to the Quartet-led efforts to reach a two-state solution, and to using its influence nationally and through the EU to support a negotiated agreement to bring to an end the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Mr. Abdullah Ocalan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Turkish Government on *(a)* the state of health of Mr. Abdullah Ocalan and *(b)* the prison conditions under which Mr. Ocalan is being held; and if he will make a statement. [95971]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has not raised the health of Mr. Ocalan or his prison conditions with the Turkish Government.

However, the British embassy in Ankara has discussed these issues with Mr. Ocalan's lawyers, most recently on 16 December.

The UK is working closely with the Turkish Government in support of its efforts to improve human rights. A bilateral human rights dialogue was held on 26 November 2002 during which the issue of prison reform was raised. The British Government have funded a number of bilateral projects to assist Turkey in the reform and modernisation of its prison system, in order to promote respect for the human rights of all prisoners.

Mugabe Regime

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment

he has made of crimes under international law which may have been committed by members of the Mugabe regime; and if he will make a statement. [95353]

Mr. Rammell: We receive evidence of the Mugabe regime's widespread abuse of human rights from a number of sources inside Zimbabwe, and we monitor the situation closely. We have consistently condemned the regime for its appalling human rights record and its use of torture on political opponents. We will continue to work with international partners in focusing attention on human rights abuses in Zimbabwe.

Mullah Omar

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning the current whereabouts of the former Taliban leader Mullah Omar. [95319]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We continue to discuss the whereabouts of Mullah Omar with our international partners. We will continue to use all means at our disposal to bring him to justice.

Osama bin Laden

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning the current whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. [95310]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received a number of reports as to the possible whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. It has been the practice of successive governments not to comment on intelligence matters. The Security and Intelligence Agencies are outside the scope of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Paragraph 6, Part I).

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has had with *(a)* Governments and *(b)* intelligence organisations within the last six months regarding Osama bin Laden. [95311]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We continue to have a wide range of discussions about Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders, with our international partners.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps are being taken by the British Government and its allies to monitor the *(a)* whereabouts and *(b)* activities of Osama bin Laden. [95313]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We and our allies in the coalition against international terrorism will continue to use all means at our disposal to bring Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders to justice.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the last confirmed sighting of Osama bin Laden was; and if he will make a statement. [95321]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There have been numerous reported sightings of Osama bin Laden since 9/11. We and our coalition partners will continue to hunt for bin Laden and the other al-Qaeda leaders to bring them to justice.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what resources are being channelled towards the hunt for Osama bin Laden; and what the costs are to date. [95322]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is not possible to identify the specific costs of hunting down Osama bin Laden. This is a key objective in the wider campaign against international terrorism, which involves the whole range of military, diplomatic and intelligence effort and undertaken in co-operation with international partners.

Osama bin Laden/al-Qaeda

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the regimes which his Department suspect of *(a)* having given and *(b)* continuing to give aid to Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda organisation. [95312]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The global network of al-Qaeda and its associated groups have located themselves in countries where governments are unable to exercise full control over their territories or where the authorities have offered them their protection and/or collusion.

Saudi Arabia (British Detainees)

Dr. Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Foreign Office has done to ensure that the alibis presented by the British detainees charged with bombings in Saudi Arabia have been properly investigated by the Saudi Arabian authorities. [95522]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The details of individual consular cases are confidential. The British men in Saudi Arabia have legal representation and discuss their cases with their lawyers. We are in close contact with the men's lawyers and we keep the families informed of developments in the case. It has been the wish of the men that we do not discuss the cases in detail in public.

Sudan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers from his Department have visited Sudan since 1997. [94763]

Mr. Rammell: The then Minister of State the late Derek Fatchett visited Sudan in July 1998, when he helped to broker a ceasefire in Bahr el Ghazal.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent fighting that has broken out in Western Upper Nile in the Sudan. [95065]

Mr. Rammell: There have been recent reports of fighting around Leer, Tam, Lara and Nhialdou in Western Upper Nile (Unity State). The US-led Civilian Protection Monitoring Team (CPMT) has investigated alleged attacks against civilians in Western Upper Nile and alleged violations of the Memorandum of Understanding on cessation of hostilities in Western Upper Nile. Their report has been presented to the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A for comment before dissemination.

We expect the parties to reach agreement soon on an improved verification and monitoring mechanism to underpin the Memorandum of Understanding on cessation of hostilities. This should help to reduce tension until a full ceasefire agreement can be worked out.

Venezuela

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent discussions he has had with other countries regarding the situation in Venezuela; [95333]

(2) what discussions he has had with countries working with Venezuela to end the national strike there; and if he will make a statement; [95350]

(3) what discussions he has had with the Venezuelan Government and other interested parties since the Venezuelan President was temporarily deposed from power last year; and if he will make a statement; [95336]

(4) what discussions he is having with the Venezuelan Government and opposition forces regarding the situation in Venezuela; and if he will make a statement; [95334]

(5) when Government Ministers last met representatives of the Venezuelan Government; what discussions took place; and if he will make a statement. [95335]

Mr. Rammell: We have maintained regular contact with the government and opposition. I discussed our concerns with the Vice President of the National Assembly on 18 November.

In all those contacts, and in discussions with EU partners and members of the recently constructed Group of Friends supporting the OAS (Organisation of American States) facilitation efforts, we have stressed the importance of respect for the constitution and democratic principles.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what discussions were held with his EU counterparts at the EU General Affairs Council meeting of 27 to 28 January concerning EU sanctions against Mr. Robert Mugabe and his Government; and if he will make a statement; [94721]

(2) which EU member states *(a)* objected and *(b)* agreed to the extension of sanctions against Zimbabwe at the EU General Affairs Council of 27 to 28 January; and if he will make a statement. [94730]

Mr. Rammell: EU Foreign Ministers discussed EU sanctions against the Mugabe regime at a General Affairs Council meeting in Brussels on 27–28 January. The meeting proved inconclusive, as did a subsequent discussion among Permanent Representatives in Brussels on 30 January. We have made our position clear; that we want to see a roll-over of the EU sanctions on Zimbabwe, including the travel ban, when they expire on 18 February. This will require consensus among all EU member states, and has not yet been achieved.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORTA

Cricket (Zimbabwe)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has had with members of the Commonwealth regarding the future of the forthcoming Cricket World Cup to be played in Zimbabwe; and if she will make a statement. [94268]

Tessa Jowell: The Cricket World Cup is a matter for the cricket authorities, not for the Commonwealth. I refer my hon. Friend to the written answers given to the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes (Michael Ancram) on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 640W and 631W, by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Sport, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions she has had with the ECB since the announcement by England players that they do not want to play World Cup matches in Zimbabwe. [94863]

Tessa Jowell: I discussed the planned World Cup match in Zimbabwe with the England and Wales Cricket Board on 9 January. A DCMS official attended a meeting held at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 23 January along with representatives of the Board and the Professional Cricketers' Association. The views of the England players on participation in the match were discussed at that meeting. Officials in both this Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have remained in close touch with the Board and the Association since then.

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice was given to the English Cricket Board about the policy of Ministers on the English team playing matches in Zimbabwe at the meeting on 5th July. [95621]

Tessa Jowell *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* A copy of the minute of this meeting has been deposited in the Library of the House.

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when Ministers first informed the English Cricket Board of the Government's opposition to an England cricket team playing matches in Zimbabwe. [95622]

Tessa Jowell *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) by my rt hon Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 353W.

Regional Sports Boards

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations her Department has made to Sport England to ensure that the new regional sports boards will include input from the governing bodies of individual sports and from local authorities. [95956]

Mr. Caborn: The constitutions of the new regional sports boards provide for representatives of both local government and the voluntary sector in sport to be appointed to the boards. Sport England is currently recruiting the board members.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Algeria

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what licences have been granted for export of controlled goods to Algeria in each month since September 2001; and if she will make a statement. [95207]

Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The number of Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) issued to end users in Algeria, in each month since September 2001, is set out in the following table. Individual licences might cover a range of items with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

	SIELs	*OIELs*
September 2001		
ML11	1	—
5A002	—	1
5B002	—	1
October 2001		
ML21	—	1
November 2001		
ML4	—	1
ML17	1	—
PL5006	—	1
December 2001		
ML11	—	1
ML14	—	1
ML21	—	1
PL5017	—	1
5A101	1	—
S1 P1 G2	—	1
January 2002		
ML9	1	—
February 2002		
ML11	1	—
5A002	1	—
March 2002		
ML22	1	—
PL5031	—	1
5D002	—	1
April 2002		
5A002	—	1
S1 P1 G2	—	1
May 2002		
ML2	1	—
ML10	1	—
6A001	—	1
June 2002		
ML6	2	—
ML11	1	—
ML21	1	—
ML22	1	—
7A103	3	—
7E101	2	—
9A004	1	—
9A117	1	—
July 2002		
ML21	1	—
5A002	—	1
5D002	—	1
August 2002		
7A101	—	1
7A103	1	1
7E101	1	—
September 2002		
ML11	1	—
ML22	1	—
5D002	—	1
6A001	—	1
7A103	1	—
November 2002		
1E001	—	1

There were no SIELs or OIELs issued to end users in Algeria in October 2002, December 2002 or January 2003.

All relevant export licence applications for Algeria are rigorously assessed on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria and other previously announced Government policies. Details of all export licences issued and refused are published by destination in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, copies of which are available from the Libraries of the House.

Armed Forces Reservists

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether the full *(a)* contractual, *(b)* statutory and *(c)* common law employment rights of individuals in their main job are protected during periods of service as an armed forces reservist; and if she will make a statement. [93343]

Alan Johnson *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment Act) 1985 provides protection to members of the reserve forces who are called out for permanent service. In general, it places an obligation on an employer to re-instate reservists who apply to them for this following a period of called-out service. The obligation is to reinstate in the occupation in which they were last employed before call out and on terms and conditions not less favourable than those which would have been applicable had they not been called out. Where this is not reasonable and practicable, they must be taken into employment in the most favourable occupation and on the most favourable terms and conditions as are reasonable and practicable in the particular case.

In addition, section 217 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 provides that, where those individuals resume employment with their previous employer within six months of the end period of service with the armed forces of the Crown, the period of service does not break their continuity of employment as far as the statutory

provisions of the 1996 Act are concerned. The Ministry of Defence also has powers to make payment to individuals and their employers to maintain membership of an employer's pension scheme while the individual is called out.

Together these provide robust and practicable safeguards for the employment rights of individuals who are reservists when they are called out.

Arms Export Licences

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will take steps to make available for public inspection a register of applications for UK arms export licences. [95305]

Nigel Griffiths: The Government have made clear in the consultation document on the draft Export Control Bill that they propose to register information on all those applying for licences, both for exports and for arms trafficking and brokering activities, thus creating a database available to be used for licensing and enforcement purposes, including as appropriate on an international basis. There are no plans to publish a register of applications.

ASW

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what inquiries she has instituted into *(a)* the collapse of ASW, *(b)* the actions of its directors and *(c)* the effect of the collapse upon the pension schemes of the company's employees; and if she will make a statement on the Government's response to the situation. [94898]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The information is as follows:

(a) As regards the exercise of the Secretary of State's power of investigation under the Companies Act 1985, it is not the Department's policy to comment on the affairs of individual companies. I am, of course, pleased that former ASW plants at Cardiff and Sheerness plants have both found new owners and hope that this will lead to a quick resumption of production and re-employment of ASW workers who have lost their jobs.

(b) An Insolvency Practitioner (IP) appointed as a receiver has statutory power to report to the Secretary of State on the conduct of the directors of a company. In the case of ASW the IP has considered the actions of the directors and has reported to the Secretary of State that he has not found any matters of unfit conduct.

(c) Ministers have met members of the ASW Action Groups and their constituency MPs, on more than one occasion, to discuss concerns about the Cardiff and Sheerness pension schemes. A number of practical ways forward were identified and the Minister of State for Pensions has re-affirmed his commitment to meet with members of the ASW Action Group. The protection that people receive if their pension schemes are wound up is important, and we need to do more to protect the rights of members in schemes that are winding up. That is why we are consulting on proposals within the Pensions Green Paper.

Broadband

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the Government agencies, offices, departments, task forces and units involved in the promotion and extension of broadband throughout the United Kingdom; what their responsibilities and funding are; and what their current programmes, projects and targets are. [94953]

Mr. Timms: The Department of Trade and Industry is working with a number of other public sector bodies to promote the use of and extend access to broadband services in pursuit of the Government target for the UK to have the most extensive and competitive broadband market in the G7 by 2005. These include: the nine English Regional Development Agencies, the Office of Government Commerce and the Office of the e-Envoy. We are also working with the three devolved Administrations, which have their own broadband strategies based on their (devolved) economic development remits.

The programmes to which DTI is contributing include: The UK Broadband Fund—£30 million distributed through RDAs and devolved Administrations to support them in taking forward innovative schemes to meet local requirements for extending broadband networks to a wider range of customers than those who would appear immediately to be commercially attractive. The UK Broadband Taskforce—this is a joint initiative between DTI and OGC. The DTI contribution places a Regional Broadband Coordinator in each devolved Administration and RDA to support and promote the aggregation of public sector demand for broadband and to ensure that through such aggregation there is an extension of broadband availability, particularly in rural areas and for small and medium enterprises. The budget for the Taskforce is about £3 million.

The OGC contribution to the UK Broadband Taskforce is to make public sector procurement of broadband more effective by:

Publishing non-chargeable advice and guidance

Offering chargeable hands-on support to assist public sector purchasing authorities with specific broadband projects

Framework Agreements for Broadband Services—OGCbuying.solutions (the trading arm of OGC) is in the process of letting Frameworks which will provide customers with a 'one-stop-shop' for the procurement of broadband managed services. These agreements will be awarded in early spring 2003, and enable any UK public sector contracting organisation to obtain best value when buying broadband services without requiring a full and separate procurement for each purchase.

OGCbuying.solutions' costs in letting and managing the frameworks will be defrayed in a small percentage management charge levied on suppliers who conduct business through the frameworks.

UK online for business—This DTI programme supports business in the take up and effective use of ICT to improve productivity and competitiveness. As such it supports the broadband agenda through raising awareness of the business benefits to be gained through the use of broadband and other enabling technologies, backed by the provision of independent and impartial advice and information, delivered through publications,

the UK online for business website and UK online for business advisers. Estimated spend this financial year is £15 million of which £1.5 million is specific to promotion of broadband.

In addition to these programmes many local and regional bodies have broadband-related campaigns. Other Government Departments have their own programmes to extend broadband services to public buildings. For example, under the Department for Education and Skills the importance of broadband has been reflected by right hon. Friend the Prime Minister who announced in November 2002 that all schools should be connected to broadband by 2006.

By the end December 2002, 26 per cent. of schools in England were connected to broadband at 2 mbps or faster.

Defence Exports

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what form end-use monitoring agreements between the UK and nations importing UK-manufactured defence exports take; and if she will make a statement. [95208]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* I have been asked to reply.

Restrictions can be placed on export licences prior to issue, which limit who may use the defence material in question and for what purpose. In general however, the Government consider that carrying out effective risk assessment on end-users before deciding whether or not to issue export licences is the most effective way to ensure that UK manufactured defence material is used responsibly.

Departmental Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her latest estimate is of the value of each departmental building within London; and if she will make a statement. [95822]

Ms Hewitt: My Department occupies only leasehold properties in London.

Huntingdon Life Sciences

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what sum has been identified to cover possible contingent liabilities consequent on the provision of insurance services to Huntingdon Life Sciences. [94977]

Ms Hewitt: Although the Department has recognised the possibility of contingent liabilities consequent on the provision of insurance services to Huntingdon Life Sciences, under Exemption 13—Third Party Commercial Confidences—of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, commercial confidentiality reasons prevent us from disclosing details of the sums involved.

Internet Presentation Grants

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the grants and funding available to public bodies to develop internet presentations for use as public consultation are. [96226]

Mr. Timms: DTI makes no specific grants or funding available for this purpose.

Israel

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to change Israel's status as one of her Department's target markets. [95374]

Nigel Griffiths: None.

Post Office Closures

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with the Post Office about the level of opposition needed to reverse a decision to close a post office under the urban reinvention programme. [94899]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* There have been no such discussions. Proposals for post office closures under the urban network reinvention programme are put out to public consultation in accordance with the code of practice agreed with Postwatch. Final decisions on closure, after consideration of representations received, are an operational matter for Post Office Ltd. It would not be appropriate for the Government to intervene in this process.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post office closures have been announced under the Urban Reinvention Programme since 1 January; and how many of those decisions have been reversed following representations by local people. [94913]

Mr. Timms: Proposals put out to consultation for, and subsequent decisions on, post office closures under the urban network reinvention programme are an operational matter for Post Office Ltd. and I have asked the Chief Executive to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many telephone helplines are sponsored by her Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95711]

Ms Hewitt: My Department and its Agencies operate a number of call centres providing help and assistance to our customers, as well as specific enquiry number helplines which vary in number at any given time to reflect particular initiatives.

The number of call centres currently in use across the Department and its Agencies is 11 and these are either operated direct by the Department or its Agencies or as a managed service on our behalf.

Information is not available centrally on the current number of inquiry helplines which are set up to support individual programmes and schemes or to meet short-term needs. However, at the last review in 2001 some 33 departmental and 25 Agency helplines existed.

Information is also not held centrally on whether these utilise national, premium or local rates although at the last review three of the above utilised 0870 numbers, 11 used 0845 numbers and the remainder used STD numbers, the majority being 020 numbers.

Trade Agreement (Qatar)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry why the trade agreement talks with the Emirate of Qatar were suspended; and whether the talks have been resumed. [95680]

Nigel Griffiths: Our trade relations with Qatar are excellent. There have been no trade agreement talks. Discussions continue on a Double Taxation Agreement and Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement.

Vehicle Fleets

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the annual rate is at which her Department has renewed its vehicle fleet, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each category of (i) vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel over the last three years. [96450]

Ms Hewitt: The Department does not run any cars of its own and all vehicles run on our behalf are done so under contract through bodies such as OGC and the GCDA.

TREASURY

Capital Modernisation Fund

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 27 January, *Official Report*, column 604W, on the capital modernisation fund, if he will place in the Library the bids for the latest round of allocations from the fund. [95428]

Mr. Boateng: The proposals put forward for the capital modernisation fund are the subject of internal discussion between Ministers. The results of ministerial decisions will be published in the Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses and on the Treasury website, with further details available from individual Departments.

Coal Mines (Methane)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on his plans to provide financial incentives for the capture of coal mine methane emissions; [95437]

(2) what steps he has taken to encourage coal mine methane capturing industry in the UK. [95439]

John Healey: The Government announced in Budget 2002 that it would exempt electricity produced by Coal Mine Methane plant from the climate change levy, subject to EU state aid approval. The application for state aid approval is currently with the European Commission.

Gross Domestic Product

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what independent forecasts of GDP growth for *(a)* this year and *(b)* next year his Department has collected; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [96217]

Ruth Kelly: HM Treasury publishes 'Forecasts for the UK Economy: A comparison of independent forecasts' every month. This document brings together a selection of independent forecasts for GDP growth and other economic indicators. The January edition is available from the House of Commons Library, and the next edition will be published shortly.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what criteria he uses when assessing the validity of independent GDP growth forecasts. [96218]

Ruth Kelly: Independent forecasts for the UK economy are the responsibility of the organisations that produce them.

Higher Education

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment his Department has made of the effect the proposals in The Future of Higher Education will have on the UK economy with particular reference to *(a)* the housing market and *(b)* the banking industry. [94398]

Mr. Boateng: No such specific assessments have been made. The impact of the White Paper overall on the economy is expected to be positive.

National Savings and Investments Evaluations

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library those elements of the national savings and investments evaluations which are not commercially sensitive; and if he will make a statement. [96202]

Ruth Kelly: All elements of National Savings and Investments' advertising evaluation results are commercially sensitive because they would disadvantage commercial negotiations with the media. Exemption 7 (Effective management and operation of the public service) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information applies.

Pensions

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to encourage pension schemes such as the Pension Exchange scheme offered by the financial services company Berry, Birch and Noble. [95647]

Ruth Kelly: The Government recently published the pension green paper "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement".

That explains that the financial services industry is a vital partner in the UK pensions system. We are keen to see firms of all sort play a vigorous part in promoting pension saving, and improving choice, service and competition across that market.

Chapter 4 of the Green Paper outlines the crucial role that employers play in the pensions partnership, as providers of, and contributors to pension schemes. The Government promotes workplace pension saving by providing employers with generous tax incentives to provide or contribute to pensions. This recognises the importance of pensions to a firm's ability to recruit and retain staff and to help employees to save for their retirement.

Personal Debt

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with officials from the Bank of England concerning levels of personal debt; and if he will make a statement. [96188]

Ruth Kelly: HM Treasury and Bank of England officials regularly meet to discuss a range of issues.

Revenue Qualifying Regime

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the effects of the Government's proposed abolition of the Inland Revenue's qualifying regime on the amount of money saved by those on low incomes. [94629]

Ruth Kelly: Last July, the Sandler "Review of Medium and Long-Term Retail Savings in the UK" recommended the abolition of the qualifying regime for life insurance policies, which mainly afford a tax advantage to higher rate taxpayers. The recommendation would also have consequences for the taxation of small tax-free savings policies sold by friendly societies.

The Government are consulting on the recommendations of the Sandler review, as announced in the pre-Budget report. The Inland Revenue and the Treasury are discussing with the life insurance industry and the Association of Friendly Societies, the economic impact of the recommendations, including how those people on low incomes might be affected.

Stamp Duty

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the revenue yield cost of abolishing stamp duty on share transactions. [95580]

Ruth Kelly: The 2002 pre Budget forecast of revenue from duty on transactions in shares, and hence the direct yield cost of abolition, is £2.2 billion in 2003–04.

This estimate makes no allowance for the effect on other taxes arising from the wider impact abolition may have on the economy.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many statutory instruments have been issued by his Department in each calendar year since 1979. [89840]

John Healey: HM Treasury, HM Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue have introduced 2,459 Statutory Instruments in the last 24 calendar years. A breakdown by calendar year is provided in the table.

Year	*Number*
1979	62
1980	86
1981	64
1982	73
1982	69
1984	98
1985	83
1986	84
1987	97
1988	96
1989	52
1990	43
1991	77
1992	98
1993	125
1994	103
1995	202
1996	139
1997	105
1998	83
1999	128
2000	144
2001	214
2002	134
Total	2,459

The HMSO SI Registrar (Siregistrar@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk) can provide a list of statutory instruments which have been issued by individual Government Departments since 1999. SIs which have been originated by departments but eventually made by the Privy Council are list only under the Privy Council Office.

Stock Market

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the value of the FTSE 100 index. [94392]

Ruth Kelly: No country can be insulated from fluctuations in the world economy and the fall in the FTSE 100 share index since its peak at the end of 1999 reflects declines in global equity prices. The best basis for long-term sustainable increases in wealth remains a strong economic policy framework, delivering a platform of low inflation and sound public finances.

Tax Loopholes

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to close tax loopholes; and if he will make a statement; [95430]

(2) what action he is taking to reduce tax avoidance by corporate entities; and if he will make a statement; [95579]

(3) what plans he has to combat avoidance of *(a)* value added tax, *(b)* income tax, *(c)* capital gains tax, *(d)* national insurance contributions, *(e)* stamp duty and *(f)* excise duties; and if he will make a statement. [95578]

John Healey: The Government are committed to tackling fraud and closing loopholes in the tax system which allow some people to avoid paying their fair share of tax, increasing the burden on other taxpayers and giving those who use avoidance schemes an unfair advantage. The Government have acted every year since

1997 to close unfair loopholes. For example, the 2002 pre-Budget report included measures to counter the avoidance of tax and national insurance through the abuse of Employee Benefit Trusts, legislation to prevent businesses unfairly claiming accelerated capital allowances, changes to the controlled foreign companies rules to prevent avoidance of UK tax on profits from extended warranties, and action to prevent companies avoiding the payment of VAT on the sale of freehold buildings. In addition the pre-Budget report launched a strategy to tackle losses in the VAT system, which is designed to produce £2 billion a year in additional revenues by 2005–06.

CABINET OFFICE

Broadband Access

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what proportion of *(a)* GP surgeries, *(b)* hospitals, *(c)* primary care trusts, *(d)* health authorities and *(e)* the criminal justice system have broadband access; and what the target date is for full broadband access. [92344]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

The Statistics for existing connections are as follows:

(a) GP practices—157 out of 8,519 connections—(0.02 per cent.)

(b) Hospital Trusts—345 out of 726 connections—(47 per cent.)

(c) Primary Care Trusts—77 out of 284 connections—(27 per cent.)

(d) Health Authorities—108 out of 562 connections—(19 per cent.)

These figures relate to connections only, not directly to the organisations themselves, as it is common for Health Authorities and Trusts to have multiple connections. These can be for connections between different sites or multiple connections to the same sites. Information broken down by specific Trust or Health Authority is not collected centrally.

(e) 100 per cent. of police forces and 100 per cent. of Crown Prosecution Service offices have broadband access through their connection to the Criminal Justice Extranet and Government Secure Intranet services; and 90 per cent. of the Prosecution Service has access to broadband via their connection to the Government Secure Extranet.

Targets for future broadband connectivity are as follows:

Under the existing framework contracts with the NHS net suppliers, connections to GP practices in England are being upgraded to 256 kbps where they do not already have it. Trust and Health Authority connections are being upgraded to 2 Mbps where they do not already have it, or better. The Target for completion of this exercise is March 2004.

As part of the Government 21st Century IT strategy for the NHS, it is planned to replace the existing networking arrangements with a new national broadband infrastructure for the NHS England in 2006–07.

The target date for full broadband access for 100 per cent. of the core criminal justice agencies (the police, Crown Prosecution Service, Courts, Probation Service and Prison Service) is 2006. However, magistrates courts and the Probation Service plan to achieve this during 2003 and the Prison Service plan to achieve it by 2004.

Performance Indicators

Mr. Allen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will create new performance indicators and a table of rankings for *(a)* Departments and *(b)* Ministers. [93391]

Mr. Alexander: There are no current plans to create tables of ranking for Departments or Ministers. The performance of each Department is assessed against the stretching delivery targets agreed and published in their Public Service Agreements. These are specific to each Department. Progress against PSA targets is reported every spring in departmental reports, with an update in the Autumn Performance Reports. Links to these documents are available on the HM Treasury website. Many of the indicators are also subject to regular statistical release.

Each Department is scrutinised in public by the relevant Select Committee and this is complemented by the National Audit Office's programme of value-for-money studies.

DEFENCE

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92391]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 333–34W, by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

External Consultants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92258]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence expenditure on External Assistance (EA), of which external consultancy is a part, is available in the Libraries of the House for the years 1995–96 to 2000–01. This includes expenditure broken down by Departmental Top Level Budget Holders and Trading Funds. However,

expenditure on external consultancy is not recorded as a specific category of EA and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The return for 2001–02 will be published shortly and figures for 2002–03 will be published once the current financial year has ended.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92465]

Dr. Moonie: The reported estimated cost to the Department including its agencies and non-departmental public bodies of fraud and theft in each financial year since 1996–97 is as follows:

£

Year	*Fraud*	*Theft*
1996–97	234,826	231,033
1997–98	98,441	491,215
1998–99	569,863	141,141
1999–2000	1,832,871	204,535
2000–01	660,224	221,126
2001–02	1,318,773	85,407

No abatement is made for subsequent recoveries. The figures relate to a combination of suspected and proven non-procurement and procurement frauds and thefts with estimated values refined from time to time as investigations, sometimes lasting a year or more, reach a conclusion. A major element of estimated cost relates to 'at risk' estimates applied to suspected procurement fraud cases, incorporated here in reported totals from 1999–2000, and are often resolved as 'no crime' or have a proven value lower than original estimates.

Gulf Forces

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel on their way to the Gulf are on S-type contracts. [95908]

Mr. Ingram: Five soldiers serving on S-type engagements are presently serving in the 'Gulf Region'.

Although units for possible operations in the Gulf have been identified not all personnel posted to those units will deploy and others may be attached to bring them to full establishment. It is not therefore possible to identify at this stage the total number of personnel on S-type engagements who could ultimately deploy to the region.

For this answer the 'Gulf Region' includes all Gulf Coastal States.

Iraq

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations he has had with NATO partners about the use of the Alliance in future operations in Iraq, following the formal US request for assistance on 15 January. [95410]

Mr. Hoon: None, although discussions continue in the Alliance on the tasking of contingency planning in support of Turkey.

Marchwood

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what effect the Greenpeace protest outside the Sea Mounting Centre at Marchwood has had on embarkations from the military port. [95876]

Mr. Ingram: The Greenpeace protest resulted in delays to the loading of and the subsequent sailing of four chartered ships, of some one, two, seven and eight hours respectively.

Military Services Ltd

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the potential liability of the UK Government is with respect to International Military Services Ltd; and if he will make a statement. [93714]

Mr. Hoon: International Military Services Limited (IMS) is in dispute with the Government of Iran over the termination terms of contracts let in the 1970s for the supply of tanks and armoured recovery vehicles. The contracts were repudiated by Iran during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Attempts to negotiate a settlement have so far failed and the case has been referred to the International Chamber of Commerce for arbitration. The arbitration tribunal reached a decision on IMS's liability to the Iranian Ministry of Defence in 2001, but IMS is challenging the outcome in the Dutch courts. The amount of the Ministry of Defence's potential liability will be influenced by the result of the appeals process. Until that process is concluded we will not know the size of any liability. The details of the case are commercially confidential.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92462]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Missile Defence

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has concerning the use of United States bases in East Anglia as part of the missile defence programme; and if he will make a statement. [95240]

Mr. Hoon: I have no such plans.

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what discussions he and his officials have had with the United States Government concerning British industry's involvement in the missile defence programme; [95241]

(2) pursuant to his oral statement of 15 January, *Official Report*, column 710, what discussions he and his officials have had, and with which companies, concerning British involvement in the US missile defence programme. [95249]

Mr. Hoon: We are currently exploring with the United States authorities and with British industry the possibility of working together in areas of direct relevance to missile defence, including participation in the US programme. Our aim is to conclude a technical Memorandum of Understanding with the US, covering Government and industrial co-operation. The creation of a Missile Defence Technical Centre (MDTC), jointly funded by United Kingdom Government and industry, is being considered to provide a focus for this future technical work. Companies consulted include BAE SYSTEMS, QinetiQ, MBDA (UK), AMS and InSys.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which British companies are involved in the United States missile defence system. [95257]

Mr. Hoon: We are not aware of any current direct involvement in the United States missile defence programme by United Kingdom-based companies, although BAE SYSTEMS (North America) is a participant in the US industrial team supporting the programme.

Mr. Nick Woodward

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the result was of his investigation into the circumstances of the death of Mr. Nick Woodward of the Royal Military Police outside Aldershot Barracks in November 2002; and on how many occasions Mr. Woodward was present at Deepcut Barracks. [94716]

Dr. Moonie: This incident is subject to an ongoing investigation by the civilian police and it would be inappropriate to comment further. No inquest into the death has yet been held.

While I can confirm that Mr. Woodward was neither stationed nor attended courses at Deepcut, it is not possible to tell whether he ever visited the barracks in any other capacity.

Normandy Barracks

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the result was of his investigation into the circumstances of the death of the Fijian national found dead at the Normandy Barracks in October 2002; what the cause was of his death; and what period the deceased had spent at Deepcut Barracks. [94717]

Dr. Moonie: This incident is subject to an ongoing investigation by the civilian police and it would be inappropriate to comment further. No inquest into the death has yet been held. While I can confirm that the individual in question was neither stationed nor attended courses at Deepcut, it is not possible to tell whether he ever visited the Barracks in any other capacity.

Public-private Partnership (Aircrew Training)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he expects the public private partnership to provide synthetic training services for aircrew to remain within the Ministry of Defence's proposed budget. [95408]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

RAF Marham

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what accommodation has been made available at RAF Marham for personnel returning from Germany in recent months; and if he will make a statement. [95332]

Dr. Moonie: 9 Squadron and 31 Squadron returned from RAF Bruggen in the summer of 2001 to RAF Marham. They were provided with sufficient office space and accommodation for operational activities.

Family housing requirements are being successfully managed, and a current deficit in Single Living Accommodation will be addressed by the provision of 120 rooms as part of Project SLAM: construction of these additional rooms is due to start in May.

Reserve Responsibilities (Hon. Members)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many hon. Members have reserve liabilities for the armed forces. [95960]

Dr. Moonie: There is no register of hon. Members who have a reserve liability. The information requested is not centrally held and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Service Accommodation

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to increase the amount of single living accommodation with en-suite bathrooms. [95406]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to my written ministerial statement of 18 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 58WS.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to make Z-type accommodation available to all army personnel; and when this process will be completed. [95409]

Dr. Moonie: It is intended that Z-type Single Living Accommodation (SLA) will be made available to all trained Army personnel. Where planning regulations allow, accommodation will be built to Z-type (en-suite) specifications. It is planned that a variety of SLA new build and modernisation programmes will deliver some 40,000 bedspaces by 2017.

Shelter Project

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the work that the Ministry of Defence is conducting with the charity Shelter; and how successful this project has been. [95405]

Dr. Moonie: Shelter was selected as the specialist housing adviser to the Armed Forces Project (AFP) established at the Military Corrective Training Centre

(MCTC), Colchester in April 2001. The project was aimed at identifying the small minority of service leavers who are vulnerable to social exclusion and helping them to avoid homelessness. It was originally funded as a pilot scheme by the Homelessness Directorate (previously known as the Rough Sleepers Unit) of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and has been funded by the Ministry of Defence since April 2002.

The AFP was established to help those service personnel who are assessed to be at risk of homeless on discharge from the armed forces after a period of detention in MCTC. The Shelter Housing Adviser provides service personnel and the families of Service personnel in detention with the best possible housing information, advice on their housing rights, and representation. The Housing Adviser, where necessary, makes referrals to local support services in the region to which personnel are moving after they leave the armed forces.

AFP also works in partnership with other MOD housing organisations such as the Joint Services Housing Advice Office (JSHAO) and the Single Persons Accommodation Centre for Ex-Service personnel (SPACES).

The Shelter AFP has to date helped over 156 service personnel and 27 service families, who were assessed to be at risk of homelessness.

Skill Force (Oldham)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the launching of the Skill Force in Oldham. [95413]

Dr. Moonie: The Skill Force initiative is part of Ministry of Defence's work in the wider community as a force for good. The objective is to reduce the number of pupils not in employment, education or training on completion of mandatory education at 16. More immediately, the aim is to reduce truancy, school exclusion and juvenile crime. This is done by using the skills and experience of ex-Service instructors to deliver a vocational alternative for one day a week in school time. The course develops Wider and Key skills through a range of awards and qualifications ranging from St. John's Ambulance young lifesaver to Duke of Edinburgh and Key Skills qualifications. The course is structured around the ASDAN modular vocational award studied at Bronze/Silver level. Pupils gain self-confidence and team skills while working with strong positive role models from the armed forces.

As a result of an independent evaluation of two of the more mature schemes carried out last year, it was agreed that DfES would fund a further 12 schemes as part of its Behaviour Improvement Programme. 13 local education authorities were invited to include Skill Force in their range of behaviour improvement measures. I am pleased to say that Oldham was one of the authorities chosen and that the scheme there was formally opened on 9 January 2003. A total of some 54 young people are involved in Skill Force Oldham, the participating schools are, Breeze Hill School, Radclyffe School and South Chadderton School.

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92464]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 31 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 1056W, regarding the number of special advisers.

Details on the number and costs of press officers employed by the Ministry of Defence for the dates in question are not readily available. I will write to the hon. Member once the information is to hand and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Suicide Prevention Measures

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what suicide prevention measures he intends to put in place in the armed forces. [95404]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 486W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara).

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89892]

Dr. Moonie: Reported estimates of the cost of fraud and theft are maintained for the sake of consistency in respect of financial years only and relate to a combination of suspected and proven non-procurement and procurement frauds and thefts with estimated values refined from time to time as investigations, sometimes lasting a year or more, reach a conclusion. A major element of estimated cost usually relates to "at risk" estimates applied to suspected procurement fraud cases which are often resolved as "no crime" or have a proven value lower than original estimates. The reported figures for the Department, its agencies and non- departmental public bodies for the financial year 2001–02 are as follows.

£

Department	*Agencies*	*NDPBs*
1,341,364	62,816	-

No abatement is made for subsequent recoveries.

UNICOM

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures have been put in place to make UNICOM earlier to use. [95407]

Dr. Moonie: UNICOM, the Army's unit administrative IT system, is represented on several user-groups and fora that consider proposals for system improvements. Continuous improvement is achieved through 'Change Requests', submitted by users and

sponsors; on average some three to four of these are actioned per month and a major upgrade takes place quarterly. UNICOM can also operate through a Windows emulation facility and some sites operate the software through a 'Graphical User Interface (GUI)', but large-scale deployment of this software is dependent on replacement of the user terminals currently in place. This is currently being considered as part of the wider Defence Communications Services Agency Defence Integration Infrastructure (DII) programme alongside the long-term future of the system.

Wattisham Air Traffic Contract

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the risk assessments used in the first and second assessments of the Wattisham Air Traffic Contract were the same. [95955]

Mr. Ingram: There was a separate risk assessment in each competition for the Wattisham Air Traffic Control Contract. The first competition (contract CS 4D/2017) was won by VT Aerospace but the contract was subsequently declared void by mutual consent. Following termination of this contract, a second competition (contract CS 4D/2027), was launched which included a new risk assessment drawing on the lessons learned from the earlier one.

PRIVY COUNCIL

Parliamentary Questions

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the President of the Council if he will make it Government policy that Ministers give holding replies to non-named day questions if a substantive reply is not possible within 10 days of tabling. [94689]

Mr. Robin Cook: I have no plans to make such a change.

Departmental Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the President of the Council how many times since 2001 he has taken flights within his departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied the Minister on each trip. [95610]

Mr. Robin Cook: Since becoming Leader of the House of Commons and President of the Council I have not taken any flights on departmental business.

WALES

Correspondence

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many letters from hon. Members Wales Office Ministers have dealt with since October 2002. [95488]

Peter Hain: 38.

Education Announcement

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly about the press coverage of the education announcement in Parliament on 22 January; and if he will make a statement. [95478]

Peter Hain: I have had a number of conversations with the First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales about the Higher Education White Paper.

Gwydyr House

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 711W, what his estimate is of the open market value of Gwydyr House in Whitehall on the basis of maximum value for non-existing use; and if he will make a statement. [95555]

Peter Hain: The figure given in the answer of 16 January is the open market value, given existing planning permission.

Mr. David Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 711W, on Welsh Office assets, what accounting conventions underlay the upward re-valuation of Gwydyr House from the valuation on 31 March 2000; and if he will make a statement. [95495]

Peter Hain: The valuation of fixed assets in the resource accounts conforms to Generally Agreed Accounting Principles for the UK. These dictate that each year a true and fair value be placed on all assets. They also require that professional valuations are required for fixed assets at intervals of no more than five years and that appropriate and relevant statistical indices should be used to reflect any increase in the value in the interim.

Permanent Staff

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many permanent staff have been employed by his Department in each year from 1999–2000 to 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [89954]

Peter Hain: Data on staffing levels for my Department, since its establishment on 1 July 1999, is released twice a year by Cabinet Office Press Notice. The latest data for April 2002, was published on 31 October 2002. Data for April of each year from 2000–01 appears in the latest edition of the annual publication "Civil Service Statistics". Copies of the Press Notices and annual publications are available from the Libraries of the House.

Press Releases

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many press releases were required by the Welsh Office in the last two years; and how many of these were bilingual. [95489]

Peter Hain: The Wales Office issued 86 press releases in 2001–02 and 129 press releases in 2002–03.

Of these, two press releases in 2001–02 and one press release in2002–03 were issued bilingually. In all three cases, this was because the press releases dealt directly with Welsh language issues.

Railways

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the Strategic Rail Authority regarding the likely effect of a 10–20 per cent. cut in the cost of franchises for the All Wales railway franchise; when they were made; and in what form. [95485]

Peter Hain: I, and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for State forWales, have recently met with senior officials of the SRA to discuss a range of issues including railways in Wales.

The SRA are aware of our realistic ambitions for the Welsh rail network. The rail subsidy reduction exercise is aimed at improving value for money for the operation of the railways in Wales. As yet no decisions on the outcomes of the cut in subsidy have been taken and the SRA have made it clear that they will not consider any proposals which suggests closure of routes in response to a possible reduction to the subsidy.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about the likely effect of a 10–20 per cent.cut in the cost of franchises for the All Wales rail franchise; and when the discussions took place. [95486]

Peter Hain: I meet with the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly Government regularly to discuss a range of issues, including transport in Wales. Recently the Parliamentary Under Secretary for State for Wales met with the Assembly's Minister for the Environment to discuss, amongst other things, rail franchises in Wales.

We are working closely with the Assembly to ensure that the SRA are aware of our realistic ambitions for the Welsh rail network. The rail subsidy reduction exercise is aimed at improving value for money for the operation of the railways in Wales. As yet no decisions on the outcomes of the cut in subsidy have been taken and the SRA have made it clear that they will not consider any proposals which suggest closure of routes in response to a possible reduction to the subsidy.

Special Advisers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many special advisers were employed by the Welsh Office in 1997; and how many are now employed. [95492]

Peter Hain: During the course of 1997 the former Welsh Office employed three different special advisers of whom a maximum of two were in post at any one time. The Wales Office now has two special advisers.

Staff Numbers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many members of staff there were at the Welsh Office in January 1996; and how many staff are employed at the Welsh Office. [95524]

Peter Hain: In January 1996 the Welsh Office employed 2,402 staff (full time equivalents including casuals). The Wales Office currently has a complement of 55 posts.

Staff Salaries

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much was spent on salaries for staff at the Welsh Office in 1997; and how much was spent in the most recent year for which figures are available. [95491]

Peter Hain: The staff costs of the former Welsh Office in 1996/97 were £48.5 million. The staff costs of the Wales Office in 2001/02 were £1.6 million

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many telephone helplines are sponsored by his Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95721]

Peter Hain: My Department does not sponsor any helplines.

Vehicle Fleets

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what the annual rate is at which his Department has renewed its vehicle fleet, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel over the last three years; [96433]

(2) what progress has been made, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel in each of the past three years, in renewal of his Department's vehicle fleet on a lower emission basis. [96434]

Peter Hain: My Department has no agencies and has no vehicles; its road transport needs are met through the Government Car and Despatch Agency.

Welsh Office Staff

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his estimate is of the number of staff employed by the Welsh Office in each year from 1999–2000 to 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [89961]

Peter Hain: Data on staffing levels for my Department, since its establishment on 1 July 1999, is released twice a year by Cabinet Office Press Notice. The latest data for April 2002 was published on 31 October 2002. Data for April of each year from 2000–01 appears in the latest edition of the annual publication "Civil Service Statistics". Copies of the Press Notices and annual publications are available from the Libraries of the House.

Estimated outturn of staffing levels for 2003–04 to 2005–06 is 54.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Advocate General if she will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in her Department. [90871]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland.

SCOTLAND

Industrial Employment

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what proportion of employee jobs there are in each industrial sector in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Fife. [93563]

Mrs. Liddell: The table contains information on the number and proportion of employee jobs in the broad industrial sectors in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Fife.

	Employee jobs in Scotland (September 2002) [1]		*Employee jobs in Fife (2001)* [2]	
Sector	*Number (thousands)*	*Proportion (percentage)*	*Number (thousands)*	*Proportion (percentage)*
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	34.1	1.51	[3]2	[3]1.59
Production	325.9	14.42	28	20.74
Construction	114.6	5.07	8	5.93
Services	1785.3	79.00	98	72.59

[1] ONS Quarterly Employment Estimates
[2] Annual Business Inquiry
[3] Figures denoted in the table are for 2000. Figures for this sector for 2001 are incomplete due to the foot and mouth epidemic. The total percentage will therefore not add to 100.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in her Department. [90870]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department currently has four members of staff employed in a total of two job share positions.

Apart from a very small number of posts, where there are particular business requirements, all vacant posts in the Department are advertised as being available on a part-time, job share/split as well as on a full time basis. Job sharing is only one of the alternative and flexible working patterns available to staff to take up. These arrangements are decided in conjunction with local management to best suit the needs of individuals and the Department.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Farm Incomes

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the levels of farming incomes in Northern Ireland. [95531]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In 2002 it is estimated that 'Total Income from Farming' in Northern Ireland fell to £129 million. For full-time farm businesses the average net farm income is forecast to be £4,600 for the year ending March 2003, some £3,700 lower than in the previous year. These figures are disappointing but reflect lower producer prices in 2002, particularly for milk, and increased expenditure on purchased feedstuffs, a reflection of the poor weather experienced during the summer of 2002. At present there are some encouraging signs which, if maintained, should lead to an improvement in farm incomes. These include the firming of milk prices and the significant strengthening of the euro relative to sterling. In addition the Vision Action Plan, recently announced by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, addresses many of the challenges currently facing the industry and provides a clear strategy to work towards a viable and sustainable agriculture sector for the future.

Global Point Business Park

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many expressions of interest were received in the development of Global Point Business Park at Corr's Corner, Ballyhenry; what the prospects are for the future of that development; and if he will make a statement. [95094]

Mr. Pearson: Outline permission for the development of a mixed use business park at Global Point, Newtownabbey has been hindered by delays in agreeing transportation and development mix issues. It is expected that these will be resolved in the near future. A limited amount of promotion has taken place with 13 potential investors visiting the park in the last year. The current downturn in Foreign Direct Investment and Invest NI's broader responsibilities in respect of business start and business growth in the indigenous market points the way to a more diverse development mix than originally envisaged.

Horticulture

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on government policy on horticulture in Northern Ireland. [95530]

Mr. Paul Murphy: At the end of January, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for agriculture and rural development, announced a public consultation exercise for the strategic development of the horticulture sector in order to obtain the views of those in the industry and its ancillary stakeholders. This exercise will be instrumental in establishing Government policy for the short, medium and long-term future.

The consultation exercise is the current phase of a review which follows on from the completion of a consultants' report and development plan to establish future policy for the development of the horticulture sector. A key goal of the development plan will be to assist the industry to devise and implement a strategy to develop commercial horticulture to meet present and future challenges. This continuing emphasis on the need

for a strategic approach also reflects one of the recommendations of the Vision report on the future of horticulture.

I commend the report and development plan to all those with an interest in the future of Northern Ireland horticulture and urge stakeholders to make their views known on these documents so that they can help shape the future of their industry. The closing date for comments on the report and development plan is 21 April 2003.

Industrial Development Board

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what land transactions were concluded between the former IDB and TK-ECC or its predecessors; and what the *(a)* nature, *(b)* purpose and *(c)* amounts involved in such disposals were. [95535]

Mr. Pearson: The following land transactions were concluded between the former IDB and TK-European Components Corporation:

At Kennedy Way, West Belfast, European Components Corporation had a 21 year factory lease on 78,000 sq ft building within a nine acre land holding from April 1981. The lease terminated in November 1994 when the company moved to its current location at Upper Newtownards Road, Dundonald.

At Upper Newtownards Road, Dundonald, European Components Corporation had a 21 year factory lease on a 275,000 sq ft building within a 23 acre land holding from January 1979. The lease terminated in July 1995 when the company purchased the 23 acre site and the factory by freehold for £1,500,000.

Parade's Commission

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he intends to respond to the Review of the Parades Commission submitted by Sir George Quigley. [83099]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Ministerial Statement on the same subject made today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

TK-ECC

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assistance the TK-ECC factory at Dundonald received from the former IDB; what outstanding Letters of Offer exist from Invest Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [95532]

Mr. Pearson: The information requested, beyond the last five years, is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, during the last five years, TK-ECC (formerly European Components Corporation) was offered selective financial assistance totalling £2 million from the former Industrial Development Board. This related to an offer made in 1998 towards an investment programme of £12.2 million. There are no other outstanding offers of selective financial assistance to the company.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether Invest Northern Ireland is intending to claw back grant aid from TK-ECC following the recent announcement of redundancies at the company's Dundonald plant. [95534]

Mr. Pearson: The terms and conditions which govern grant clawback are included in Financial Assistance Agreements between Invest NI and the company. In accordance with its standard practice Invest NI will be reviewing the position under these agreements in the light of the recent announcement by the company.

WORK AND PENSIONS

19-Year-Olds

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent representations he has received from the Foyer Federation regarding the support of 19-year-olds wanting to follow a full-time training or education course. [93159]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Ministers and officials from this Department have regular contact with the Foyer Federation in relation to the issues for which they campaign.

We have recently received a discussion document from the Foyer Federation;, this sets out the Federation's proposal to extend the financial support available to disadvantaged young people aged 16 to 19 years wanting to take up or continue full- time study.

Together with colleagues in other interested Departments, we are currently giving the proposals careful consideration and will be responding to the Foyer Federation in due course.

Departmental Suppliers

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91907]

Malcolm Wicks: The suppliers of cut office paper to Department for Work and Pensions are: Banner Business Supplies, Guilbert (UK) Ltd., Glenmore Business Papers, Premier Paper, and The Paper Company.

The suppliers of printed paper products are: Astron, Belmont Press, PSUK and Sandy Press, Slater, Cherry Print, Oakfield Press, Colibri Press, MRP, Charisma, Print & Design Factory, Aldridge Print and Trafford (for forms, leaflets, training material and claim packs); Deanprint, Newtown, and Sunstreet (for card and board products); SP&S Secure Print and Stationery, and PADS (for Instruments of Payment and secure forms); Banner Business Stationery (for envelopes); and CEM (for business reply envelopes).

Incapacity Benefit (Claimant Numbers)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many claimants of incapacity benefit there were in each year since its introduction, broken down by local authority area. [94007]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information has been placed in the Library.

New Deal

Paul Holmes: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people have gained unsubsidised sustained employment under the New Deal, broken down by programme, since their implementation; how much has been spent on the New Deal, broken down by programme, in the same period; and if he will make a statement. [91213]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The available information is in the tables.

	Total number of people moving into unsubsidised sustained jobs (up to the end of September 2002, unless otherwise stated)
New Deal for Young People (from January 1998)[1]	290,630
New Deal 25 plus (from July 1998)[1]	80,600
New Deal for Disabled People (from July 2001)[2]	[3]1,655

[1] A sustained job in the New Deal for Young People and New Deal 25 plus is defined as one lasting 13 weeks or more.

[2] A sustained job in the New Deal for Disabled People is defined as one lasting 26 weeks out of a 39 week period. New Deal for Disabled People was launched nationally in July 2001. Prior to that, pilots beginning in September 1998 had helped 8,242 people into jobs (sustained and unsustained).

[3] Figures up to October 2002.

Source:

New Deal Evaluation Database

Separate data for sustained jobs are not available for the New Deal 50 plus, New Deal for Lone Parents or New Deal for Partners. The figures for these programmes which follow therefore relate to all people moving into jobs.

	Total number of people moving into jobs (up to the end of September 2002, unless otherwise stated)
New Deal 50 plus (from April 2000)	86,300
New Deal for Lone Parents (from July 1998)	161,700
New Deal for Partners (from May 1 999)	1,360[1]

[1] Figure up to November 2002

Source:

New Deal Evaluation Database

Expenditure on the New Deals[1]

£million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02 (Est.)*
Young People	50	268	378	368	285
25 plus	0	24	108	128	226
50 plus[2]	0	0	5	20	15
Lone Parents	0	21	41	41	36
Disabled People	0	5	20	10	10
Partners	0	0	5	10	10

[1] Includes expenditure in Northern Ireland.

[2] New Deal 50 plus expenditure does not include employment credits, which are met from Annually Managed Expenditure

Using these figures to construct simplistic measures of the cost effectiveness of these programmes is not recommended. When assessing cost effectiveness a range of factors need to be considered including the wider impact on the economy and wider social benefits. Evaluations of some of these programmes have made such assessments, based on a thorough examination of all impacts, and these are contained in their evaluation reports, available in the Library.

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people have benefited from the new deal for young people in Telford since 1997. [93284]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Up to the end of September 2002, 1,320 people had participated in the new deal for young people in Telford.

Invalid Care Allowance (Mrs. Hedges)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will decide whether to re-examine his decision with regard to invalid care allowance paid to Mrs. P Hedges of Buckfastleigh, South Devon. [94223]

Maria Eagle: Details of individual benefit claims are not disclosed under part 2 paragraph 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. I have written privately to the hon. Member.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Urban Proofing

Paul Flynn: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will introduce urban proofing for all government policies. [95658]

Mr. McNulty: Government policies for delivering an urban renaissance are set out in the Urban White Paper "Our Towns and our Cities: the Future" published in November 2000. Although this does not require policies to be systematically urban proofed, it does provide a comprehensive framework for action for Government policies and programmes affecting urban areas in England. Progress against the White Paper's recommendations is monitored regularly across Government through an Implementation Plan, available on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's website. The Urban Summit, held last year, brought together Ministers from across Government to reaffirm our commitment to tackling urban issues in an integrated way.

Urban policy in respect of Scotland and Wales is the responsibility of the devolved administrations and, while the institutions in Northern Ireland are dissolved, responsibility rests with Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office.

Council Housing

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many council dwellings he estimates will be built in *(a)* the current financial year and *(b)* the next financial year. [91144]

Mr. McNulty: There were 105 local authority dwellings completed in England during 2001–02. Information from local authority housing strategies shows that the totals of local authority dwellings planned to be built in 2002–03 and 2003–04 were reported as 307 and 199 respectively, but these numbers may include some Registered Social Landlords dwellings.

Education and Social Services

Mrs. May: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when it was decided that any local authority with a low CPA score for education and social services would be categorised as weak or poor. [96220]

Mr. Raynsford: The Audit Commission developed the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) methodology, including the framework of weightings and rules applied to component service scores in determining each council's overall category. The Commission is responsible for classifying authorities based on this assessment framework and for publishing the results. Decisions on the methodology were made following extensive and open consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Government.

The Audit Commission published their proposals in consultation documents in March and June 2002 and their decisions on the final framework, following evaluation of responses, on 21 October 2002.

Housing (Right to Buy)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what measurements were used to provide evidence that areas satisfy the criteria by which councils were selected for inclusion in proposed reductions in right to buy discounts in his statement of 22 January; and if areas excluded from the statement can apply for inclusion before the Order is laid. [94847]

Mr. McNulty: The 42 areas listed in my right. hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's statement of 22 January are those that appear to be under the greatest housing market pressure, as evidenced by a high incidence of homelessness and high local house prices. The sources of the homelessness data were statistical surveys of local authority housing departments, routinely conducted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister:

2001–02 Housing Investment Programme Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix

Quarterly Housing Activity Return (PIE).

The data is available on the website of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, at http://www.housing.odpm.gov.uk/local/hipoi/index.htm.

House prices were obtained from the Land Registry.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will consider carefully all representations received, including any from local authorities or housing associations in areas not covered by these proposals.

Housing (Rural Areas)

Andrew George: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many new affordable housing units were completed in *(a)* England and *(b)* local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90831]

Mr. McNulty: The number of housing units completed by Registered Social Landlords and local authorities in England for 1978 to 2002 and in local authorities defined as rural, by region for 1989 to 2002 are given in the following tables.

Region

	All England[1]
1978	113,876
1979	91,065
1980	94,134
1981	71,706
1982	42,840
1983	44,231
1984	43,104
1985	34,582
1986	30,250
1987	27,558
1988	26,911

[1] Urban and rural

Region	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
North East	177	84	165	146	230	172	197
North West	431	470	255	480	546	665	696
Yorkshire and Humber	660	270	350	327	695	713	500
East Midlands	276	406	422	324	453	445	631
West Midlands	378	404	302	340	449	344	464
East	1,267	1,045	690	865	1,200	1,289	1,292
South East	1,250	1,279	744	689	1,215	1,252	1,261
South West	1,075	1,316	1,172	1168	1,530	1,189	1,408
All England (urban and rural)	25,353	27,836	23,421	24,298	31,201	31,942	31,675

Region	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
North East	322	207	121	215	152	246	48
North West	455	324	313	320	254	199	116
Yorkshire and Humber	439	452	177	178	260	96	73
East Midlands	467	307	311	325	356	273	328
West Midlands	394	252	178	416	197	113	138
East	910	953	804	491	714	552	423
South East	682	741	639	447	461	726	413
South West	1,247	982	918	891	1,148	719	482
All England (urban and rural)	27,536	21,256	20,201	17,665	17,248	15,216	13,957

Note:
The rural local authorities included in the figures are those that are classified by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as "mixed rural" or "deeply rural".
Source:
Local Authority returns to ODPM.

Housing Surpluses

Lynne Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what his estimate is of the average surplus, as defined by Government assumptions, per property, of housing owned by *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* housing associations. [95164]

Mr. McNulty: There are currently some 299 local authorities in surplus and some 55 local authorities in deficit based on the assumptions used for housing revenue account subsidy purposes. In aggregate, there is an average deficit of £89.46 per dwelling that is met by subsidy.

The 2001 Global Accounts and Sector Analysis of Housing Associations jointly published by the Housing Corporation and National Housing Federation show the operating surplus for registered social landlords (RSLs) in 2000–01 to be £125 million. Information on RSLs by dwelling is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The global accounts for 2002 relating to the 2001–02 financial year are not yet available.

Local Government Finance (East Sussex)

Gregory Barker: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment his Department made prior to the announcement into the effects of the Local Government Finance settlement on public services in the shire counties, with particular reference to East Sussex. [96263]

Mr. Raynsford: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has balanced up all of the various pressures in taking decisions on how to distribute the fixed pot of grant, and have implemented a floor that guarantees all authorities, including East Sussex, an increase well above inflation. Shires counties receive an average grant increase of 5.7 per cent.

Milton Keynes and South Midlands Study

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he intends to publish the conclusions of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Study; and if he will make a statement. [95504]

Mr. McNulty: The final report for the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Study was published in September 2002. The Regional Planning Bodies for the east Midlands, south-east and east of England are now considering the study recommendations and will publish alterations to regional planning guidance in due course, in the light of the Deputy Prime Minister's statement "Sustainable Communities, Building for the Future".

New Buildings

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to introduce new standards for the design of new buildings in areas of special historic interest, with particular reference to the City of London. [95660]

Mr. McNulty: PPG1 General Policy and Principles underlines that "good design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process and should be encouraged everywhere", and that particular weight should be given to the impact of development on areas of "townscape value". There are special requirements under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 when exercising planning functions affecting listed buildings and conservation areas. There no plans to change these expectations.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he is taking to encourage *(a)* the construction industry, *(b)* architects and *(c)* local authorities to improve the quality of design of new buildings. [95729]

Mr. McNulty: A comprehensive agenda has been set out in "Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future", including significant extra funding for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment to drive up design standards and skills. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's planning policies have for some time made it clear that when submitting planning proposals applicants should be able to demonstrate how they have taken account of the need for good design.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what steps he is taking to encourage *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* the construction industry to inform local communities of the design of new buildings planned in their area; [95730]

(2) if he will make it his policy to require local authorities to publish full details of major new construction work in the local press before planning permission is granted; [95666]

(3) if he will make it his policy to ensure that local residents have the opportunity to see *(a)* plans and *(b)* artists' impressions of the quality of design of new constructions proposed in their area, before final planning permission is given; [95667]

(4) if he will make it his policy to penalise local authorities who make it difficult for local residents to gain access to information regarding planned significant construction work in their neighbourhood. [95665]

Mr. McNulty: PPG1 "General Policy and Principles" underlines that

> "good design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process and should be encouraged everywhere".

Annex A to PPG1 provides further information on the handling of design issues, and explains that

> "Applicants for planning permission should, as a minimum, provide a short written statement setting out the design principles adopted as well as illustrative material in plan and elevation."

Good practice guidance is set out in "By Design".

Under the Town and Country Planning (Applications) Regulations 1988 applications for planning permission are required to include a plan identifying the land to which the application relates and any other plans or drawings and information necessary to describe the development question. Local Planning Authorities can request further information, plans and drawings necessary to enable them to determine the application. All planning applications and planning decisions are placed on the planning register and are open to public inspection during office hours.

Local planning authorities are required under the Town & Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995 to publicise all planning applications. As a minimum, authorities have to notify neighbours directly or place a notice on or near the site. For major applications, including the erection of 10 or more dwellings, a local newspaper advertisement is also required. Pre-application discussions between applicants, local authorities and other interested parties are encouraged to minimise problems at a later stage.

In addition to the statutory publicity requirements, the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill will, subject to parliamentary approval, require all Local Planning Authorities to produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) setting out what the authority will do in terms of involving the community in preparing local development documents and in their consideration of planning applications.

The SCI will set out who the local planning authority intends to consult (above its statutory consultation requirements) when determining an application for planning permission. It can also specify which bodies an authority would encourage developers to consult in advance of submitting applications for significant development.

A local planning authority which does not follow the terms of its SCI, or any of its statutory publicity or consultation requirements could be challenged by an aggrieved person in the courts. Where maladministration or injustice is alleged, complaints can be made to the authority's Monitoring Officer. Complaints about maladministration can also be addressed to the Local Government Commissioner (the Local Ombudsman) who can investigate whether maladministration has occurred.

New Developments (Thames Gateway)

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on new developments on flood plains in the Thames Gateway. [94217]

Mr. McNulty: My right. hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals for new developments in the Thames Gateway were announced in his statement on sustainable communities, housing and planning on 18 July 2002, *Official Report*, columns 438–42 and his further statement on the long-term programme of action for sustainable communities on 5 February 2003.

Although much of the new development in Thames Gateway will take place within the indicative flood plain defined by the Environment Agency, the defences on the River Thames provide a high level of protection from flooding. The indicative flood plain must not be confused with the functional flood plain where water needs to flow freely in time of flood. Development in this area should be wholly exceptional, and limited to essential transport and utility infrastructure.

Elsewhere in the indicative flood plain in Thames Gateway development proposals will still be subject to an appropriate flood-risk assessment and full consultation with the Environment Agency. The agency is a member of the Environment Sub-Group of the Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership, and has been working closely on the proposed developments for over a year. It has produced environmental constraint maps for each of the zones of change within Thames Gateway.

Planning Application (Windsor)

Mrs. May: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister against what criteria he will determine whether to call-in the planning application by the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead to develop a civic quarter; and when he will announce his decision. [96222]

Mr. McNulty: My right. hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's policy, against which he will consider whether to call in a planning application by the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead to develop a civic quarter, is to be very selective about calling in planning applications. This step will generally be taken if planning issues of more than local importance are involved. Such cases may include for example, those which in his opinion:

may conflict with national policies on important matters;

could have significant effects beyond their immediate locality;

give rise to substantial regional or national controversy;

raise significant architectural or design issues; or

may involve the interests of national security or foreign governments.

Each case will be considered on its individual merits. A decision on the application will be announced in the not too distant future.

Mrs. May: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister why the decision on calling-in the planning application by the Royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead for the development of a civic quarter has been postponed. [96223]

Mr. McNulty: The decision on whether or not to call-in the planning application by the Royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead for the development of a civic quarter has been postponed for a short period. This has been to allow consideration of the interrelationships with other proposals, the range of policy issues involved and to allow consideration of public representations that are currently being made to the Government Office.

Planning Applications

Mrs. May: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many planning officers were employed in his Department to determine cases of calling-in planning applications on *(a)* 1 January 2002 and *(b)* 1 January 2003. [96219]

Mr. McNulty: The number of staff in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister involved in the planning process (including whether or not to call in a planning application) on *(a)* 1 January 2002 was 144 and on *(b)* 1 January 2003 was 131.

Mrs. May: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many decisions to call-in planning applications are outstanding with his Department; and for how long each has been under consideration. [96221]

Mr. McNulty: The number of planning applications under consideration as to whether or not to call in, outstanding on 4 February was 122. Of these 58 have been under consideration less than 3 weeks.

Radio Masts

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent planning guidelines have been issued on granting planning permission for radio masts; and if he will make a statement. [95475]

Mr. McNulty: On 22 August 2001, taking into account the recommendations in the Stewart Report published in May 2000 and following the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister public consultation, changes were introduced that significantly improved the planning procedures and guidance for telecommunications mast development. These are set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note 8 (revised) (PPG8). The main changes:

- strengthened public consultation requirements on mast proposals of 15 metres and below so that they are the same as for planning applications;
- increased the time for an authority to deal with prior approval applications to 56 days;
- underlined that school governors must be consulted on all proposals for new masts on or near a school or college; and
- increased fees to enable authorities to carry out full public consultation.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to amend further the planning arrangements for telecommunications development.

A Code of Best Practice on Mobile Phone Network Development, produced jointly by representatives of central and local government and the mobile phone industry, was published on 11 November 2002. The code is a guide to the siting of mobile phone masts produced jointly by representatives of central and local government and the mobile phone industry.

Right to Buy

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what calculations underlie his assessment that last year's right-to-buy sales will result in a long run cost of some £850 million; and whether he offset the lifetime rental subsidy in his calculations. [94301]

Mr. McNulty: The long term cost of a Right to Buy sale compares the financial costs and benefits to the public sector over 30 years from a RTB sale compared to if the sale had not taken place. There are three elements to this:

- the receipt from the sale—a financial benefit;
- rental income foregone and expenditure saved from the home no longer being in the public sector—usually a cost;
- the grant needed to build a replacement social home, in the year when the home sold under RTB would have been available for letting if it had not been sold—a cost

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's analysis indicates that these three elements together represent a cost per sale of £17,000. This includes allowance for any net rental subsidy. Multiplied by 52,000 RTB sales in 2001–02 suggests a total long term cost of these sales of £885 million.

Seaside and Country Homes Scheme

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many properties have been added to the Seaside and Country Homes scheme since 1979. [95139]

Mr. McNulty: None.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the terms of reference are of the review of the operation and extent of the Seaside and Country Homes scheme being undertaken as part of the procurement of the Housing and Employment Mobility Services. [95141]

Mr. McNulty: The review consists of discussions with bidders for the Housing and Employment Mobility Services on their future management of the scheme and changes that might be implemented to the Seaside and Country Homes Scheme once they are running it. As this is not a formal review no terms of reference have been written.

Water Framework Directive

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what action he is taking to ensure that current reforms in land use planning will take into account UK obligations under the EC Water Framework Directive. [95669]

Mr. McNulty: The EC Water Framework Directive contains no explicit provision in relation to land-use planning but River Basin Management Plans and land-use plans need to be mutually supportive. The requirement in the new Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill that every local development document should be subject to an appraisal of the sustainability of the proposals should assist in this. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is considering further with the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how best to develop the linkages between the requirements of the Directive and land-use planning.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were

registered as living in *(a)* each of the boroughs in Hampshire, *(b)* Southampton and *(c)* Portsmouth in each of the years between 1997 to 2002. [94900]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* The information is not currently available in the form requested. Measures in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and the introduction of induction, accommodation and reporting centres are designed to ensure stringent contact management and as a result better information on the location of asylum seekers.

The availability of information on the location of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom is currently linked to the support the asylum seeker receives. Asylum seekers in the United Kingdom either receive support from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), local authorities or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), or are supporting themselves.

The following table shows the number of asylum seekers supported in the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation in Hampshire at the requested times. Figures by borough are not available.

Table showing the number of asylum seekers (including dependants) supported in NASS accommodation in Hampshire[1]

	As at end		
	2000	*2001*	*September 2002*
Portsmouth	0	170	245
Southampton	0	345	455
Total	0	510	705

[1] All figures have been rounded to the nearest five and may not sum due to rounding. Figures exclude cases where support has ceased.

Additionally some asylum seekers receive subsistence only support from NASS or are disbenefited cases[1] These figures are available only at regional level. The following table shows the number of asylum seekers in these categories who were staying in the South Central region (which includes Hampshire).

[1] Disbenefited cases are cases which were previously supported under the main UK benefits system and have been moved onto NASS support. Some of these cases have remained in the original social services accommodation.

Table showing the number of asylum seekers (including dependants) receiving subsistence only support or being supported as a disbenefited case in the South Central region (which includes Hampshire)

	As at end		
	2000	*2001*	*September 2002*
Subsistence only	1,330	3,150	4,410
Disbenefited	0	45	75
Total	1,330	3,195	4,485

From grant claims sent to the Home Office by local authorities, as at the end of December 2002, there were the following number of asylum seekers supported by local authorities:

Table showing the number of asylum seekers supported by local authorities in Southampton, Portsmouth and the rest of Hampshire as at the end of December 2002

	Singles	*Families*	*Total households*
Southampton	220	35	250
Portsmouth	85	25	105
Rest of Hampshire	40	5	45

In previous years information is available only on the number of weeks support given to asylum seekers as opposed to the number of asylum seekers actually supported.

Statistics on the number of asylum seekers supported by NASS in each region are available on the Home Office's Immigration and Asylum Statistics website: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of those who have unsuccessfully sought asylum were deported in each year from 1997 to 2002. [94901]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* Information on the proportion of those persons who have been removed after unsuccessfully seeking asylum is not available, except by examination of individual case files, this could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The number of principal asylum applicants removed from 1997 to September 2002 is given in the table.

Removal of asylum seekers[1]

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*January to September 2002*[2]
Principal applicants	7,165	6,990	7,665	8,980	9,285	7,780
Dependants[3]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	[3]1,495	1,825

[1] Includes persons departing "voluntarily" after enforcement action has been initiated against them and persons leaving under the Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes run by the IOM.
[2] Provisional data subject to change.
[3] Data for dependants removed only shows those removed from April 2001 onwards. Data on dependants was not collected prior to this date.
Note:
Figures are rounded the nearest five.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* asylum seekers and *(b)* persons who have had their asylum applications denied are residing in Eastbourne. [95113]

Beverley Hughes: The information is not currently available in the form requested. Measures in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum (NIA) Act 2002 and the introduction of induction, accommodation and

reporting centres are designed to ensure stringent contact management, and as a result better information on the location of asylum seekers.

The availability of information on the location of asylum seekers in the UK is currently linked to the support the asylum seeker receives. Asylum seekers in the UK either receive support from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), local authorities or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), or are supporting themselves.

NASS does not disperse asylum seekers to accommodation in Eastbourne. Some asylum seekers receive subsistence only support from NASS or are disbenefited cases.[1] Statistics on these cases are only available at regional level. As at the end of September 2002 there were 4,410 asylum seekers (including dependants) who were receiving subsistence only support, and 75 disbenefited asylum seekers (including dependants), who were staying in the South Central region (which includes Eastbourne).[2]

From grant claims sent to the Home Office by local authorities, as at the end of December 2002, there were 75 single asylum seekers and 30 asylum seeker families being supported by local authorities in East Sussex.

Statistics on the number of asylum seekers supported by NASS in each region are available on the Home Office's Immigration and Asylum Statistics website: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Statistics are not available on the location of persons who have been refused asylum.

[1] Disbenefited cases are cases which were previously supported under the main UK benefits system and have been moved onto NASS support. Some of these cases have remained in the original social services accommodation.

[2] All figures have been rounded to the nearest five. Figures exclude cases where support has ceased.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* powers he has and *(b)* policy he applies to assess the health of *(a)* asylum seekers and *(b)* other immigrants, in considering their admission to the UK. [95352]

Beverley Hughes: Under the Immigration Act 1971, Immigration Officers are able to refer persons seeking leave to enter the United Kingdom to Medical Inspectors at ports of entry.

Paragraph 36 of the Immigration Rules sets out the circumstances in which Immigration Officers may refer an individual to a Medical Inspector for examination.

Current policy is to refer for medical examination any person who mentions health or medical treatment as a reason for his visit, or who appears not to be in good mental or physical health, or who intends to remain in the United Kingdom for more than six months and comes from an area of the world which is high risk for TB.

This action during the immigration process is complemented by work done by the national health service (NHS) at local level. The NHS follow up any cases of infection that are identified by the Medical Inspector and arrange any necessary testing which is unavailable at the Port.

We intend that asylum applicants who go to an induction centre on arrival will undergo a basic health screening. To evaluate the specification and benefits of this new service, a pilot started at Dover Induction Centre during the summer of 2002. The pilot includes the following;

Recording immunisation history;

Recording full medical history to identify past illnesses; ongoing chronic conditions and communicable diseases; and

TB screening and referral (as appropriate).

The results of the pilot have yet to be evaluated.

The Government are undertaking a new, comprehensive review of immigration and imported infections involving discussions between the Department of Health, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. As a starting point, the Cabinet Office has been commissioned to establish the facts on immigration and asylum and the related public health issues.

Child Prostitution

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been taken since 1997 to combat child prostitution and punish those who control and use this. [93552]

Hilary Benn: It is a tragedy for any child to become involved in prostitution. Children involved in prostitution are primarily victims of abuse and adults who take advantage of them, whether by exploiting them as pimps or by buying sexual services from them, are child abusers.

The Government issued guidance for agencies working with children entitled "Safeguarding Children in Prostitution" in May 2000. This was followed by the "The National Plan for Safeguarding Children from Commercial Sexual Exploitation", which was published in September 2001.

The message of both documents is that those under 18 who engage in prostitution are almost invariably victims and must be treated as such. A further message is that wherever possible criminal justice action should be pursued against those who abuse children through prostitution or seek to exploit them as prostitutes.

"Setting the Boundaries: Reforming the law on sex offences", the report of the Review of Sex Offences published in July 2000, did not specifically review the law on prostitution but did consider matters relating to exploiting the prostitution of others, especially children. It made recommendations to clarify, and make more effective the legislation relating to sexual exploitation. The Government announced their response to this document in the command paper "Protecting the Public" in November 2002, and introduced the Sexual Offences Bill to Parliament on 28 January 2002. This Bill proposes four new offences to directly tackle the commercial sexual exploitation of children, which will carry severe penalties. These new offences are:

Paying for Sex with a Child to tackle the demand side of this terrible trade. It will be an offence to pay for sex with a child or promise such payment or have sex with a child in the knowledge that another person has paid for or promised payment for this.

The maximum penalty ranges from seven years to life imprisonment depending upon the age of the child involved, and the nature of sexual activity engaged in.

Causing or Inciting Child Prostitution or Pornography tackles those who for their own or another's gain cause or encourage a child to become involved in prostitution or pornography. The maximum sentence for this offence is 14 years imprisonment.

Controlling a Child Prostitute or a Child involved in Pornography covers the extremely repugnant issue of pimping, where a person directs or controls the activities and movements of a child in the course of their sexual exploitation. A man who, for example, made a child stand on certain street corners, or instructed the child to participate in the making of a pornographic film would be guilty of this offence. The maximum sentence for this offence is 14 years imprisonment.

Arranging or Facilitating Child Prostitution or Pornography covers, for example, the landlord or parent who knowingly, and for their own, or another person's gain, arranges for or allows their house to be used for the filming of a pornographic video in which children are abused.

These proposed new offences cover the sexual exploitation of children up until the age of 18.

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 introduces a new offence of trafficking persons to control them in prostitution. This offence carries a maximum penalty of 14 years in prison. The Sexual Offences Bill includes more comprehensive trafficking legislation, carrying the same penalties but covering a wider range of activities, which are intended to replace this provision.

In addition, the Home Office continues to fund six prostitution initiatives as part of the "What Works: Tackling Prostitution" scheme, funded by the Crime Reduction Programme. These projects address the issues of child prostitution, policing and the process of exiting a lifestyle of prostitution and seek to better inform us of successful strategies for dealing with and managing the nuisance caused by the activities of prostitutes, the behaviour of those involved in the exploitation of others and ways of supporting those involved in prostitution who wish to exit the trade.

Corporate Liability

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department plans to introduce legislation to amend the law relating to corporate liability for killing. [95254]

Hilary Benn: The Government consulted on proposals for legislation on corporate manslaughter, and we are currently conducting a regulatory impact assessment. This is a routine measure which is undertaken on all new proposals. The Government are committed to introducing legislation, and will do so when parliamentary time allows.

Criminal Records Bureau

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assumptions underlay his estimate of fees from the Criminal Records Bureau for financial year 2004–05 as stated in his answer of 21 March 2002, *Official Report*, columns 472–74W; and if he will make a statement. [94998]

Hilary Benn: The estimate of Criminal Record Bureau fees (£117,276,161) quoted in the answer to Matthew Taylor's question of 21 March 2002 were based on a charge of £13.80 for a disclosure, £345 for a registered body and £5.75 for a countersignature. These were estimated to generate £131,264,580 gross revenue, which minus the cost of free disclosures for volunteers (£13,988,419) results in a net revenue of £117,276,161. The demand for enhanced and standard Disclosures was forecasted to be 3,330,595 and for basic Disclosures, 5,990,000. These figures were all determined over 12 months ago and are currently being reviewed.

Departmental Secondments

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff are seconded to his Department from the private sector; and from which companies they are seconded. [93299]

Beverley Hughes: Secondments are part of the Interchange initiative, which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. All sectors of the economy are involved: Voluntary, Education, Health, Public and Private. Interchange provides opportunities for civil servants to learn new skills, widen their experience and develop ideas. It also brings in skills and experiences from other sectors.

Over 100 staff are currently seconded into the Home Office, only one of whom is recorded as being from the private sector, British Telecom. In addition, units may second people with a specific skill to contribute to particular projects.

Race Relations Act

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if he will make a statement on his plans to repeal section 9 of the Race Relations Act 1976. [95061]

Beverley Hughes: The Government's proposal to repeal section 9 of the Race Relations Act is part of a package of measures for implementing the EC Article 13 Race and Employment Directives set out in the consultation document "Equality and Diversity: The Way Ahead". The consultation exercise ended on 24 January. The responses to the consultation are currently being analysed and policy will be developed in the light of the responses.

The Government aims to implement the Race Directive by its deadline of 19 July. The Government intends to lay regulations before Parliament in the spring. The affirmative resolution procedure will be used.

Rape

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the arrangements are for funding rape crisis centres and rape crisis helplines; [91890]

(2) what plans he has to fund the establishment of a national rape crisis line; [91891]

(3) what plans he has to ensure the presence of rape support services in the locations in which rape crisis centres have closed in the past 12 months. [91893]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The Home Office has funded the Rape Crisis Federation, the umbrella body for rape crisis centres, since April 2001. This year's grant will be up to £432,000.

Central Government does not fund local rape crisis centres or helplines. Like other independent local voluntary organisations, they must look primarily to local sources for funding.

The Home Office has no plans at present to fund the establishment of a national rape crisis helpline, nor to ensure the presence of rape support services in any particular location, though we are currently exploring ways of best supporting the
victims of sexual assault and rape.

Wildlife (Illegal Trade)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the reason was for the delay in publishing explanatory notes to the Criminal Justice Bill. [93338]

Hilary Benn: The Explanatory Notes to the Criminal Justice Bill were published a week after the Bill itself in order to allow sufficient time for them to be thoroughly checked.

Work Permits

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons from Sangatte have *(a)* applied for and *(b)* been issued with work permits in the last three months. [95072]

Beverley Hughes: 900 persons have been given a visa permitting them to work in the United Kingdom under the deal to close Sangatte.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many work permits have been issued in each of the last four months for which figures are available. [95073]

Beverley Hughes: The figures for the number of work permits approved in the last four months are given in the table:

Month	*Number issued*
October	11,726
November	10,529
December	9,706
January	11,047
Total	43,008

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether it is his policy to issue work permits to all applicants from the same countries as former Sangatte residents who have been issued with work permits. [95075]

Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) on 5 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 976W. The Arrangements for Sangatte have no implications for other work permit applications.

Yarl's Wood

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 3 July, *Official Report*, column 433W, on Yarl's Wood, how many of those who were detained at Yarl's Wood are detained *(a)* in a prison and *(b)* in an immigration detention centre; and if he will make a statement. [96236]

Beverley Hughes: No separate records are maintained as to the status and location of former Yarl's Wood detainees. Such information could be obtained only by examination of individual case files at disproportionate cost.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish part of the report of Mr. Stephen Moore into the disturbance at Yarl's Wood on 14 February 2002. [94494]

Beverley Hughes: Stephen Moore's terms of reference require him to take full account of inquiries being undertaken by the Bedfordshire Police and the Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. He is also required to conduct his inquiry in a way that would not impede any criminal investigation. Criminal trials arising out of the events at Yarl's Wood on 14 and 15 February are listed for April 2003. Consideration is therefore still being given as to when the report can be completed and published.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether he intends to re-open the Yarl's Wood remand centre to detainees from April; and if he will make a statement. [94498]

Beverley Hughes: No firm decision about that part of the Yarl's Wood site that was destroyed by fire has yet been taken. However, work has started with a view to the installation of sprinklers in the remaining part and places will become available as soon as this installation and other associated work are complete. We are working towards opening the centre in late April or early May to house single females, and later families, both asylum and non-asylum cases. There is also the matter of the outstanding insurance claim to be settled and negotiations are continuing on this.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Entertainment Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92368]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Expenditure by both officials and Ministers on entertainment for the financial year 2002–03 is estimated to be between £40,000 to £45,000, in 2001–02 was £44,730, in 2000–01 was £60,768, in 1999–2000 was £71,166 and in 1998–99 was £45,087. Data prior to 1998–99 is not readily available.

Family Law Act

Margaret Moran: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what arrangements the Crown Prosecution Service has put in place to implement section 60 of the Family Law Act 1996. [95765]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer provided on 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 67W.

Hereford Crown Court

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans there are for asylum and immigration appeals to be heard at Hereford crown court; what representations he has received; and if he will make a statement. [94710]

Ms Rosie Winterton: There are no plans to use Hereford crown court for asylum and immigration appeals and my Department has received no representations on this.

Solicitors

Ann Winterton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will ensure that sole practitioner solicitors can be indemnified for fraud; and if she will make a statement. [95337]

Ms Rosie Winterton: It is a general principle of English law that one cannot be indemnified against one's own dishonesty. So in that regard it is not possible for a sole practitioner solicitor, or any other person, to have insurance cover against his/her own fraud. For this reason most professional indemnity insurance policies contain a dishonesty exclusion which excludes the liability of the insurer to indemnify any person involved in the dishonesty, or fraudulent act, giving rise to the claim. Any "innocent" partners or employees not involved in the dishonesty or fraud will still have the benefit of cover under the policy. The current position, whereby solicitors obtain indemnity insurance from commercial providers, does not differ from the previous arrangements under which indemnity cover was provided by the Solicitors Indemnity Fund.

However, the Law Society continues to maintain a Compensation Fund, under which it is possible to make a claim for loss arising out of the dishonesty of a Solicitor, including a sole practitioner, in circumstances where the claim is excluded from the practice's professional indemnity cover. Any payments from the fund are made on a discretionary basis by the Law Society, having regard to the statutory provisions, rules and guidelines pursuant to which the fund is maintained. The level of cover provided by the Compensation Fund is up to £1 million per claim.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many practising solicitors there are in England and Wales; and how many there were in 1992. [95484]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I understand from the Law Society that the number of solicitors with practising certificates as at 31 July 1992 was 59,563, and as at 31 January 2003 was 90,358.

Voting Age

Phil Sawford: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations the Department has received from the Electoral Commission on lowering the voting age to 16. [95538]

Yvette Cooper: None to date. I understand that the Electoral Commission is shortly to commence a review of the voting age, and its work will include the preparation of a paper which is expected to be issued widely for public consultation this summer. The Government welcome this review, which will help to inform the debate on the age that the right to vote should be set. It will give careful serious consideration to any recommendations the Electoral Commission may make following its review.

HEALTH

National School Fruit Scheme

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to include *(a)* nursery schools and *(b)* Ethelred Nursery School in the National School Fruit Scheme. [91318]

Ms Blears: The National School Fruit Scheme will entitle children aged four to six to a free piece of fruit each school day by 2004. The original pilots are now being expanded in selected regions in England with funding from the New Opportunities Fund.

During this expansion the scheme is open to children in reception, Year 1 and Year 2 classes within local education authority maintained infant, primary and special schools as well as children in nursery classes attached to these schools. Free fruit is offered to whole classes and therefore some three and seven-year-olds also receive fruit if they are in these classes. Nursery schools that are not attached to infant, primary or special schools are not eligible and there are currently no plans to include them.

These early stages of expansion are being carefully evaluated to learn lessons that will inform all aspects of the Scheme in 2004, including the practicalities of delivery to large numbers of schools.

In the consultation document, "Healthy Start", we put forward proposals to enable children in nurseries to have the choice of either a piece of fruit or milk via the Welfare Food Scheme. Decisions on the future of the Scheme will not be taken until the outcome of the consultation on the proposals has been assessed.

999 Services

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) for what reason the 999 service for the London area does not enable callers about health emergencies in other regions to be patched through to the 999 service for the regions concerned; [R] [95639]

(2) what guidelines are given to London 999 Ambulance Service telephone operators on handling emergency calls from telephones in London reporting someone collapsed in another part of the country; [R] [95641]

(3) for what reason London 999 Ambulance Service telephone operators tell callers reporting an emergency in another part of the country that they can only attempt to find a number to ring to pass on the information to the 999 service in that part of the country. [R] [95642]

Mr. Hutton: The 999 system is designed to put callers in touch with the emergency services locally. If an ambulance service receives a call that is outside their area then it is their responsibility to pass it on to the ambulance service in the appropriate area.

If a call is made close to the London Ambulance Service's boundaries the nearest ambulance is immediately dispatched in accordance with nationally agreed control procedures. This action is taken before, or at the same time as, the call details are being transferred to the service responsible for the call. Once connected to the appropriate service a joint decision is taken between the staff of both services as to whether the first ambulance should continue or be cancelled in favour of a local ambulance resource that may be closer to the call.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to enable callers in one part of the country seeking emergency help for someone in another part of the country to be put into contact with the 999 emergency ambulance service in the region concerned.[R] [95640]

Mr. Lammy: The 999 system is designed to put callers in touch with the emergency services locally. If an ambulance service receives a call that is outside their area then it is their responsibility to pass it on to the ambulance service in the appropriate area.

Ambulances

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff there were in each ambulance station in TENYAS in each month since 1 January 2002; and what redeployments of staff there were between ambulance stations in the same period. [93845]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is shown in the table. However, the numbers of redeployments of staff are not collected centrally, nor by Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust (TENYAS).

Staff establishment by station for the period January 2002 to December 2002 (wte)

	Jan	*Feb*	*Mar*	*Apr*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*Aug*	*Sept*	*Oct*	*Nov*	*Dec*
North Yorkshire												
Harrogate	30	30	30	30	27	27	28	28	28	30	30	30
Ripon	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5	9.5
Bramham	8.5	8.5	8.5	8.5	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
Pateley Bridge	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	8	8	8	8
Northallerton	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	16	16	16	16	16
Thirsk	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	12	12	12
Richmond	11	11	11	11	11	11	10	10	10	10	10	9
Bainbridge	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	8	8	8	8	8
Scarborough	21	21	20	19	19	18	18	18	18	20	20	21
Filey	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
Whitby	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	15	18	18	18	18
Kirkbymoorside	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Malton	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6	10.6
York	27.5	27.5	27.5	27.5	27.5	27.5	29	29	30	30	30	30
Selby	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14
Haxby	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
Hull/East Riding												
Anlaby	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	13	13	13	13
Hull Central	35	35	35	35	35	35	35	35	35	35	41	43
Sutton Fields	29	29	29	29	29	29	28	29	28	30	30	27
Preston	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13
Hornsea	8	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	8
Withernsea	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	9	9	9	9
Driffield	10	10	10	10	9	9	10	11	11	11	11	11
Bridlington	18	18	18	17	18	18	18	20	20	20	20	20
Pocklington	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
Beverley	15	15	15	16	16	16	15	15	14	14	14	15
Brough	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Goole	23	23	23	24	24	24	25	25	24	24	247	24
Tees												
Carling	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Redcar	26	26	26	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Coulby	19	19	19	[1]63	63	63	63	63	63	63	63	63
Newham	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Middlesbrough	26	26	26	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Stockton	30	30	30	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22
Hartlepool	26	26	26	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24

1. Increase in establishment for Tees area staff also moved from other stations to form permanent relief/extra crew at Coulby Newham to remove relief from base stations.

Source:

Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust (TENYAS)

Bone Fractures (Hospital Patients)

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to Ref.PQ02260, 29 January 2003, whether statistics on the numbers of people experiencing bone fractures while being cared for in NHS hospitals will be collected as part of the proposed national reporting and learning system for adverse events. [95567]

Mr. Lammy: The national reporting and learning system will collect reports from National Health Service staff, patients, carers and the public on all kinds of adverse events and near misses involving NHS patients, including those relating to bone fractures.

The system will enable the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) to identify trends and patterns of adverse events, including avoidable injuries such as bone fractures, and to use this information to seek effective solutions to stop them recurring.

The NPSA is currently looking into interventions to prevent hip fractures occurring to those who fall while under NHS care, including the use of hip protectors. The NPSA is also collaborating with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in the development of guidelines for falls prevention in acute settings.

Brain Cooling Technologies

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of brain cooling technologies in treating brain damage. [92289]

Jacqui Smith: Researchers have suggested that cooling the body may limit a chemical chain reaction in which injured brain cells release toxic chemicals that damage neighbouring cells. Clinical trials in rat populations with traumatic brain injuries suggest hypothermia does reduce permeability of the blood brain barrier, bruising and swelling of the brain, and neural cell death and injury. In recent years, there have been human clinical trials studying the connection between hypothermia and traumatic brain injury outcomes.

Some of the trials showed promising results, while one showed no benefit and, in fact, indicated hypothermia may be harmful to patients over 45 years of age. It has now been recognised that larger trials are required that provide the statistical power necessary to give clear answers both in children and in adults.

Buckingham Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 803W, on Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust, what action he will take to ensure that *(a)* a chief executive and *(b)* other executive directors will be in post when the Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust comes into being. [95987]

Ms Blears: Several senior appointments have been made to the Buckinghamshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust which include the chair and two of the non executive directors.

Interviews were held for the post of chief executive on 29 January, but no appointment was made. Interim management arrangements are being discussed to ensure that the new trust can assume its role from 1 April.

I will write to the hon. Member outlining these arrangements when they are finalised.

Care Bed Costs

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average cost of *(a)* establishing and *(b)* running (i) a high dependency care bed and (ii) an intensive care bed was in the last period for which figures are available. [95519]

Mr. Lammy: Information is not collected centrally on the average cost of establishing and/or running a high dependency or intensive care bed.

Child Asylum Seekers

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on what health assessment is made for unaccompanied children applying for asylum. [91993]

Jacqui Smith: Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by local authorities' social services departments under the Children Act 1989. This requires authorities to undertake a needs assessment as specified in the Government guidance, the "Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families".

This multi-disciplinary assessment will determine the type of support the young person will receive, depending on their needs, wishes and capabilities. If the child becomes looked after, a health assessment must be undertaken and then reviewed annually by an appropriately qualified registered medical practitioner.

If not a looked-after child, support may be less intensive but will still be in line with the framework guidance.

Chiropodists and Podiatrists

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what discussions there have been between his Department and the Health Professions Council on how the public will differentiate between the clinical competencies and qualifications of chiropodist and podiatrist practitioners; [95602]

(2) if he will make a statement on the efficacy of using the titles chiropodist and podiatrist to differentiate between the clinical competencies and qualifications of chiropodist and podiatrist practitioners. [95601]

(3) what his policy is on whether the titles chiropodist and podiatrist should indicate different levels of clinical competency; and if he will make a statement. [95600]

Barbara Follett(4) what plans his Department has to recommend to the Health Professions Council that they institute a sub-register for current chiropodists who may decide not to join the Health Professions Council's register. [95599]

(5) what plans his Department has to recommend to the Health Professions Council that they create protected titles other than chiropodist and podiatrist. [95598]

Mr. Hutton: I met with the president and chief executive of the Health Professionals Council (HPC) on 4 December 2002 at which all aspects of the HPC's proposals were discussed.

The HPC consulted about which titles should be protected by law and has undertaken extensive market research to understand the public's perception of titles currently in use by healthcare professionals. The HPC's decision to propose the protection of both chiropodist and podiatrist reflects the general perception that these titles are used interchangeably. The titles indicate that those registered have met HPC's standards of competence. All applicants for registration will be expected to meet standards of proficiency, whether they are applying through the transitional arrangements, as international applicants or as UK applicants who have completed an approved course.

The HPC proposes using subsections of the register to distinguish between modalities of care but believes that to distinguish between skill levels would be confusing and unnecessary. The HPC has no plans to introduce a sub-register for those practitioners who do not meet the Council's standards of proficiency and who would not therefore be able to use the protected titles. Ultimately, it is for the Health Professions Council to propose and the Privy Council to determine the protected titles that will be associated with parts and subsections of the Health Professions Register.

Clothing Provision (NHS Trusts)

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment has been made of the effect on the self-esteem and recovery of long-term patients of being reliant on the NHS trust for clothing, with particular reference to those with mental health problems; [95300]

(2) what the scope is of the National Institute of Mental Health's evidence-gathering exercise regarding the provision of clothing for long-term patients by NHS trusts; and how and when good practice in this area will be disseminated. [95299]

Jacqui Smith: The Government has made no assessment of the effect on the self-esteem and recovery of long term patients in mental health in-patient units being reliant on the National Health Service for clothing. However, empowering patients to take an active role in their own care is a key theme in the NHS Plan. In addition, the National Institute for Mental Health for England (NIMHE) is in the process of gathering examples of positive practice in the provision of clothing needs for long term patients in mental health in-patient units. We hope to make such examples of positive practice available on the NIMHE website in the spring.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which primary care trusts provide drug eluting stents for the treatment of coronary heart disease. [95684]

Ms Blears: This information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Crisis Management

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of whether staff from health protection organisations managing organisational change will have the surge capacity to cope with a major crisis. [95865]

Ms Blears: The organisational change is being managed by the Health Protection Agency implementation team, through the change management protocols.

The human resources departments of the health protection organisations are closely involved. The capability and capacity to respond to major incidents embedded within the health protection organisations will continue to be delivered and as always in any major incident a reprioritisation of tasks is undertaken by senior managers in order to deliver the surge capacity that is required.

Dementia

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the impact of the health service Ombudsman's ruling on the Squires case on the Government's policy on those suffering from *(a)* dementia and *(b)* Alzheimer's. [95211]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is aware of the Ombudsman's report on continuing care, which includes the Squires case. However, the report has not yet been published.

The Government will consider their response once the report has been published.

Doctor Recruitment

Mr. Paul Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what negotiations his Department has had with the Italian Government on the possibilities of recruiting doctors. [95127]

Mr. Hutton: Officials from the Department will be meeting with officials from the Italian Ministries of Health and Labour later this month. The purpose of the meeting will be to progress the recruitment of doctors to work in the National Health Service.

Employers' National Insurance Contributions

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost to each NHS provider in the Thames Valley area of meeting the planned increase in employers' national insurance contributions. [95603]

Ms Blears: The increases in National Insurance, announced by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 17 April 2002, will come in to effect in April 2003. A table is attached showing the percentage increase on the provider's total cost base. As the NI increase is 1 per cent., on pay, and pay is two thirds or more of costs, this averages about 0.7 per cent. increase on total costs.

Exact figures are not available as individual National Health Service staff members' pay and deductions are not collected centrally.

Cost of national insurance increases to providers in the Thames Valley area

Acute Trusts	*National Insurance*
Oxford Radcliffe	0.69
Nuffield Orthopaedic	0.68
Royal Berks & Battle Hospitals	0.77
Heatherwood & Wexham	0.78
South Bucks	0.62
Stoke Mandeville	0.68
Milton Keynes	0.51
Other Trusts	
Oxford Mental Health	0.72
Oxford Learning Disability	0.65
Oxford Ambulance	0.70
Berkshire Healthcare	0.71
Royal Berks Ambulance	0.70
Bucks Mental Health	0.81
Two Shire Ambulance	0.70

External Consultants

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent on external advisers or consultants by the Department of Health in 2002–03; and what is budgeted to be spent on external consultants and advisers in *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06. [94584]

Mr. Lammy: Expenditure by the Department on external advisers or consultants in 2002–03 is £2.943 million. This figure represents expenditure as at December 2002.

The Department does not centrally report or record what expenditure on consultants may be required for future years, so this information is not available.

Fair Trade

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 523W, on fair trade, if his Department will establish rules to support the Government's position on fair trade. [94558]

Mr. Lammy: Existing procurement procedures within the Department already allow consideration of a wide range of criteria in the evaluation of tenders within the framework of the Government's value for money policies and the European Community procurement rules. These include assessment of company policies on a range of issues including purchasing and the environment to ensure compliance with the appropriate Government policy in these areas, including fair trade.

Within the Department, our approved catering supplier is committed to supporting fair trade and requires all its suppliers to comply with this policy.

Gender Reassignment Surgery

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent information he has collated on waiting lists for gender reassignment surgery; [93435]

(2) how many tertiary level consultants and sessions were devoted to *(a)* male to female psychiatric assessment, *(b)* female to male psychiatric assessment, *(c)* male to female gender confirmation surgery and *(d)* female to male gender confirmation surgery, in respect of each specialist centre providing medical treatment of gender dysphoria, including transsexualism, within the national health service, in the most recent week for which figures are available and in the same week in each of the previous three years; how many patients there were to whom treatment was provided in each category listed above during the preceding 12 months; and how many patients were on the waiting list for each category of such treatment; [93721]

(3) if he will list the locations of providers of gender reassignment surgery that have done NHS commissioned work in each of the last five years; and how many FTE staff, broken down by category, worked at each facility in each year. [93436]

Mr. Hutton: Gender reassignment surgery consists of a series of different surgical procedures, for example, female to male gender reassignment may require a mastectomy and a hysterectomy and a series of operations to construct a phallus. The Department collects Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) from national health service trusts on operations specifically for sexual transformation, but those procedures such as mastectomies or hysterectomies are collected separately and it is not possible to identify if these were carried out as part of a gender reassignment operation. Details of the NHS trusts who have undertaken any operations for sexual transformation in the past five years are listed in the table.

The HES data shows that 89 operations were undertaken for male to female gender reassignment surgery in 2001–02. No operations for female to male gender reassignment were recorded during this period.

Information on the numbers of psychiatric assessments undertaken for gender dysphoria are currently not collected centrally. The mental health minimum dataset will collect data for the first time on psychiatric assessments from April 2003.

Information on waiting lists and the number of full time equivalent staff and sessions per week devoted to treating patients with gender dysphoria and those working in gender dysphoria clinics is not collected centrally.

Havering (GP Statistics)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on General Practitioner numbers in the London borough of Havering; and what plans he has to increase their number. [90298]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the response I gave my hon. Friend, the Member for Hornchurch (John Cryer) on 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 807W.

Health Protection Agency

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secre tary of State for Health why there has been a delay in appointing a chief executive for the Health Protection Agency; and when he expects to make an appointment. [90078]

Ms Blears: The original timetable for appointing the Health Protection Agency (HPA) shadow chief executive officer (CEO) had been for the end of October 2002, to enable the incoming shadow chair of the HPA to participate in the appointment procedure.

Following advertisements in the national press and professional journals, it was felt that the field of responses could be strengthened and that, given the importance of the role of the new Agency, the assistance of executive search consultants should be sought to advise on and co-ordinate the appointment. This was undertaken during November and December 2002, enabling competitive interviews to be held in early January.

The result of that process has been the announcement of the CEO appointment, Dr Pat Troop, on 27 January 2003.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the establishment of the Health Protection Agency as a special health authority. [94956]

Ms Blears: We aim to establish the Health Protection Agency as a special health authority from 1 April 2003.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes he expects in the levels of surveillance of health care associated infections as a consequence of the establishment of the Health Protection Agency and the transfer of microbiology services from the public health laboratory service to NHS laboratories. [94957]

Ms Blears: As the establishment of the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will not change the current national system for surveillance of health care associated infections, we do not expect any difference in the levels of surveillance.

The HPA will continue to develop the mandatory surveillance system for health care associated infections. The second phase of which will be introduced shortly.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what transitional funding will be allocated to the Health Protection Agency in 2003–04 to cover redundancies; and what estimate he has made of the number of likely redundancies. [95677]

Ms Blears: Decisions have not yet been made on the Department of Health central budget programme for 2003–04 so the overall sum available to the Health Protection Agency including funding for any redundancies is not yet finalised. The HPA will not be able to agree its organisational structures until after its board has been appointed, so staff could not be identified as being at risk of redundancy until then. If staff are identified as being at risk they will be guaranteed employment for a period of 12 months from 1 April 2003 under the agreed change management protocol.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish the result of the consultation on the creation of the Health Protection Agency. [95693]

Ms Blears: We received over 200 written responses to the consultation paper on the Health Protection Agency (HPA). Our decision to proceed with the HPA's creation, first as a special health authority and subsequently as a non-departmental public body, takes account of the widespread support for establishing the HPA.

Because the consultation paper set out proposals for creating the HPA by Regulatory Reform Order, it did not simply invite views on general principles but made relatively detailed proposals about the nature of the legislation needed. Many of the responses similarly made detailed points. We are continuing to consider these points in deciding on the details of the legislation to establish the agency. We aim to publish a report on the consultation exercise at the same time as our proposals for changes to primary legislation, since at that stage we shall best be able to show how we have taken into account the detailed points made.

Copies of the responses, except where respondents requested otherwise, will be placed in the Library.

Hospices

Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the bed capacity is of the hospice network in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the East Cheshire NHS Trust area. [95006]

Ms Blears: There are approximately 2,460 specialist palliative care beds in the voluntary sector and 598 beds in the national health service in the United Kingdom. The bed capacity in East Cheshire NHS Trust area is 15.

HPA

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what legal requirements there are for consultation with future HPA staff on changes to terms and conditions; if these consultations will be required; and whether they will be completed by 1 April. [90055]

Ms Blears: Staff transferring to the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will retain their terms and conditions of employment, which apply at the time of transfer, until harmonised terms and conditions of employment are agreed with recognised trade unions. The HPA, as a special health authority, will adopt national health service terms and conditions of employment for new employees.

It is the intention to establish the HPA as an non departmental public body when legislative time permits. It would then be a matter for the HPA board to determine, subject to consultation, what terms and conditions will apply.

Infections (Healthcare Settings)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what powers the *(a)* Health Protection Agency and *(b)* Commission for Health Improvement have to combat infections in healthcare settings. [94940]

Ms Blears: The Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) reviews and monitors compliance with the national infection control standard for acute trusts during their routine clinical governance reviews. The CHI undertakes a rolling four-year inspection of hospital trusts' systems and processes for monitoring and improving services. These clinical governance reviews, among other things, assess the compliance with national standards and identifies where further action needs to be taken. Conversely, the CHI also praises and highlights best practice from which the rest of the National Health Service can learn. As at 24 January 2003, CHI had completed 220 clinical governance reviews across a range of NHS bodies.

Health Protection: A Consultation Document on creating a health protection agency (June 2002), proposed that the Health Protection Agency (HPA) "will work with the Commission for Health Improvement where there are serious deficiencies in standards of infection control in hospitals, primary care or other health care premises" (paragraph 4.12).

Having considered the responses to the consultation, we aim to establish the HPA as a special health authority from 1 April 2003 and subsequently as a non-departmental public body when legislative time allows. The powers to be given to the HPA will be a matter for the legislation: it remains our intention that it should be able to work with the CHI and subsequently with the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection.

Junior Doctors

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to NHS providers in the Thames Valley area during 2003–04 of implementing planned reductions in junior doctors' hours. [95604]

Mr. Hutton: Disregarding annual inflationary awards, we estimate that reducing all junior doctors' hours to below 56 per week will result in a saving to the national health service pay bill of some 15 million between 2003–04 and 2004–05.

This saving must be offset against potential costs where it may be necessary to either employ more doctors or other staff to cover hours lost or to make appropriate alternative service provision. This will be dependent on local circumstances and will differ from trust to trust and area to area.

These costs are still under discussion between provider trusts and primary care trusts.

Kava-kava

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the Medicines Control Agency's *(a)* analysis of consumers' reasons for using Kava-kava, and potential hazards created by regulating kava-kava off the market and *(b)* assessment of consumers accessing Kava-kava product of unknown quality via the Internet and other direct marketing strategies. [91475]

Ms Blears: Unlicensed herbal remedies containing kava-kava on sale before The Medicines for Human Use (Kava-kava) (Prohibition) Order 2002 came into force could only lawfully have been sold without any written indications. Traditionally Kava-kava has been used to treat anxiety, tension, restlessness and bladder discomfort. However, consumers may use Kava-kava for many reasons. The test for making a prohibition order under section 62 of the Medicines Act 1968 is whether this is necessary in the interests of safety.

Any website reported to the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) that appears to be in breach of regulations regarding advertising, sale and supply of medicines is investigated. The MCA works closely with other Government Departments and law enforcement authorities, both in the United Kingdom and abroad, in an effort to identify and take action where appropriate.

There is evidence, both from the UK and internationally, that some unlicensed herbal remedies may be of poor quality and in some cases may pose a threat to public health. However, this problem is not restricted to products sold on the internet or via other direct marketing strategies. Subject to the successful conclusion of negotiations, the proposed Directive on Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products would provide a regulatory regime, which should allow the public to choose from a wide range of herbal remedies, made to assured standards of safety, quality and information. In turn this would make it possible for the public to be given much clearer advice than is currently possible about how to avoid unregulated herbal medicines which may pose a risk to health.

A number of papers are available in the Library relating to the considerations which led to The Medicines for Human Use (Kava-kava) (Prohibition) Order 2002. Beyond these the MCA does not hold additional analyses covering the issues raised in this question.

Meat Imports

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what basis the Food Standards Agency advised against banning imports to the United Kingdom of meat from abattoirs in other European Union member states and third countries which have previously sent beef with specified risk material still attached. [92636]

Ms Blears: In line with Government policy, the Food Standards Agency considers that action to deal with the problem of specified risk material in meat of non-United Kingdom origin should be taken within the established system of European law and in co-operation with competent authorities in European Union Member States and in third countries. The UK is therefore working closely with the European Commission and relevant Member States on this issue.

The Commission has been fully supportive of the actions the UK has taken to date in dealing with the matter.

Most meat arriving in the UK fully complies with EU law. That which is found not to do so is detained and disposed of.

Medical Trainees

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the number of medical students and training grade doctors who intend to enter into a career in general practice. [92109]

Mr. Hutton: The most recent study of young doctors' career intentions has been undertaken by the medical careers research group (MCRG) of the University of Oxford. The MCRG's survey of doctors during their first year after graduation shows that the percentage of doctors who intended to enter general practice has risen from 20 per cent. in 1997 to 25.5 per cent.

There is evidence that a higher number of medical graduates become general practitioners than indicated an initial preference to do so when first surveyed during their pre-registration house officer year. The number of junior doctors choosing to train for general practice has been increasing steadily each year since 1997. The Department's work force census in March 2002 showed an increase of 565, 42 per cent., in the number of GP registrars since 1997. Prior to that there has been a reduction of 334 GP registrars from 1991 to 1996.

The Department has implemented a number of measures to make the profession more attractive. These include:

A GP flexible careers scheme, which was launched in November and seeks to create more part-time and flexible GP posts. In this way it will help to improve the GP registrar conversion rate, attract back GPs who may have left because of a lack of suitable posts, and retain existing GPs.

GP golden hello payment scheme which pays up to £12,000 to new and returning GPs.

Family friendly policies including the extension of the national health service child care strategy to include primary care and improved arrangements for maternity, paternity and adoptive leave.

Increasing training places, including new premises to train and employ more GPs.

Medical Workforce

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many and what proportion of the NHS medical workforce are immigrants from countries outside the OECD. [95471]

Mr. Hutton: It is not possible to provide figures for the number of doctors from outside the Organisation of European Co-operation and Development. Published figures show doctors categorised by country of qualification grouped into United Kingdom, European Economic Area and Other.

Although data on the individual country is available for most doctors, there are several thousand doctors each year for whom this broad categorisation is the only one available. It is therefore not possible to say accurately how many are from outside the OECD.

The available figures are shown in the table.

NHS doctors (excluding dental staff in the HCHS sector) by country of qualification, England, 30 September 2001

Number (headcount)

	Country of qualification				
	UK	*EEA*	*Elsewhere*	*Total*	*Proportion from outside EEA (%)*
NHS doctors (excluding staff in dental specialties)	68,700	4,820	20,850	94,370	22.1
Of which:					
HCHS medical staff	42,700	3,570	16,270	62,540	26.0
GPs (all practitioners)	26,000	1,250	4,580	31,840	14.4

Note:
1. GPs (all Practitioners) include GMS Unrestricted Principals, PMS Contracted GPs, PMS Salaried GPs, Restricted Principals, Assistants, GP Registrars, Salaried Doctors (para 52 SFA), PMS Other and GP Retainers
2. HCHS medical staff excludes Hospital Practitioners and Clinical Assistants working in medical specialties in hospitals, as many of these will also work as GPs.
3. All figures exclude Dental staff working the HCHS sector. Figures on country of qualification for these staff are not available.
4. HCHS is "Hospital and Community Health Services". The sector also includes Public Health staff.

Source:
Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics
Department of Health HCHS medical workforce census

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92450]

Mr. Lammy: Since 1999, this Government has published an annual list of all visits overseas undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing 500 or more during each financial year. The Government has also published on an annual basis the cost of all Ministers' visits overseas. Copies of the lists are available in the Library.

Information for 1997–98 was included in the 1999 list. The overall cost of Ministers' visits for the years 1995–96 and 1996–7 was most recently provided with the 2001 list. The information for 2002–3 will be published as soon as possible after the end of the financial year.

Detailed information requested in respect of United Kingdom travel is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Library.

NHS Budget Formula

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 8 January, *Official Report*, column 281W, on the NHS budget formula, what reasons underlay the decision on the timing of publication of the new formula. [95620]

Mr. Hutton: The booklet describing the new formula will be published as soon as it has been completed.

NHS Redundancies

Mr. Simon Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* total and *(b)* average cost to the NHS was, over the last 12 months for which figures are available, of redundancy payments to managers and administrators in NHS regions in England. [95637]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 5 February 2003]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on the 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 480W.

NHS Treatment Abroad

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to extend the availability of operations in France and Germany to other NHS patients outside the south-east, in the rest of England. [92558]

Mr. Hutton: Plans have already been extended and operations are available in France and Germany for national health service patients outside the south east of England.

NHS University

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what remuneration each of the NHSU executive will receive; how many other staff will be employed at the NHSU and at what annual cost; and what the annual expenditure for the NHSU will be in each year between 2003 to 2006. [96120]

Mr. Hutton: The remuneration of the chief executive designate of the NHS University (NHSU) was advertised at around £100,000.

The remuneration for the remaining NHSU directors falls into the NHS senior manager's Pay Range 1 of between £56,790 to £107, 395 per annum.

The structure and organisation of NHSU is currently out for consultation. We are therefore unable to provide exact figures and costs relating to how many staff will be employed at the NHSU and the annual cost. Further information about the NHSU structure will be published in their first strategic plan, available later this year.

The annual budget for the NHSU for 2003–04 to 2005–06 has not yet been finalised.

Nicotine Replacement Therapies

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made on the long term efficacy of *(a)* Zyban and *(b)* nicotine replacement therapies (i) in the UK and (ii) in other Council of Europe countries in reducing the number of regular smokers. [92571]

Ms Blears: There is substantial evidence that nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and bupropion (Zyban) are effective in helping smokers stop.

Guidelines produced to support Smoking Cessation Services[1] assessed the efficacy of Zyban and NRT and concluded that smokers of 10 or more cigarettes a day should normally be encouraged to use NRT or bupropion.

Most recently the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, in its Appraisal Guidance issued in March 2002, advised that NRT and bupropion are not only clinically effective but are among the most cost effective of all healthcare interventions and recommended they should be prescribed for smokers who have expressed a desire to quit smoking.

Data about the use of NRT and Zyban across the Council of Europe countries is not routinely collected.

[1] (Raw M., McNeill A., and West R.). "Smoking Cessation Guidelines for Health Professionals—A guide to effective smoking cessation interventions for the health care system". Thorax. London: BMJ Publishing Group, 1998; 531S-18S.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the percentage of smokers who will stop smoking permanently through the use of nicotine replacement therapies in the next five years. [92604]

Ms Blears: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 117–18W.

Nurse Recruitment

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 14 January, *Official Report*, column 535W, on nurse recruitment, what the cost was to his Department of investigating breaches in the Code of Conduct in 2001–02; and what budget has been set aside for *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* 2003–04 for such investigations. [95860]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on Wednesday 5 February 2003.

Paediatric Nurse Training

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many paediatric nurse training places were available in each of the last 10 years; and how many applications were received for each training place. [92539]

Mr. Hutton: Between 1992–93 and 2001–02, the number of nurses entering training to become children's nurses has increased by over 1,300, or 155 per cent., from 851 to 2,172. Applications to children's nursing diploma courses have increased by nearly 10,000, or 108 per cent., between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Nursing and midwifery admissions service data on applications to nursing courses is only available for children's branch diploma courses from 1997–98. Information from 2001–02 is not yet available. Information on applications for degree courses is not broken down by branch.

In addition, nurses who trained in the other three branches can undertake further training to specialise as a children's nurse such post-registration commissions are not included in the data.

Pre-registration children's nurse training places and applications Annual Commissions[1]

	Total	*Diploma courses*	*Degree courses*	*Applications to diploma courses*[2]
1992–93	851	825	26	[3]—
1993–94	909	898	11	[3]—
1994–95	1,137	1,092	45	[3]—
1995–96	1,219	1,175	44	[3]—
1996–97	1,408	1,359	49	[3]—
1997–98	1,493	1,450	43	9,201
1998–99	1,690	1,535	155	15,872
1999–2000	1,830	1,600	230	17,038
2000–01	1,949	1,622	327	19,165
2001–02	2,172	1,725	447	[3]—
2002–03	2,183	1,708	475	[3]—

[1] Not available

Notes:

1. 1992–93 to 1995–96 from balance sheets
1996–97 and 1998–99 from finance and workforce Information returns
1999–00 to 2001–02 from quarterly monitoring reports
2002–03 data is forecast from quarterly monitoring and is subject to change
2. Nursing and midwifery admissions service
3. Figures are commissions for a 1st qualification as a nurse by diploma and degree courses.

Passive Smoking

David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had on the measures needed to protect the public from exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke. [93622]

Ms Blears: Full information on environmental tobacco smoke is published by the Department in the leaflet, "Passive Smoking—What it is and what you can do".

We are working closely with the hospitality trade to develop the Public Places Charter designed to provide customers with clear information on the type of smoking policy operating in a particular establishment and allow them to make an informed choice.

We are also increasing the visibility of health messages highlighting to smokers the risks environmental tobacco smoke presents. This is through regulations to transpose into United Kingdom law the EU Directive on the Manufacture, Presentation and Sale of Tobacco Products. These regulations require tobacco products to carry larger and darker health warnings, on both the front and back of the packet. The dangers of passive smoking are highlighted in two of the new warnings which include "Smoking seriously harms you and others around you" and "Protect children: don't make them breathe your smoke" The contents of tobacco smoke are also highlighted in a warning saying, "Smoke contains benzene, nitrosomines, formaldehyde and hydrogen cyanide".

We are encouraging all employers to introduce smoke-free work places. This year the Department is funding local tobacco control alliances across England to carry out projects in close co-operation with local employers to tackle passive smoking and to increase the number of smoke-free environments. These projects vary in nature from the production of smoke-free guides to pubs and restaurants to the provision of advice and support to managers wishing to introduce policies. We hope that many will be suitable for national application.

Patients (Home Treatment)

Mr. Havard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether it is the Government's policy that where clinically possible patients should be treated at *(a)* home and *(b)* day centres, rather than be admitted to hospital. [95572]

Mr. Hutton: The Government's vision in the NHS Plan is to provide fast and convenient care, available when people require it and tailored to their individual needs.

We are taking forward programmes of work to increase capacity and deliver a wider range of services in primary and community settings, using general practitioners and nurses with specialist skills, in a modern, efficient and integrated way, which is convenient for patients. This will involve, for example, millions more outpatient appointments taking place in the community rather than in hospital.

In addition, the day surgery operational guide, published in August 2002 makes it clear that, where a patient requires a procedure that can be performed as a day case, it should be assumed that the procedure will take place as a day case, unless it is not possible or the patient asks to be admitted as an inpatient. Patients receive treatment that is suited to their needs and which allows them to recover in their own home. The risk of hospital acquired infection is also reduced.

To support this, we are also creating additional capacity in diagnosis and treatment centres, which provide high quality, scheduled, booked care for a pre-defined range of elective treatments and diagnostics. These will be geared towards patient convenience.

Performance Targets

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what level of output in 2005–06 would qualify as a failure to meet his Department's value for money target as defined in the technical note to the 2002 Spending Review value for money target; and if he will make a statement. [94597]

Mr. Lammy: The value for money public service agreement (PSA) target requires that value for money in the national health service and personal social services will improve by at least 2 per cent. per annum, with annual improvements of 1 per cent. in both cost efficiency and service effectiveness.

It is therefore the cost and quality of the delivered output rather than the volume of output that will be used to measure progress against the PSA target.

For the NHS, the cost element of the PSA will be measured using changes in reference costs. The quality element of the target will be assessed by comparing the estimated expenditure on increasing service effectiveness with data on quality. A key element of this

will be the value that can be placed on the lives saved from reducing mortality following health care interventions.

For personal social services, costs will be based on unit costs of services, after some adjustments to allow for increases in funding for quality improvements. The quality element will be based on the quality indicators published by the Department.

Public Health Laboratory Service

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons he is *(a)* dismantling the network of Public Health Laboratory Service laboratories and *(b)* transferring microbiology services to the NHS. [94939]

Ms Blears: We want to raise standards in clinical microbiology and public health microbiology in all the laboratories serving the health service. We believe that the action we are taking is the best way of achieving this. It includes:

the establishment of a new post of inspector of microbiology;

the creation of pathology networks;

an initiative to secure clinical pathology accreditation for all National Health Service laboratories;

requiring all laboratories to follow standard operating procedures and meet reporting standards;

the appointment of regional public health microbiologists.

The changes we are setting in place will facilitate the creation of a comprehensive network of accredited microbiology pathology laboratories within the NHS, building on the existing networks operating in the public health laboratory service (PHLS) and on the emerging NHS pathology networks.

The aim is to ensure that the NHS has networks of laboratories, which achieve uniformly high standards; an arrangement similar to that which is proposed for Wales and which has been welcomed by many commentators. The past distinction between PHLS laboratories and those under local management has not been conducive to achieving uniformly high standards in all laboratories.

The transfer of laboratories away from PHLS does not represent a fundamental change in the provision of clinical microbiology: it has long been the case that the bulk of such services have been provided by NHS trusts and there are several precedents for laboratories transferring from PHLS to the NHS.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many service level agreements will be required after 1 April to ensure the continuance of the work done by the Public Health Laboratory Service on pneumococcal disease. [95668]

Ms Blears: There will be no service level agreements to maintain the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) co-ordinated programmes on pneumococcal disease.

All work for the Department by PHLS on pneumococcal disease is part of the core funding provided by the Department.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that accommodation used for public health work is protected when the management of public health laboratories transfers to local NHS trusts. [95696]

Ms Blears: The laboratories transferring to national health service trusts are being transferred together with their current accommodation. We expect that the accommodation which is currently utilised for public health will continue to be used for that purpose.

It will be the role of local Health Protection Agency public health microbiologists and the HPA regional public health microbiologist to ensure that the public health outputs of transferred, and other, laboratories are maintained.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the continuance of work undertaken by the Public Health Laboratory Service on pneumococcal disease, when the laboratory network is reformed. [95698]

Ms Blears: All work currently undertaken by Public Health Laboratory Service laboratories on pneumococcal disease will continue under the direction of the new Health Protection Agency.

Reserve Call-up

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital trusts will be affected by the call up of reservists to serve in Iraq; and if he will list them. [93030]

Mr. Hutton: We do not know how many reservists working in the National Health Service may be called up in the event of any military action against Iraq, and as a result the total number of trusts likely to be affected is unknown.

Road Traffic Accidents

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what fees are expected from road traffic accident payments to NHS trusts in financial years *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005; and if he will make a statement. [94996]

Mr. Lammy: Total payments to national health service trusts in England, Scotland and Wales from the recovery of charges following road traffic accidents are expected to reach £100 million for 2002–03.

The amounts recovered for future years will depend on the number of people who are injured in road traffic accidents and who then make successful claims for personal injury compensation. However, increases in amounts recovered are expected when increases in the tariff and ceiling of charges introduced in January 2003 take full effect, which is expected to be around July 2004.

Smokers

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the population *(a)* permanently stopped smoking and *(b)* took up smoking in each of the last five years. [92603]

Ms Blears: The information is not available in the form requested. The available data are shown in the tables.

Table 1: Cigarette smoking status among adults aged 16 and over, England, 1998–2001

Percentage

Smoking status	*1998*	*2000*	*2001*
Current cigarette smokers	28	27	27
Ex-regular cigarette smokers	25	24	24
Never or only occasionally smoked	48	50	50

Source:
Derived from ONS General Household Surveys, 1990 to 2001 (weighted data). The 2001 report is available on the internet at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/2001/index.html

Table 2: People setting a quit date through the NHS smoking cessation services who were successful at 4 week follow-up (based on self-report), England, 1999–2000 to 2001–02

Year	*Number who successfully quit*
1999–2000 (HAZ only)	5,800
2000–01	64,600
2001–02	119,800

Notes:
1. A client is counted as having successfully quit smoking at the four week follow-up if he or she has not smoked at all since two weeks after the quit date.
2. Data rounded to nearest hundred.
3. Smoking cessation services were launched in Health Action Zones in 1999–2000 and were set up in all health authorities in England in 2000–01.

Source:
Department of Health statistical bulletin: Statistics on smoking cessation services in England, April 2001 to March 2002. Available on the internet at: http//www.doh.gov.uk/public/sb0225.pdf

Stroke Patients

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what work is being done to ensure that stroke patients receive rapid assessment and appropriate treatment. [92362]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* The Department published the national service framework for older people, which includes a standard on stroke, on 27 March 2001. It sets out a comprehensive strategy to ensure fair, high quality integrated health and social care and reduce variations in services.

The stroke standard provides for stroke prevention, immediate care, early and continuing rehabilitation and long-term support as components of a service model for integrated specialist stroke services, which will build on current arrangements.

The target is to put this in place in all general hospitals, which care for people with stroke, by April 2004.

Terrorism (Hospital Preparations)

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received requesting additional resources from individual hospitals in order to fund preparations for possible terrorist incidents. [95954]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health is not aware of any such representations.

Tobacco Advertising

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he has on the long term efficacy of tobacco advertising bans upon the numbers of regular smokers in Council of Europe countries. [92572]

Ms Blears: The United Kingdom does not routinely collect comparable data for the countries of the Council of Europe.

The 1999 report from the World Bank, entitled "Curbing the Epidemic", stated that "policy makers who are interested in controlling tobacco need to know whether cigarette advertising and promotion affect consumption. The answer is they almost certainly do, although the data are not straightforward. The key conclusion is that bans on advertising and promotion prove effective, but only if they are comprehensive, covering all media and all uses of brand names and logos". The World Bank suggests that implementation of EU Directive 98/43/EC could have reduced cigarette consumption within the European Union by nearly 7 per cent.

"Effect of Tobacco Advertising on Tobacco Consumption", the "Smee" report produced by the Economic and Operational Research Division of the Department of Health in 1992, concluded that a reduction of cigarette consumption in the order of 2.5 per cent., might be expected in the long run. This would save up to 3,000 lives a year.

TUPE Transfer Undertakings

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of TUPE transfer undertakings have been drawn up for employees to be transferred to the HPA or from the PHLS to the NHS. [90086]

Ms Blears: It is envisaged that approximately 2,500 staff will transfer to the Health Protection Agency (HPA) on 1 April 2003. Consultation continues between the staff concerned and their current employers to identify any issues relating to the transfer of undertakings from 1 April 2003. Until these consultations are completed, it will not be possible to say precisely how many staff will or will not transfer to the HPA.

Waiting Times

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients admitted to accident and emergency departments in Hull and East Riding waited more than 12 hours before being treated in each of the last two quarters for which figures are available. [92903]

Jacqui Smith: During Quarter 2 of July to September 2002, no patients waited more than 12 hours to be admitted.

During Quarter 3 of October to December 2002, seven patients waited more than 12 hours to be admitted.

Source:
Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust

Zyban

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library *(a)* submissions to, *(b)* briefing documents used by and *(c)* risk analysis carried out by the MCA in its consideration of Zyban in the last two years. [93784]

Ms Blears: I am arranging for the risk analysis carried out by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) in its consideration of Zyban (bupropion hydrochloride) in the last two years to be placed in the Library by 10 February 2003. This comprises papers considered by the Committee on Safety of Medicines and minutes of the meetings held on 22 February 2001, 24 May 2001, 12 December 2001 and 26 June 2002, the Committee for Proprietary Medicinal Products Opinin following the Europe-wide review of the risk and benefits of bupropion hydrochloride and a summary of all reports of suspected adverse drug reactions received through the Yellow Card Scheme. These documents encompass all relevant material submitted to the MCA in relation to the risks and benefits of Zyban.

Some of the papers considered by the advisory committees have been anonymised under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information under exemptions 13, 14 or 15 of the code.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 7 February 2003

MINISTER FOR WOMEN

Executive Boards

Keith Vaz: To ask the Minister for Women what estimate she has made of the percentage of members of executive boards that are women in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the European Union. [94039]

Ms Hewitt: Research for the Higgs Review on the role and effectiveness of non-executive directors, published on 20 January, showed that in the FTSE-100, women represent three per cent of executive directors.

I am not able to provide a figure for the European Union as we do not hold information across each EU country which are comparable.

TRANSPORT

Aircraft Pilots

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make it his policy to permit aircraft pilots to carry arms during flights. [96208]

Mr. Jamieson: There are no plans to permit pilots of commercial aircraft to carry arms during flights.

Aviation Fuel

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what checks are carried out to ensure that aviation fuel has not been dumped over land for reasons other than emergencies. [96477]

Mr. Jamieson: Aviation fuel is an expensive commodity and, other than in an emergency, there is no reason why pilots or airlines would want to jettison it. The Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Aviation and the Global Atmosphere" (1999 citing research from 1994) indicates that most of the small amount of fuel that is jettisoned at low altitude in the troposphere evaporates while it falls.

Congestion Charges

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 523W, on congestion charges, when he intends to provide a uniform minimum standard of exemptions or concessions; whether the exemptions or concessions will be backdated to 17 February; and if he will make a statement. [95030]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* We will consult on the scope of a uniform minimum standard of exemptions and concessions in due course once we have had an opportunity to take into account the experiences gained from road user charging schemes in London and Durham.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90515]

Mr. Jamieson *[pursuant to the answer, 16 January 2003, Official Report, c. 698W]:* My Department was formed on 29 May 2002. Expenditure on external consultants by my Department during the remainder of 2002 was £91.4 million.

First North Western Trains

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many rail season ticket holders have had to suffer cancellations because of the withdrawal of services by First North Western Trains in the last 12 months. [96169]

Mr. Jamieson: This information is not available.

M1

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport for what reason the southbound carriageway of the M1 motorway closed south of junction 11 on 27 January; and on whose authority it was closed. [95493]

Mr. Spellar: The police directed that the M1 Motorway be closed at this point following a serious accident involving an articulated lorry and four cars. Diversion routes were set up along the A5 and A505.

Network Rail

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has had with the Strategic Rail Authority regarding remuneration packages for directors of Network Rail; what will be the *(a)* minimum and *(b)* maximum remuneration for Network Rail directors; and what is the maximum amount that directors will receive as severance. [96126]

Mr. Jamieson: None, as this is primarily a matter for Network Rail.

Pilots (Alcohol/Drug Abuse)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many incidents have been recorded of people in charge of aeroplanes being apprehended for *(a)* alcohol and *(b)* drugs abuse in each of the last five years. [96520]

Mr. Jamieson: The Civil Aviation Authority's Mandatory Occurrence Reporting (MOR) scheme requires the reporting of incidents resulting in flight crew incapacitation within the UK or on UK registered aircraft. Prior to the recently reported incident in Sweden, a search of the database has revealed only one confirmed incident in the past five years where the pilot of an aircraft has been arrested in connection with the consumption of alcohol. This occurred following a private aircraft accident in 1998. The pilot failed a voluntary police breath test—at the road traffic limit—shortly after the accident and was subsequently

prosecuted. The MOR database also records two fatal air crashes during this period, where the resulting post mortem examinations revealed the presence of alcohol and/or drugs in the bodies of the pilots.

Street Lighting

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to open up to competition the connection of street lighting. [95498]

Mr. Wilson: At present connections of street lighting columns can only be undertaken by Distribution Network Operators. Ofgem is taking this matter forward. Ofgem's intention is to permit local authorities to hire contractors directly to undertake jointing of street lighting columns to distribution networks. The development of a "contractor competence registration scheme" should facilitate the introduction of true competition by independent contractors working on behalf of local authorities.

I recently introduced a new regulation, (regulation 25) to The Electricity Safety, Quality and Continuity Regulations 2002 which addresses issues around public safety and network integrity which facilitates competition in connections for street lighting and other applications.

Untaxed Cars

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many of the notices issued by police for untaxed cars in each of the last five years were the subject of prosecutions by the DVLA. [95981]

Mr. Jamieson: DVLA only holds information on enforcement results from 1999–2000. Some cases are settled out of court by way of payment of a penalty. The number of reports received from police and traffic wardens of successful completions were as follows:

	Received	*Prosecutions*	*Out of court payments*
1999–2000	1,074,916	188,689	165,658
2000–01	945,301	179,779	165,836
2001–02	931,806	192,671	165,252
2002–03 (January)	705,653	161,777	118,166

Many of the reports received were either duplicate for the same vehicle or relate to vehicles which are already taxed (but not displaying a disc).

DEFENCE

Anti-Terrorist Operations

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what strategic assessment he has made of the role of armed small craft in anti-terrorist operations in *(a)* home and *(b)* foreign waters. [95873]

Mr. Ingram: None. Naval vessels have not been developed to counter specific terrorist threats but provide capabilities of wide utility in potential counter-terrorism operations at home and overseas. Small armed craft are employed when necessary. The Strategic Defence Review: New Chapter, published in July 2002, set out the Ministry of Defence's strategic thinking on how to counter international terrorism both at home and abroad. It looked again at Ministry of Defence's posture and plans to ensure that there are the right concepts, the right capabilities and the right forces to meet the additional challenges of international terrorism within the land, sea and air environments. It stated that "we will continue to keep under close review and, where appropriate, make adjustments to, our arrangements to counter ship-borne threats".

Civilian Staff (Colchester)

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civilians are employed at the Military Corrective Training Centre in Colchester; and how many are in receipt of the prison environmental allowance. [96139]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 25 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 560W.

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to help find alternative employment for civilian employees at Colchester Garrison who are expected to be made redundant in the event of troops being deployed overseas; and if he will make a statement. [96138]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has no plans to make any of its civilian staff employed at Colchester Garrison redundant because of the deployment of troops based there. It is not appropriate for me to comment on decisions that are the responsibility of our contractors, but we are in discussion with them.

Depleted Uranium

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent assessment he has made of the effects of depleted uranium munitions on *(a)* UK troops and *(b)* the local population of the Gulf. [95916]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given on 7 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 466W to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn).

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what monitoring procedures have been put in place to assess depleted uranium in blood and urine. [95918]

Dr. Moonie: The Royal Society reports on "The Health Hazards of Depleted Uranium Munitions" consider three levels of exposure to DU:

Level I—exposures to personnel in a vehicle that is struck by a DU penetrator, or to personnel entering a struck vehicle immediately, typically to assist injured comrades.

Level II—exposures following combat, typically to personnel working in or on contaminated vehicles to carry out repairs.

Level III—all other exposures, for example, being downwind of an impact or fire involving DU, or brief entry into contaminated vehicles.

The Ministry of Defence accepts these definitions, but in recognition of some veterans' concerns, has extended the definition of Level III personnel to include everyone in a military theatre of operations where DU is likely to have been used.

All those considered to have received a Level I or Level II exposure while in theatre (according to the Royal Society definitions) will be advised to accept testing for uranium exposure. All other troops in theatre will also have the opportunity to be tested for uranium exposure if they wish.

MOD's full policy for biological monitoring for depleted uranium (DU) on current and future operations is published on MOD's internet site at: http://www.mod.uk/issues/depleted(uranium/du(biomonitoring/htm.

As part of the public consultation process on provision of a screening programme for estimating DU exposure, it was agreed that a urine test would be more appropriate than a blood test. This is also in accordance with the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) guidance on personal monitoring. Their recommendations are for monitoring of urine of faeces or for monitoring the lungs by whole body counting. There is therefore no requirement for blood to be monitored.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many depleted uranium shells will be test-fired during the trials commencing on 3 February at Dundrennan Range. [95972]

Dr. Moonie: Up to 192 rounds will be fired. The exact number will be determined as the firing programme progresses.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what steps are being taken to monitor the environmental impact of shells testing during the week starting 3 February at Dundrennan Range; [95973]

(2) if he will make a statement on environmental impact testing undertaken at Dundrennan Range which continues to monitor the effect of depleted uranium shells test-firing. [95974]

Dr. Moonie: These firings will be subject to the same environmental monitoring programmes that have been in place at Kirkcudbright ever since the beginning of the Depleted Uranium munitions trials announced in the House in 1979. I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 20 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 313W to the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce).

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions have taken place with the Health and Safety Executive over the effects of test-firing depleted uranium shells. [95977]

Dr. Moonie: No recent discussions have taken place with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) over the effects of test-firing depleted uranium (DU) shells. All firings are subject to regulation under the Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999, which are enforced by the HSE. The HSE needs only to be notified if a new process is used; the processes used for firing DU have not changed since the firing programme began. HSE representatives last visited Kirkcudbright range in January 2001 and confirmed they were content with the health and safety arrangements for firing DU.

Kosovo

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troops are serving in Kosovo. [95595]

Mr. Ingram: The United Kingdom currently has some 1,400 troops serving in Kosovo.

Means-tested Benefits

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many armed services personnel and their families receive *(a)* income support and *(b)* other means-tested benefits. [96539]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held by the Ministry of Defence since the claiming of any benefits by eligible Service personnel is a private matter for the individuals concerned. However, in the case of Income Support, I understand that the website of the Department for Work and Pensions outlines the eligibility criteria for this benefit, including the condition that applicants must work, on average, less than 16 hours a week. It seems improbable therefore that any regular Service personnel would be eligible to claim Income Support.

Merchant Shipping (Gulf)

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names and flag states of the merchant ships chartered in support of the current military deployment in the Mediterranean and Gulf regions. [95672]

Mr. Ingram: Some 53 vessels have now been chartered for use in the Mediterranean/Gulf regions. The numbers and flag states are as follows:

	Number
United Kingdom	8
Isle of Man	1
The Netherlands	3
Bermuda	2
Panama	1
Greece	1
Sweden	2
Spain	3
Malta	8
Egypt	1
St. Vincent	4
Liberia	1
Cayman I	2
Bahamas	3
Turkey	3
Italy	2
Cyprus	1
Denmark	1
Marshall I	2
Canada	1
Antigua	3

I am withholding the information requested on the names of the merchant vessels involved, under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, due to the overriding need to maintain force protection.

RAF

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many land-based aircraft for *(a)* strike/attack and *(b)* offensive support the Royal Air Force has owned in each year from 1980–81 to 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [95783]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Service Pay

Hugh Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) in what circumstances station specific pay can be withdrawn from a member of the armed forces when they are temporarily assigned to another duty station; [96316]

(2) whether any member of the armed forces will *(a)* lose station specific pay and *(b)* receive less pay as a result of serving in the Gulf. [96317]

Dr. Moonie: The only remuneration that is affected by temporary deployments is Local Overseas Allowance (LOA), which is a non-taxable allowance paid to compensate Service personnel for the necessary extra cost of living overseas.

When personnel are temporarily deployed away from their permanent LOA earning duty station, they no longer incur the full range of additional costs associated with that station. However, it is accepted that they still have ongoing financial commitments overseas and that many have families who remain at the permanent duty station. Consequently all Service personnel continue to receive the full LOA rate for the first 17 days of their deployment. Additionally married accompanied personnel continue to receive their full LOA rate unless their accompanying spouse also leaves the permanent duty station for more than 17 days at which point an abatement of approximately 35% is applied. Single and married unaccompanied personnel lose 20% of their fall LOA rate after the first 17 days.

No Service personnel will receive less basic pay as a result of serving in the Gulf.

Territorial Army Medical Services

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Territorial Army Medical Services are being deployed; what percentage this represents; how many of these are from the field hospitals and how many are from the medical squadrons and field ambulances; what percentage this represents in each case; and if he will make a statement. [95548]

Mr. Ingram: Currently, call up notices have been issued to 202 members of the Territorial Army Medical Services, for possible deployment in support of Op. TELIC. This represents less than 7 per cent. of the Doctors, Nurses and Combat Medical Technicians within the Army Medical Services TA units.

158 personnel have been called up from field hospital units, representing less than 5 per cent. of our relevant TA strength, as well as 44 personnel from medical squadrons, which represents 7.4 per cent. of the total of TA personnel within those units. No call up notices have been issued to personnel from field ambulance units.

Tomahawk

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Tomahawk submarine-commanded cruise missiles have been acquired for the Royal Navy in each of the past five years. [91282]

Mr. Ingram: Two bulk purchases of Tomahawk cruise missiles for the Royal Navy have been made. The first batch of 65 was delivered in the years 1991 to 1999 and the second batch of 20 was delivered in the years 2000 and 2001. A third batch of 22 missiles was ordered in early 2002 and these are due to be delivered between September 2003 and April 2004.

Water Abstraction Boreholes

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many water abstraction boreholes *(a)* in use and *(b)* licensed but not in use there are on MOD land in (i) Salisbury District, (ii) Kennet District and (iii) West Wiltshire District; and what the six-figure grid references are for each borehole. [95436]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* Project Aquatrine (which will provide water and waste-water services to the Ministry of Defence) has information on 24 boreholes in use, plus one borehole used on an emergency basis; and no boreholes that are licensed but not in use. There may be additional boreholes on Ministry of Defence land, but this information is not held centrally.

I am withholding the locations in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

West Freugh Airfield

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects an announcement to be made on redundancies at West Freugh airfield and range. [95978]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence are currently engaged in negotiations with QinetiQ for a Long Term Partnering Agreement for the provision of Test and Evaluation services. Subject to a satisfactory conclusion to the negotiations, any announcement on redundancies will be a matter for QinetiQ.

PRIME MINISTER

Iraq

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister whether he has discussed with President Bush the issue of oil reserves in Iraq. [96493]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) during my statement to the House on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 38.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Domestic Violence

Julie Morgan: To ask the Solicitor General what guidance she gives to the Crown Prosecution Service about consulting victims of domestic violence about decisions relating to the prosecutions. [95248]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* I regularly have discussions with the DPP, CPS policy lead on domestic violence and the Area Domestic Violence Co-ordinators about the CPS policy on the prosecution of cases of domestic violence.

The revised domestic violence policy and the guidance issued to prosecutors in November 2001 contain many references to the importance of consultation and seeking the views of the victim. For example, they provide that: consultation and support may be needed to make the prosecution process less difficult for victims; information from the police should be regularly updated with particular emphasis on the victim's/children's safety and views expressed by the victim.

In addition, as in any non-domestic violence case, the Code for Crown Prosecutors requires prosecutors to take into account views expressed by the victim. Consultation may also take place: in accordance with the Attorney-General's guidelines when the prosecution is considering a plea to a lesser charge; or, as part of the Direct Communication with Victims initiative; or, by way of a Victim Personal Statement.

Mrs. Sally Clark

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Solicitor General what plans she has to investigate the handling by the Crown Prosecution Service of the case of Mrs. Sally Clark. [95592]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The Court of Appeal has yet to give its detailed judgement in the case of Sally Clark. I will consider whether further investigation into the handling of the case by the CPS is appropriate when I have had the opportunity to study the full Court of Appeal judgment.

Suicide Act

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Solicitor-General when the Director of Public Prosecutions will publish her policy on the criteria which she applies when exercising her discretion under section 2(4) of the Suicide Act 1961. [92779]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* Proceedings under section 2(1) of the Suicide Act 1961 are reviewed in exactly the same manner as any other prosecution. The decision to prosecute and the Director's decision as to whether he grants consent are taken in the light of all of the evidence available following the investigation conducted by the police, in accordance with the Code for Crown Prosecutors. The code can be viewed at www.cps.gov.uk.

Section 2(1) of the Suicide Act 1961 is an offence for which the DPP's consent is required before a prosecution can commence.

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Solicitor-General what processes will be used to achieve clarification of policy, and to produce guidelines, with respect to section 2(4) of the Suicide Act 1961. [94596]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* Proceedings under section 2(1) of the Suicide Act 1961 are reviewed in exactly the same manner as any other prosecution. The decision to prosecute and the Director's decision as to whether he grants consent are taken in the light of all of the evidence available following the investigation conducted by the police, in accordance with the Code for Crown Prosecutors. The code can be viewed at www.cps.gov.uk.

Section 2(1) of the Suicide Act 1961 is an offence for which the DPP's consent is required before a prosecution can commence.

Tom Sugden

Janet Anderson: To ask the Solicitor-General on how many occasions the trial of Tom Sugden at Burnley Crown Court was adjourned; what the reasons were for the adjournments; why the trial was abandoned on Monday 13 January; and if she will make a statement. [92661]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The trial of Thomas Sugden was concluded at Burnley Crown Court on 13 January 2003 having been adjourned on three previous occasions.

On 14 February 2002, the first occasion, the prosecution applied for an adjournment of the trial due to the unavailability of three prosecution witnesses, two of whom were sick and one who was working abroad. The case was re-listed to be heard during the week commencing 8 April 2002. The second adjournment was generated by the Crown Court at Burnley, in common with other Crown Courts in the country closing as a mark of respect following the death of the Queen Mother. The matter was briefly mentioned at court on 17 April 2002, when a judicial direction was given that the matter be placed in the court list for 1 July 2002.

The third adjournment was due to a civilian prosecution witness failing to attend to give evidence on the scheduled start date for trial of 2 July 2002. The reason provided to the court was that she was unwell and anxious as she was, at this time, heavily pregnant. A sick note to cover her absence was produced. The prosecution had indicated that they would proceed without this witness but defence counsel indicated that he wished to cross examine this witness and her attendance was therefore essential. The other prosecution witnesses who were distressed by the need to adjourn again were given full explanations which were personally conveyed to them by representatives from the Crown Prosecution Service.

Following two pre-trial reviews at which the availability and willingness of witnesses to attend were resolved, the matter was adjourned to a further trial date of 13 January 2003. One of the reasons for so lengthy an adjournment was because of the expected date of confinement of the above mentioned prosecution witness.

The matter commenced on 13 January 2003 before His Honour Judge Cornwall at Burnley Crown Court. The principal prosecution witness gave her evidence. The trial Judge expressed his concern in relation to this evidence, and the Crown reviewed the case. In the light of these developments it became apparent that the proceedings would be unlikely to generate a realistic prospect of a conviction and the case was therefore terminated. Prosecuting Counsel held an immediate conference with the the prosecution witnesses explaining to them why such a step had had to be taken.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Child Support

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the average maintenance payment made under the Child Support Acts by husbands whose ex-wives are *(a)* on benefits and *(b)* in work was in each of the last three years. [96403]

Malcolm Wicks: Information to answer this question is not available in the form requested. The available information is in the table.

Average maintenance payment by non-resident parents to parents with care, by the status of the parent with care

£ per week

Parent with care status	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Parent with care in receipt of benefit			
Income support	5.63	5.95	5.79
Family credit	8.56	—	—
Job seekers allowance (income based)	3.44	3.26	3.84
Parent with care not in receipt of benefit			
Others	9.45	9.80	9.91
Working families tax credit	11.00	12.92	13.40

Notes:
1. Figures are taken from 5 per cent. samples of all live and assessed cases of quarterly scans of the CSCS and so are subject to sampling variation.
2. Figures are for full maintenance assessments only.
3. Both regular and arrear accounts have been used.
4. The averages take account of cases assessed at zero.
5. The averages also take account of cases assessed to pay maintenance, but where payments are not made.
6. Figures do not include direct pay cases.
7. The status is taken as the status of the parent with care at the end of the financial year.
8. The years used for analysis are financial years (April-March).
9. The "Others" and WFTC category contain employed cases.

HEALTH

Blood Therapies

Mr. Havard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when The Appropriate Use of Blood working group will publish its report on the use of alternative blood therapies in place of transfusing blood. [95573]

Ms Blears: The National Blood Service appropriate use of blood group has continued to gather evidence on alternatives to blood, bloodless surgery and autologous blood transfusion. A report is to be produced by spring 2003 for consideration by the group and the Chief Medical Officer's National Blood Transfusion Committee. Appropriate recommendations for a future strategy will then be developed. This information will be made widely available on the Internet, to relevant individuals and organisations and promulgated through the regional and hospital transfusion committee structure.

Broadband

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of *(a)* GP surgeries, *(b)* hospitals, *(c)* primary care trusts and *(d)* health authorities have broadband access; and what targets have been set for full broadband access in each case. [95657]

Ms Blears: Information on the number of broadband access connections are shown in the table.

		Percentage
General practitioner practices	157 out of 8,519 connections	0.02
Hospital trusts	345 out of 726 connections	47
Primary care trusts	77 out of 284 connections	27
Health authorities	108 out of 562 connections	19

These figures relate to connections only, not directly to the organisations themselves, as it is common for health authorities and trusts to have multiple connections. These can be for connections between different sites or multiple connections to the same sites. Information broken down by specific trust or HA is not collected centrally.

Under the existing framework contracts with the NHSnet suppliers, connections to GP practices in England are being upgraded to 256Kbps where they do not already have it. Trust and health authority connections are being upgraded to 2MBps where they do not already have it, or better. The target for completion of this exercise is March 2004.

As part of the Government's "21st Century IT" strategy for the national health service, it is planned to replace the existing networking arrangements with a new national broadband infrastructure for the NHS in England in 2006–07.

Dystonia

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he collates as to the incidence of dystonia, and the costs and development of treatments for this condition. [95609]

Jacqui Smith: The Department of Health does not routinely collect statistics on the prevalence of individual conditions like dystonia nor on the costs and development of treatments for them. The Dystonia Society however, estimates that around 38,000 people in the United Kingdom currently have the condition.

Epilepsy

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations made in the National Sentinel Audit of Epilepsy-Related Death published in May 2002; what

steps have been taken to develop the action plan announced in September; when he expects the action plan to be launched; and if he will make a statement. [96137]

Jacqui Smith: In May 2002, we welcomed the publication of National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) sponsored national clinical audit of epilepsy-related death. The audit looked at investigations into epilepsy deaths, care provided prior to death and contact with bereaved families. The audit report draws the attention of local national health service clinicians and organisations to the need to establish or review policies and practicesregarding the management of epilepsy and epilepsy related deaths.

We have given a commitment to consider in full the key findings and recommendations of the audit and to develop an action plan to address the key issues. We have consulted the epilepsy voluntary organisations during its development and expect to publish the action plan shortly. It will take account of two major pieces of work currently in development:

The national service framework for long term conditions, which is expected to develop standards of care for people with neurological conditions such as epilepsy. We currently plan to publish this framework in 2004 and to start implementation in 2005.

NICE work on a clinical and cost effectiveness appraisal of new anti-epilepsy drugs in children and adults, which is due in autumn 2003. This will be supported by a clinical guideline for the diagnosis, management and treatment of epilepsy which is due in June 2004. These will help address any variations in clinical practice and contribute to the improvement of services.

We are additionally supporting the improvement of epilepsy services in different ways. We have:

Developed the expert patients programme, which aims to provide training in self- management skills for people with long term chronic conditions.

Provided £71,000 to the Joint Epilepsy Council (JEC) to develop its "National Statement of Good Practice for the Treatment and Care of People who have Epilepsy", which was published in May 2002. The statement makes a series of recommendations for good quality epilepsy services. It is intended to facilitate commissioning and will be of use to NHS purchasers, providers and service users.

Agreed to provide £122,000 over three years to the National Society for Epilepsy for its "Living Well Project". The project aims to promote independent living by providing locally based short-term courses for people with epilepsy to develop self-help and self-management techniques.

Framework for Children

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to ensure that the National Service Framework for Children includes standards for the development of neurological head injury and spinal services for children. [93479]

Jacqui Smith: The national service framework for children, young people and maternity services will raise standards of care for children with all medical conditions.

To illustrate this a small number of exemplars will be developed, although no decision has been made on the all conditions being covered.

Health Protection Agency

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the terms and conditions to be offered to new recruits in the Health Protection Agency after 1 April will be determined. [95735]

Ms Blears: Subject to legislation, the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will be established as a special health authority on 1 April 2003, and new staff employed by the HPA as from 1 April will commence employment on National Health Service terms and conditions using local pay and grading arrangements.

Heart Transplants

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many heart transplant operations took place in NHS hospitals in 2000. [95597]

Mr. Lammy: The number of heart-only transplants undertaken in United Kingdom National Health Service hospitals in 2000 was 204. The number of heart/lung transplants undertaken in UK NHS hospitals in 2000 was 33.

Hospital Readmissions (Hull and East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, how many patients were re-admitted to hospital as emergency cases after being discharged in Hull and the East Riding in 2002; and what the national average was for such re-admissions in 2002. [92849]

Jacqui Smith: The rate of emergency re-admissions to hospital within 28 days of discharge (all ages), as a percentage of live discharges, age and sex standardised, was 7.14 per cent. for Hull and East Yorkshire hospitals trust in 2001, compared with 6.11 per cent. nationally (all England).

Source of Information:

These figures are taken from the NHS Trust Performance ratings data on the NHS Performance ratings and indicators 2002 website at: http://www.doh.gov.uk/performanceratings/2002/downl

Lymphoedema

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what resources his Department has committed to lymphoedema prevention campaigns in the last three years. [96057]

Jacqui Smith: We have committed no specific resources to lymphoedema prevention campaigns in the last three years.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the hospital trusts in England which have lymphoedema departments. [96055]

Jacqui Smith: Information on the detailed configuration of local hospitals trusts and the services they provide is not held centrally.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to hospital trusts and PCTs on the provision of services to lymphoedema sufferers. [96056]

Jacqui Smith: We have issued no specific guidance to hospital trusts and primary care trusts for the provision of services to lymphoedema sufferers. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has, however, recently updated the "Improving Outcomes in Breast Cancer Guidance", and that guidance made some recommendations about lymphoedema.

The guidance recommends that cancer networks should agree guidelines for identification and management of lymphoedema and that a lymphoedema service, staffed by nurses and physiotherapists who have experience in dealing with this problem, should be available for all patients who experience arm swelling or discomfort.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many lymphoedema sufferers there are in England; and how many of them are receiving treatment from the NHS. [96058]

Jacqui Smith: The Department of Health does not routinely collect statistics on the prevalence of individual conditions like lymphoedema. We do have data on the number of finished consultant episodes (FCE) where the main diagnosis is lymphoedema. An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within a year.

FCE by main diagnosis Lymphoedema (ICD10 code I89) NHS hospitals England 1995–96 to 2000–01

	Number
1995–96	2,401
1996–97	2,260
1997–98	2,157
1998–99	2,326
1999–2000	2,049
2000–01	1,873

Medium-Secure Units

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average cost per patient per week of *(a)* a place in an NHS medium-secure unit and *(b)* a place purchased by the NHS in a medium-secure unit in the independent sector was in the last period for which both figures are available. [95905]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The latest available figures on the average cost per week, at 31 December 2001, indicate that the cost of a place in a national health service medium-secure unit ranges from £1,390 to £2,750 per week. A place purchased by the NHS in a medium-secure unit in the independent sector ranges from £2,450 to £3,220 per week.

National Service Framework

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the procedures in place to ensure that accurate figures are being obtained on which to monitor the milestones for the National Service Framework for Older People; and if he will make a statement. [94603]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 31 January 2003]:* "Improvement Expansion and Reform", the priorities and planning framework for 2003–06 has the main milestones on stroke, falls, mental health and intermediate care services as key targets. Progress will be closely monitored. Other aspects of the national service framework will be monitored through existing information collections, discussions with the field and through a network of older people national health service and social care leads.

Nursing and Midwifery Council

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people applied to be registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council during 2002; what the average waiting time for applications to be processed is; how many applications have been subject to a delay in processing; and what measures are being taken to reduce delays in the application process. [93396]

Mr. Hutton: Since 1 April 2002 to present date the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has received 88,013 applications for registration.

The normal target processing times for applications for registration are 21 working days for United Kingdom applicants and 108 working days for overseas applicants.

Applications received since 1 April 2002 may have been delayed due to the problems encountered by the new council. However, it is not possible to quantify the exact number of applications which experienced some form of delay. The NMC is taking steps to improve the information which can be obtained from the new system.

The NMC has taken action to resolve the issues including improving communications, targeting resources to tackle the backlogs and undertaking a review of systems and processes to continue improvements in the registration process.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime Prevention (Wandsworth)

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the heads under which Wandsworth Borough has received money to help tackle crime; and how much was received in each year between 1997 and 2003. [94712]

Mr. Denham: The table outlines the levels of funding that have been provided to Wandsworth Borough under crime reduction initiatives since 1997.

£

Name of project/allocation	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	Total
CCTV—projects in Lennox Estate, St. George's Hospital and Battersea Park extension						
Allocation	—	131,000	180,000	—	—	311,000
Reducing Burglary Initiative—projects targeting the over 60s, Balham Ward and West Putney Ward						
Allocation	—	22,300	29,300	—	—	51,600
Street Wardens						
Allocation	—	—	48,000	198,000	199,000	445,000
Street Crime Wardens						
Allocation	—	—	—	123,210	399,130	522,340
Partnership Development Fund						
Allocation	—	11,050	50,000	40,000	—	101,050
Communities Against Drugs						
Allocation	—	—	274,100	274,100	—	548,200
Communities Against Drugs Street Crime Funding						
Allocation	—	—	—	454,978	—	454,978
Safer Communities Initiative						
Allocation	—	—	—	126,727	—	126,727
Total	24,232,000	23,911,350	25,275,400	26,568,015	598,130	

Further to the funding in the table, allocations of £414,147 and £343,155 have been made to Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and Basic Command Units respectively for 2003–04. This does not include funding provided to the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) to fund policing in London, including Wandsworth.

Criminal Records Bureau

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his department has paid Capita plc for work on Criminal Records Bureau checks; how much work is outstanding; and what penalty clause arrangements apply and on what basis. [88523]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 7 January 2003]:* Since 11 March 2002 when the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) launched its disclosure service, Capita Plc has been paid a total of £15,737,771.87 for their work on CRB checks. This figure includes the costs associated with processing registration applications, counter-signatory applications and disclosures.

The CRB has received some 1,284,891 disclosure applications and has issued 1,058,572 disclosures. This leaves a total of 226,819 that have not been completed, although a substantial number of these are back with customers to provide missing information.

There is provision under the terms of the contract between Capita and the Home Office for penalties for delay or poor performance. Capita has incurred liquidated damages although the details remain commercial in confidence. The main priority is for the CRB and Capita to collaborate in order to achieve further improvement in the quality of service. Capita shares operational responsibility with the CRB agency and the police for the delivery of the CRB service.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92445]

Mr. Blunkett: The money lost by the Home Office, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through fraud and theft is set out in the table:

£000

Accounting period	Fraud	Theft	Total
1996–97	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
1997–98	13	100	113
1998–99	84	104	188
1999–2000	140	230	370
2000–01	47	117	164
2001–02	109	34	143

[1] Information is not readily available.

The Home Office has a comprehensive anti-fraud and corruption policy and a response plan that is applied rigorously. All cases of reported fraud and theft are investigated with follow-up action taken, which includes prosecution where appropriate.

Industrial Action/Illness

Mr. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many working days have been lost in his Department and its predecessors owing to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997–98. [94936]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* Four days (by 69 staff) were lost to industrial action in the Home Office and its agencies during 1997–98. No days have been lost to industrial action in the Home Office and its agencies during subsequent years.

The average number of lost working days owing to sickness in the Home Office and its agencies is as follows:

1997—11.4 working days
1998—10.4 working days
1999—11.1 working days
2000—11.2 working days
2001—8.0 working days.

The figures for 2002 are not currently available.

Scottish Executive

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what mechanisms are in place for co-ordinating emergency planning guidance and procedures with the Scottish Executive. [90407]

Mr. Blunkett: Emergency planning in Scotland is a devolved responsibility. The devolved administrations are involved in the relevant cabinet committees and sub-committees dealing with emergency planning in the UK, and thus have a full opportunity for appropriate input at strategic level.

The core guidance document for contingency planning arrangements for Scotland, including assessment, prevention, planning response and recovery is "Dealing With Disaster Together" (Scottish Executive Justice Department). This draws heavily on the guidance for England and Wales, "Dealing With Disaster" (Third edition).

Formal consultation arrangements are in place at management and editorial levels between the Cabinet Office Civil contingencies Secretariat and the Scottish Executive Justice Department to ensure that any alterations or addenda to either document are made only after full consideration and input from either party.

"Dealing with Disaster" is currently being updated to reflect changes in data, legislation and Lead Government guidance. The Scottish Executive Justice Department has been given full access to proposed changes so that these, where appropriate, can be incorporated into its core guidance.

Terrorism

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many arrests have been made under the Terrorism Act 2000. [94234]

Mr. Blunkett: On the latest information available 335 people have been arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with *(a)* MI5 and *(b)* other intelligence organisations concerning current al-Qaeda terrorist cells within the UK concerning their location and number of operatives. [95327]

Mr. Blunkett: It is longstanding Government policy not to discuss Security Service investigations and operations. I am in regular contact with the Director General of the Security Service and am kept fully informed of the service's assessment of the extent of terrorist activity in the United Kingdom.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what representations have been received by his Department concerning links between *(a)* Abu Hamza, *(b)* Osama bin Laden and *(c)* the al-Qaeda organisation; and if he will make a statement; [95338]

(2) what representations his Department has received concerning the extent of support for Osama bin Laden from *(a)* organised groups and *(b)* individuals within the United Kingdom. [95326]

Mr. Blunkett: My Department regularly receives representations on a whole range of counterterrorist issues, including those individuals or organisations where concerns have been raised. I have already made clear that the activities of people such as Abu Hamza are closely monitored. Anyone breaking the law and inciting violence, whether under the provisions of the Terrorism Act 2000, Race Relations Act 1976 as amended by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 or the Criminal Justice Public Order Act 1994, will be prosecuted. Decisions on this are for the prosecuting authorities. I would not want to state anything publicly that would make their job more difficult.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to apprehend individuals and organisations within the UK spreading *(a)* pro-terror and *(b)* anti-British propaganda; and if he will make a statement; [95339]

(2) what information he has collated on the extent to which al-Qaeda propaganda has been promoted within the United Kingdom since 11 September 2001. [95325]

Mr. Blunkett: The police and the Security Service take all threats seriously and attach a high priority to monitoring and countering any possible activities in the country by foreign extremists. Any credible information is fully investigated. An investigation which yields evidence that an organisation or individuals are supporting terrorism will result in action being taken.

CABINET OFFICE

Congestion Charge

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what arrangements have been made in respect of payment of congestion charge costs incurred by the Leader of the Opposition when using his official car. [96494]

Mr. Alexander: The responsibility for the provision of ministerial cars and drivers has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive Mr. Nick Matheson to write to the hon. Member. Copies of his letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much money has been lost by his

Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92449]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An estimate of the cost of theft and fraud to my Department since 1996–97 is as follows:

£000

Year	*Theft*	*Fraud*	*Total*
1996–97	15	199	214
1997–98	22	3,816	3,838
1998–99	94	5,716	5,810
1999–2000	7	4,548	4,555
2000–01	3	17,327	17,330
2001–02	8	70,069	70,077
Total	149	101,675	101,824

The figure on fraud for 2001–02 includes an estimate of some £67 million relating to serious irregularity and fraud in respect of individual learning accounts.

Information on NDPBs is not collected centrally.

Student Finance (Wales)

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about the transfer of powers for student finance in Wales to the Assembly. [93765]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* I meet the First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales from time to time in the course of normal business. I have had preliminary discussions with both the First Minister and Minister for Education and Life Long Learning in the Welsh Assembly Government about the proposals contained in my White Paper and its implications for Wales.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Convention on the Future of Europe

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the Convention on the Future of Europe; and if he will make a statement. [95959]

Mr. MacShane: The recommendations of the Convention on the Future of Europe are likely to be in the form of a draft constitutional treaty. This will be discussed in an Inter-Governmental Conference, where decisions will be taken by Heads of State or Government, acting by unanimity. The outcome will be put to Parliament before ratification.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 17 December 2002 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. Arkhand. [94690]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary replied on 29 January 2003 to my right hon. Friend's letter of 17 December 2002 concerning his constituent Mr. Arkhand. We are in touch with the constituent concerned and we are taking immediate action on the matter.

Export Licences

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures will be taken by Her Majesty's Government to ensure equipment exported under export licences for HMX pellets and synchros used as an inspection tool on Tay 650 engines to power Fokker 100 aircraft will not be diverted for military purposes for use by the Iranian military or security forces. [94578]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government has made clear its commitment to effective monitoring of the end-use of defence exports, including to Iran. The most effective way to do this is through rigorous assessment at the export licensing stage. Both the synchros and the HMX pellets do have a possible military use. However HMG is as satisfied as we reasonably can be that both of these items are intended only for the legitimate end-use stated. We judged that the risk of these goods being diverted for use by the Iranian military was minimal.

Gibraltar

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Gibraltar will be included in a referendum on the Single European Currency. [94204]

Mr. MacShane: The Government's policy on membership of the single currency is clear. The Five Economic Tests will define whether a clear and unambiguous case for the UK membership of EMU can be made. If, on the basis of the five tests assessment, the Government decides to recommend UK entry, it will be put to a vote in Parliament and then to a referendum of the British people. Parliament would decide the details of any referendum, as part of the legislation needed to hold the referendum.

Kosovo

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the policy of Her Majesty's Government is on the protection of churches by KFOR troops in Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [95546]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* Britain, along with its international partners, is working to ensure that Kosovo develops as a tolerant, multi-ethnic society. The security of churches and other religious and cultural sites in Kosovo is important to the success of this effort. British soldiers, as part of our contribution to the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), play an active role in protecting these sites. These arrangements are reviewed regularly by KFOR in the light of the security situation prevailing at the time, and in full consultation with the local and regional authorities.

Ricin

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has received concerning the manufacture of ricin in the UK and the al Qaeda terrorist network. [95318]

Mr. Blunkett: I have been asked to reply.

I understand that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has received no direct representations concerning the manufacture of ricin in the United Kingdom and the al Qaeda terrorist network. But the Government continues to have regular discussions with our Coalition partners about a wide range of al Qaeda-related security issues affecting the UK.

TREASURY

Child Poverty

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether it is his policy to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent. between 1998–99 and 2004–05 on an after housing costs basis; and if he will make a statement. [95725]

Ruth Kelly: The Government has a PSA target to reduce the number of children in low-income households by a quarter by 2004–05 compared with 1998–99, as a contribution towards the broader target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. The technical note for this PSA, published on DWP and HMT websites, provides details. Low-income households are defined as those with less than 60 per cent. of contemporary median income. Progress is being measured on both a before housing costs and an after housing costs basis.

Higgs Report

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he intends to implement the findings of the Higgs report; and if he will make a statement. [94340]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

Derek Higgs' recommendations reflect a very thorough consultation process. Most of the recommendations are for changes to the Combined Code. The Financial Reporting Council, which has responsibility for the code, has invited comments by 14 April on the detailed drafting with a view to putting a revised code into effect on 1 July 2003. The Government welcome this. It will then be for listed companies to comply with the new provisions or explain to shareholders why they have not done so.

A group is being formed under the leadership of Professor Laura Tyson, Dean of the London Business School, to consider how to bring to greater prominence candidates who could make an effective contribution to boards of listed companies. The group will report to me in May.

The City of London Law Society and Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators, together with the Association of British Insurers and the British Insurance Brokers' Association, will be developing guidance on directors' and officers' insurance.

Non-Executive Directors

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the timetable for implementation of the recommendations laid out in the Higgs report on non-executive directors. [94630]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

Most of the recommendations in Derek Higgs' report are for changes to the Combined Code. Derek Higgs expressed the hope that the changes would be introduced as soon as practically possible, preferably for reporting years starting on or after 1 July 2003. The Financial Reporting Council has invited comments by 14 April on the detailed drafting with a view to putting a revised code into effect on 1 July 2003 as suggested by Derek Higgs. The Government welcome this. It will then be for listed companies to comply with the new provisions or explain to shareholders why they have not done so.

A group of business leaders and others is being formed under the leadership of Professor Laura Tyson, Dean of the London Business School, to consider how to bring to greater prominence candidates who could make an effective contribution to boards of listed companies. The group will report to me in May.

The City of London Law Society and Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators, together with the Association of British Insurers and the British Insurance Brokers' Association, will be developing guidance on directors' and officers' insurance.

We will give careful consideration to Derek Higgs' recommendation as regards indemnifying directors in advance against costs of defending proceedings from the company itself, in the context of our wider reform of company law. The Lord Chancellor's Department is promoting active case management, as suggested in the report. We will ensure that the recommendation on considering the checklist in relation to new criminal sanctions on directors is drawn to the attention of those who may consider such legislation.

Other recommendations are directed at individuals or boards or institutional investors. It will be for them to take forward the useful suggestions made.

Public Liability Insurance Premiums

Diana Organ: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average percentage increase in public liability insurance premiums was in 2002–03. [96545]

Ruth Kelly: We are aware of concerns about increases in public liability insurance premiums experienced by firms. Public liability insurance is one element of the fact-finding study on liability insurance that the Office of Fair Trading is currently undertaking. We do not routinely collect data on public liability insurance premiums.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many telephone helplines are sponsored by his Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95712]

John Healey: The Treasury has two telephone helplines: the National Euro Helpline, which appears on the Treasury's euro web site www.euro.gov.uk and is available to the public at the local rate; and an internal incident line for Treasury staff, calls to which are free.

The Inland Revenue has 43 helplines. 28 of these are charged at the local rate, 14 geographically and one is a freephone number. The full list can be found on the Inland Revenue's website at www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk.

HM Customs and Excise has 12 telephone helplines, nine of which are charged at the national rate, and three at the local rate.

The Office for National Statistics has nine helplines, eight of which are charged at the national rate and one at the local rate. Details are available on the National Statistics website at www.statistics.gov.uk.

Telephone helplines for National Savings and Investments were outsourced to Siemens Business Services in 1999, following the Public Private Partnership. National Savings and Investments currently has five customer helplines, including a textphone and two local rate business helplines. All customer helplines are free or charged at the local rate.

The Office of Government Commerce has four telephone helplines, three of which are charged at the local rate and one that is a standard central London number. The Royal Mint has 27 telephone helplines, 23 of which are charged at the national rate, three at the local rate, one at freephone rate and none at the premium rate. The Office for National Statistics has nine helplines, eight of which are charged at the national rate and one at the local rate. Details are available on the National Statistics website at www.statistics.gov.uk.

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ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the departmental expenditure limits are in her Department's *(a)* resource and *(b)* capital budget for (i) environmental protection, (ii) food, fishing and farming, (iii) land use and rural affairs, (iv) animal health and welfare, (v) operations and service delivery and (vi) executive agencies for (A) 2001–02, (B) 2002–03, (C) 2003–04, (D) 2004–05 and (E) 2005–06. [95910]

Alun Michael: The information for 2001–02 and 2002–03 is as follows:

Departmental expenditure limits

£000

	2001–02		*2002–03*	
	Resource	*Capital*	*Resource*	*Capital*
Environmental Protection	319,463	264,569	409,767	279,685
Food, Farming and Fisheries	89,059	11,373	106,949	12,014
Land Use and Rural Affairs	287,615	155,784	291,060	170,993
Animal Health and Welfare	163,664	9,946	169,907	17,226
Operations and Service Delivery	477,424	-115	290,643	24,368
Executive Agencies	433,079	37,209	405,373	64,221

Budgets for future years have not yet been finalised.

Equine Passports

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimates her Department has received of the cost of disposing of horses that *(a)* might enter the food chain and *(b)* will not enter the food chain. [93364]

Mr. Morley: The Department has not received any estimates for the cost of disposing of horses via the food chain. Horse carcases that are not intended for human consumption are normally disposed of via knacker yards or hunt kennels. We understand that knacker yard charges are in the region of £100 for animals that are shot and around £140 for injected animals. The cost of disposing of animal carcases via hunt kennels varies from area to area. Many hunts subsidise their service and impose little or no cost.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total cost to her Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90504]

Alun Michael: The cost of external consultants in 2002 was £39 million. This figure includes costs for core-Defra, the Rural Payments Agency, the pesticides Safety Directorate, the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, the Central Science Laboratory, the Veterinary Laboratory Agency and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science.

National Park (South Downs)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the timetable is for the completion of the National Park designation process for the South Downs. [96012]

Alun Michael: The timetable will depend on whether or not the Secretary of State calls a public inquiry into the designation order submitted by the Countryside Agency. This will be determined when all objections and representations received have been considered after the period for public consultation on the order ends on 28 February. If, as is anticipated, an inquiry is required, then it will probably be 2006 when the Secretary of State is able to decide whether or not to confirm the designation order. A full National Park authority, if it were decided to establish one, would probably come into being the following year. If there were no public inquiry, the decision on the designation order could be made this year.

Right of Access

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the right of access available to areas for which an entrance fee has been payable, but which meet the criteria for open country under the provisions of the Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000; and if she will make a statement. [95943]

Alun Michael: The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides a power for landowners and tenants to close land for any reason for up to 28 days each year. The Act also makes provision for any person with an interest in land to apply to their relevant authority (the Countryside Agency, or, in national parks, the National Park Authority) to restrict or exclude access on the grounds of land management, public safety or to avoid the risk of fire. It would be open to landowners who before the Act charged a fee for entrance to their land to apply to their relevant authority for a restriction or exclusion of access to enable them to continue to charge for entry to that land but would have to show that one of the three criteria is met.

On our behalf, the Countryside Agency is developing guidance for relevant authorities on the operation of the restrictions and exclusions system. It is considering what guidance to give relevant authorities on applications for restrictions and exclusions of access for the purpose of charging a fee for entry to the land.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

BNFL

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been spent on providing security for shipments of radioactive material by BNFL in the last year for which figures are available. [94970]

Mr. Wilson: The costs involved in transporting radioactive material, including the costs of ensuring that appropriate levels of physical protection are applied to the material during transport, are a commercial matter for the companies involved. Where radioactive material transport is carried out by BNFL pursuant to contracts concluded with external customers, the transport costs are reflected in the value of the contract.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the value of BNFL will be after the establishment of the Liabilities Management Authority . [94974]

Mr. Wilson: Decisions on the capital structure of BNFL will be taken after legislation has been agreed by Parliament to set up the Liabilities Management Authority.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what controls she intends to put in place to prevent BNFL from using funds available to it for investments tangential to its primary function. [94975]

Mr. Wilson: BNFL operates within a strategic framework set by Government. How it invests commercially generated funds within that framework is a matter for the company.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what factors she estimates were responsible for the increases in severe fuel poverty between 1996 and 1998 as demonstrated in Table 13 of "Fuel Poverty in England in 1998". [95062]

Mr. Wilson: The number of fuel poor households in England is estimated to have fallen by one million between 1996 and 1998, from 4.3 million in 1996 to 3.3 million in 1998. Most of this reduction is thought to be due to changes in energy prices and incomes.

It is recognised that for those in severe fuel poverty improvements in energy efficiency will be needed to remove these households from fuel poverty. Improvements, and increased funding, for the key programmes to improve energy efficiency were put in place after 1998.

The figures for 1998 were based on a relatively small sample, and data for 2001 based on a larger sample from the 2001 English House Condition Survey will become available shortly, and will be published on the internet at www.dti.gov.uk/consumers/fuel_poverty/index.shtml

Audit and Accounting

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps are being taken to appoint women to the implementation unit on audit and accounting reforms. [95529]

Ms Hewitt: A steering group will direct the practical implementation of the conclusions of the Review of the Regulatory Regime of the Accountancy Profession. It is a short term, working arrangement on which those currently heading the major regulatory bodies affected by review have agreed to serve.

The Government are keen to promote meritocracy and diversity among those charged with delivering independent regulation of the accountancy and audit professions. I have accepted the recommendations of the review that there should be open advertisement of all board positions in the new structure of the Financial Reporting Council, which will incorporate the responsibilities of the current Accountancy Foundation.

This will allow those responsible for board appointments to consider the widest field of candidates—including women—who may be suitable for the post in question.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's spending on assistance to the coal industry in each year from 1990–91 to 2003–04 (planned). [95799]

Mr. Wilson: The following table shows Government financial support for the coal industry from 1990–91 to 2002–03. These figures exclude the impact of debt write-offs and proceeds at the privatisation of British Coal and payments made in respect of inherited liabilities following that privatisation, such as health claims.

A budget for spending on assistance to the coal industry for 2003–04 has not been finalised. Given that final decisions have yet to be made on a number of potential measures, each of which could significantly affect the size of the budget, it would be unrealistic at present to give a firm estimate on projected spending for 2003–04.

Government financial support for the Coal Industry

£ million

Financial Year	*Total grants*
1990–91	141
1991–92	457
1992–93	645
1993–94	424
1994–95	205
1995–96	0
1996–97	0
1997–98	0
1998–99	0
1999–2000	0
2000–01	76.5
2001–02	61.6
2002–03	[1]23.9

[1] This is an estimated figure. Part of the expenditure forecast for financial year 2002–03 may slip into 2003–04.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what her estimate is of her Department's actual spending and planned spending on the 50 Best Companies to Work For list; and if she will make a statement; [95800]

(2) what her estimate is of her Department's spending on the Work Life Balance campaign in each year from 2000–01 to 2003–04; what benefits have arisen from this campaign; and if she will make a statement. [95820]

Alan Johnson: The UK Government are committed to making the UK the best place to do business and to raising UK productivity and prosperity for all. This can only be achieved by recognising every aspect responsible for performance including work organisation and human resource management.

The Department has therefore been happy to be associated with and support the Best Companies To Work For Project with the Sunday Times. In 2001 this produced a 50 Best UK Companies to Work for List. In 2002 due to the rise in popularity this was expanded to the Top 100 UK Companies to Work For. Since the project started, in 1999, we have spent in the region of £500,000, which includes £100,000 committed for the 2003 Top UK Companies to Work for List. The surveys involved have been substantial and the generation of the 2003 list has included surveying over 47,000 employees. The project plans to announce the 2003 winners at the end of this month. We are also planning to spend some money on dissemination of the results of the survey but the sums involved are subject to further consideration.

The Top 100 UK Companies to Work For is just one part of the Work-Life Balance Campaign. The campaign was launched by the Prime Minister in 2000 to persuade employers to introduce ways of working which meet the needs of business and customers while simultaneously improving the work-life balance of their employees.

Spending on the Campaign has been in the region of £11.3 million since 2000. The costs per year are:

2000–01: £2.5 million

2001–02: £4.4 million

2003–04: £4.4 million

The campaign has successfully delivered substantial benefits including:

Adding to the growing body of research including publication of the Work-Life Balance 2000 baseline study of work-life balance practices in Great Britain, involving 2,500 employers and 7,500 employees;

Support for over 400 private, voluntary and public sector organisations through the Challenge Fund;

A very well used website providing information, guidance and case studies. The site received an average of 6,000 'hits' a day over the last eight months and much positive feedback from users;

Completion of a highly successful international study tour in 2002 which culminated in the extremely well attended and received 'Improving Life at Work Conference' which I was delighted to open in January this year.

The Work-Life Balance Campaign complements the legislation we are introducing from April this year as part of the Employment Act aimed at helping Working Parents.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's expenditure on the automotive industry in each year from 1990–91 to 2004–05 (planned), if she will give a breakdown down for each year to show the origin of investments and grant-aid of over £1 million per year; and if she will make a statement. [95802]

Alan Johnson: Since 1990, total commitments of grant aid to the automotive industry in the form of Regional Selective Assistance have totalled some £330 million. A table detailing the totals, broken down by year, is attached.

The Department has also committed grants totalling £9.9 million to SMMT Industry Forum since 1996, and around £7.3 million to Foresight Vehicle since 1997. £45 million has been committed to future funding of the Automotive Innovation and Growth Team report initiatives.

Number and value of RSA payments made in Great Britain in the Automotive Sector from 1 April 1990 to 31 March 2002

	Less than £1 million		*Greater or equal to £1 million*	
Year	*Number*	*Value of offers (£000)*	*Number*	*Value of offers (£000)*
1990–91	78	4,266	12	15,839
1991–92	62	3,105	13	29,245
1992–93	48	3,926	12	11,450
1993–94	59	5,863	19	19,053
1994–95	61	4,198	18	10,958
1995–96	74	5,664	18	8,383
1996–97	78	5,288	17	11,775
1997–98	67	5,802	21	26,152
1998–99	75	6,269	19	35,845
1999–2000	54	3,471	11	29,120
2000–01	52	4,543	17	42,998
2001–02	35	4,146	16	32,199
Total	743	56,540	193	273,017

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's spending on aerospace and defence grants and launch investment in each year from 1995–96 to 2004–05 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [95803]

Alan Johnson: The Government continue to be supportive of the aerospace industry in the UK. The Department's principle support to the civil aerospace sector is provided through the Aeronautics Research Programme (formerly known as CARAD) and through repayable launch investment. Expenditure on research and development to meet the UK's defence needs is a matter for the Ministry of Defence.

For civil aeronautics research, the value of grants paid from April 1995 through to March 2002 totalled over £145 million, averaging over £20 million per year. Forecast expenditure for the period April 2002 to March 2005 is also expected to exceed £20 million annually. Since April 1995 we have also committed in the order of £1 billion in launch investment for major new aircraft and engine projects. Annual expenditure under these programmes can be found in the Department's annual Expenditure Plans report which is available on the DTI's website at http://www.dti.gov.uk/expenditureplan/ or from the House of Commons Library.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 16 May 2002 the establishment of the Aerospace Innovation and Growth Team (IGT), led by Sir Richard Evans.

The IGT will draw on the expertise of the major aerospace stakeholders to identify the key issues, including support to the sector, which will shape the future of the industry. The IGT will make recommendations to the Prime Minister in spring 2003 as to how the UK can best respond to the competitive challenges it will face over the next 20 years. However, an interim report from the IGT is hosted on the SBAC's website at http://www.sbac.co.uk/newsview.asp Copies of the report will be placed in the House of Commons Library in due course.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's spending on the nuclear fusion programme in each year from 2001–02 to 2004–05 (planned). [95809]

Mr. Wilson: The Department of Trade and Industry's funding for fusion for the period 2001–02 was £14.63 million. From April 2003 onwards the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council will have responsibility for funding fusion, their spending from 2003 to 2005 is expected to be in the region of £15 million-£17 million per annum.

Departmental Staff

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* women aged over 55 years old, broken down into ethnic group and *(b)* people registered as disabled are employed in her Department. [96009]

Ms Hewitt: We collect ethnic and disability data on a voluntary basis. The information given as follows was extracted from our personnel records database and gives the position in DTI headquarters as of 31 December 2002.

(a) There were 197 women aged over 55-years-old—their ethnic origin is set out in the following table.

Number of women aged over 55-years-old	*Ethnic origin*
9	Asian
17	Black
5	Mixed race
5	Other
97	White
64	Unknown

(b) 303 people have told the Department that they have a disability.

Electricity

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultation there has been regarding the extension of the use of coal mine methane emissions for electricity in the UK. [95440]

Mr. Wilson: *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* This issue was covered in the Energy White Paper Consultation and the Government have given consideration to the responses they have received. Their conclusions will be made public when the White Paper is published.

Energy Industry

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will hold discussions with Ofgem on the scope of the reasons permitting energy suppliers to refuse compensation. [95979]

Mr. Wilson: DTI and Ofgem have been and are continuing to work together closely on all aspects of the post storm review. As part of the upcoming distribution price review, Ofgem will be reviewing the existing standards of performance arrangements including the

appropriate level of the standards and associated compensation payments and the scope and form of exemptions.

Export Licences (Sudan)

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what companies made export control applications to export to Sudan in the last five years; what specific items these companies applied for to export to Sudan; and what the outcome was of each of these applications. [96242]

Nigel Griffiths: Details of export licence applications from particular companies are normally commercially confidential and exempt from disclosure under categories 13 and 14 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Lost Working Days

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many working days were lost in her Department due to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997. [95901]

Alan Johnson *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* In DTI headquarters no working days have been lost due to industrial action since 1997.

The average number of staff days lost due to illness per staff year in the DTI Group have been:

	Days lost
1997	8.2
1998	8.0
1999	7.8
2000	7.5
2001	7.8

The DTI Group, in addition to DTI HQ, consists of ACAS, Companies House, Patent Office, Insolvency Service, National Weights and Measures Laboratory, Employment Tribunals Service and the Radiocommunications Agency. The figures are taken from the annual reports on public sector sick absence commissioned by the Cabinet Office each year and which enable interdepartmental comparison. Central figures for 2002 will not be available for some months but will be announced by ministerial statement and copies placed in the Library of the House.

LPG Suppliers

Matthew Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what steps she has taken to investigate the cost of changing suppliers of liquid petroleum gas; [94945]

(2) what arrangements are in place to prevent price-fixing between suppliers of liquid petroleum gas. [94944]

Mr. Wilson: It is the responsibility of the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) to keep markets under review. He has the power to investigate anti-competitive behaviour including, any anti-competitive agreements or abuse of dominant market position in the liquid petroleum gas (LPG) market.

Any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour should be sent to the DGFT.

Ministerial Costs

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of the total cost of *(a)* ministerial salaries, *(b)* ministerial offices and *(c)* other ministerial costs in her Department for the latest year for which information is available. [95614]

Ms Hewitt: The total cost of ministerial salaries in this Department for the year 2001–02 was £233,593. The total cost of ministerial offices and other ministerial costs in this Department of the financial year 2001–02 was £2,692,407. This figure includes all private office staff salaries, office running costs, and ministerial travel.

Nuclear Industry

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will place in the Library declassified documentation from the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority on the use to which reprocessed plutonium, arising from fuel imported from the Magnox reactors sold by the United Kingdom to Italy and Japan, was put. [93908]

Mr. Wilson: I understand from the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority that more than 200 declassified files relating to fuel contracts with Italy and Japan have been placed in the Public Records Office and are available for public scrutiny.

Post Office Network (Subsidy)

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total public subsidy to the *(a)* rural and *(b)* urban post office network is. [95659]

Mr. Timms: The Government regards it as most important that all communities have good access to postal and Government services and they have committed to doing all they can to ensure a viable Post Office network for the future. We are investing very substantial sums in supporting this transformation of the network—some £2 billion in total over the next five years, including £450 million funding to support the rural network until 2006.

On the rural network, the Government have:

Made a firm commitment to prevent avoidable rural closures before 2006.

Made available a £2 million fund to support community post office initiatives.

Will make available £450 million (£150 million a year) for the three years 2003–04 to 2005–06 to help to continue to provide access to services in rural areas where they could not otherwise be sustained on a commercial basis. (This funding is part of the overall financing package for the Royal Mail Group, announced in June 2002.)

On the urban network, the Government have:

Provided £210 million in total for the reinvention programme.

Made available £15 million for a scheme to support offices invaluable to the community in deprived urban areas throughout England. Similar schemes have been launched in Scotland and Wales

The Government have also invested in the IT infrastructure of the business. £480 million of Government support was invested in the Horizon project, one of the UK's largest computerisation projects, which has automated every post office in the network.

Reprocessing (Sellafield)

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make it her policy to end reprocessing at Sellafield. [94976]

Mr. Wilson: No.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 10 February 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Defence

Gregory Barker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps are being taken by his Department to ensure that local authorities are working in conjunction with the St. John's Ambulance to prepare local civil defence plans for England and Wales. [96249]

Mr. Alexander: The Government welcome the contribution of the voluntary sector in this area and has published clear guidance on the use and training of volunteers and voluntary organisations in chapter 6 of its core guidance document, "Dealing With Disaster" (3rd edition). This sets out the arrangements, which focus primarily on local authority led mechanisms, for the registration, co-ordination and training of volunteers and voluntary organisations, including the St. John's Ambulance. The document, which is held by all local authority emergency planning units, emergency services headquarters and most of the main headquarters of the national voluntary organisations, is a public document and can be obtained from the Government's resilience website: www.ukresilience.info

The National Voluntary Aid Society Emergency Committee (NVASEC) provides a national United Kingdom-wide forum for addressing voluntary sector matters in respect of national integrated contingency planning. NVASEC membership comprises representatives of the three Voluntary Aid Societies (VAS): the British Red Cross Society (BRCS) (chairing), St. John's Ambulance and St. Andrew's Ambulance. Representatives from the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS), the Department of Health, Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence are also invited.

Civil Service Pension Scheme

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the companies selected to replace Equitable Life as providers of the Civil Service Additional Voluntary Contributory Scheme; and whether this list will be amended. [96177]

Mr. Alexander: The CSAVC Scheme has three providers. Equitable Life and Scottish Widows were appointed when the scheme was set up in 1988. Standard Life Assurance Society was appointed as a further provider from 1 January 2002.

Equitable Life remains available for CSAVC investment, other than in respect of its with profits fund. This was closed to new members from August 2001 although contributing members could opt to continue their contributions if they wished.

The suitability of all providers is kept under review.

Labour Market (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the Strategy Unit's report into the labour market position of people with minority ethnic backgrounds will be published. [96600]

Mr. Alexander: The Strategy Unit's report on the labour market outcomes of ethnic minorities will be published in due course.

Ministerial Travel

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many ministerial journeys were made by train in 2002; and of those, how many were *(a)* first class and *(b)* standard class. [94988]

Mr. Alexander: Since Machinery of Government changes in May 2002, Cabinet Office Ministers have made six first class train journeys in relation to ministerial responsibilities. All travel complies with the requirements of the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers.

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many ministerial flights were made by air in 2002; and of those, how many were *(a)* first class, *(b)* business class and *(c)* economy. [94989]

Mr. Alexander: Since Machinery of Government changes in May 2002, Cabinet Office Ministers have made two First Class Flights and two Business Class Flights.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the Central Office of Information's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94109]

Mr. Alexander: The Central Office of Information (COI) is currently in the process of revising its Framework Document and preparing its Annual Business Plan. It is anticipated that the COI will announce and publish its revised Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) at the same time as announcing its annual performance targets to Parliament.

The COI will publish annually agreed external performance targets before summer recess by means of a Written Statement, and report against these in its Annual Report and Accounts. Copies of these are available in the Libraries of the House.

The current SDA, which was published as part of the Spending Review 2000, is available on-line at the COI's website.

Children at Risk

Alistair Burt: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what action he is taking to ensure that services for adults in difficulty consider the needs of the adult's family as well as the individual needs, through *(a)* the proposed Children at Risk Green Paper and *(b)* the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy; [93727]

(2) in the proposed Green Paper for Children at Risk, if he will propose a statutory obligation that there be a key worker for any child at complex risk, and that the

key worker *(a)* co-ordinate (i) a multi-professional assessment and (ii) the design of a care package, and *(b)* ensure that the assessment and care package are (i) delivered and (ii) monitored; [93723]

(3) if he will ensure that in a new identification, referral and tracking system created by the proposed Green Paper on Children at Risk, the same assessment tool is used for all young people at complex risk. [93722]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

The Government recognise that professionals working with adults in difficulties need to consider carefully the interests of the children involved. The National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, which is being prepared by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit for publication this summer, is considering the impact of alcohol misuse upon families.

The Green Paper on Children at Risk, to be published this spring, is examining the range of services available to children and young people who are at risk of educational failure, offending, victimisation and abuse, and poor health. The Green Paper will look more broadly at how families can be best supported, including considering how the adverse impact on children of parental health issues, such as substance misuse, can be minimised.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Air Quality (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what plans she has to improve the air quality in Gloucestershire in the areas close to the M5; and if she will make a statement; [96917]

(2) what assessment she has made of the impact on air quality in Gloucestershire of emissions from the M5; and if she will make a statement. [96916]

Alun Michael: Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Environment Act 1995 to review and assess the local air quality in their area against the air quality objectives for seven pollutants prescribed in regulations for the purpose of local air quality management. Where it is likely that the air quality objectives will not be met by the relevant deadline, the local authority must designate an air quality management area and produce an action plan setting out the measures they intend to implement to work towards meeting the air quality objectives.

The M5 passes through four local authority areas. Three of these local authorities (South Gloucestershire, Tewkesbury, and Stroud) have declared air quality management areas in respect of nitrogen dioxide emissions in the vicinity of the M5 motorway. All three local authorities have completed a further review and assessment following the declaration of their air quality management areas to further verify the need for the declarations.

South Gloucestershire is now consulting on whether to revoke its air quality management area. Stroud and Tewkesbury have justified the need to retain their joint air quality management area. All authorities have been liaising with the Highways Agency; the organisation responsible for the management of the M5. The local authorities will have to draw up an air quality action plan and work with the Highways Agency to look for solutions to improve the local air quality within the area affected by the M5.

Vehicle Emissions

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimates she has made of the total automotive emissions in the UK to the atmosphere in the latest available year for *(a)* particulates, *(b)* fine particulates, *(c)* sulphur dioxide, *(d)* carbon dioxide, *(e)* benzene, *(f)* 1,3-butadiene, *(g)* carbon monoxide and *(h)* oxides of nitrogen. [96832]

Alun Michael: The most recent year for which published data are available is 2000. In that year the estimates for emissions in kilotonnes from all vehicle types were as follows:

	Kilotonnes
PM_{10}	31.4
$PM_{2.5}$	25.9
Sulphur dioxide	5.92
Carbon dioxide (as carbon)	31,525
Benzene	7.71
1,3-Butadiene	4.59
Carbon monoxide	2,881
Oxides of nitrogen	629

The figures for particulate matter (PM) cover exhaust and tyre and brake wear emissions and are provided for the two size fractions for which data are available—PM_{10} (particulates, less than 10 microns diameter) and $PM_{2.5}$ (fine particulates, less than 2.5 microns diameter).

These data are taken from the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory, published annually by DEFRA, and available on the internet at http://www.naei.org.uk

Arsenic

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what air and land quality standards there are for arsenic under *(a)* UK and *(b)* European regulations. [96731]

Alun Michael: There are at present no European Commission or UK air and land quality standards for arsenic in regulations. The European Commission is due to publish a proposal for a directive addressing arsenic in ambient air in the near future.

Market Towns Initiative

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what funding was allocated to the Harwich constituency under the Market Towns Initiative in 2001. [96913]

Alun Michael: Two towns in the Harwich parliamentary constituency are included in the Market Towns Initiative, namely Harwich and Walton on the Naze. Spending allocations in 2001 were £29,000 and

£10,000 respectively, and allocations over the whole programme period were £250,000 and £400,000 respectively.

Suckler Cow Premium

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects all 2002 suckler cow claims to be settled. [96959]

Alun Michael: The window for advance payments under the 2002 Suckler Cow Premium Scheme opened on 16 October 2002. Unexpected delays encountered in the development of scheme software mean that despite best efforts, the first payments were issued in December 2002 and progress has been and continues to be slow.

It is unlikely that the Rural Payments Agency's aim to issue advance payments by early March will be achieved in all cases. We are aware of the inconvenience this will cause and regret the delays. Claim processing continues as a high priority with 1,462 claims authorised to receive payment by 6 February. Some 17,289 claims were received under the 2002 scheme in England. Up to date information on progress is available on the agency's website at www.rpa.gov.uk.

The window for 2002 bovine subsidy balance payments opens on 1 April and closes on 30 June. New EU legislation which came into effect from the 2002 scheme year introduced significant changes to the way the bovine schemes operate, including the administrative penalties that apply when producers breach scheme requirements. Under these new rules it is not possible to accurately calculate a producer's premium entitlement under each bovine scheme until all bovine claims that they have submitted have been processed and all validation checks completed. However, the RPA continues to make every effort to ensure that producers receive their 2002 bovine balance payments by the 30 June deadline.

RPA is investing significantly in new software as part of its change programme. This will replace the existing bovine schemes systems with modern, up-to-date technology in 2004–05.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

John Redgrave

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Solicitor General why the Attorney General is represented at the Metropolitan Police internal disciplinary hearing of John Redgrave. [96914]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney General is not represented at the disciplinary hearing of Mr. Redgrave. A decision was made by the Disciplinary Board which Mr. Redgrave sought to judicially review. The High Court found against Mr. Redgrave, and he sought leave to appeal that decision. Leave was granted, and in so doing. Lord Justice Sedley noted that there were points of wider public importance relating to the operation of the double jeopardy rule and invited the Attorney General to consider whether he could like to intervene in the public interest.

The Attoney General considered that in his role as guardian of the public interest he should ensure all the arguments as to the impact of the High Court's decision were presented at the Court of Appeal hearing.

On that occasion, the question about double jeopardy was resolved by the Court of Appeal in a manner which did not require the Attorney General's further involvement, and his participation in the case is now concluded.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of the *(a)* total cost and *(b)* administrative costs of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service in each year from 1980–81 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [95801]

Ms Hewitt: Information on ACAS costs, including administration costs, are published in ACAS's Annual Accounts. Information is also available in DTI's and prior to 1995 the Employment Department's expenditure plans. All documents are available in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of expenditure on the *(a)* Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council and *(b)* Economic and Social Science Research Council in each year from 1997–98 to 2004–05 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [95805]

Ms Hewitt: The expenditure of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), for the years 1997–98 to 2001–02, and budgeted expenditure for the years 2002–03 and 2003–04, is shown in the table.

£ thousand

	1997–98 Actual	*1998–99 Actual*	*1999–2000 Actual*	*2000–01 Actual*	*2001–02 Actual*	*2002–03 Budget*	*2003–04 Plans*	*2004–05 Plans*
PPARC	197,869	207,418	186,680	217,439	220,728	246,246	250,770	266,470
ESRC	65,227	67,506	70,872	70,901	74,760	85,199	94,584	104,074

Notes:

Expenditure 1997–98 to 1999–2000 on a cash bass

Expenditure for 2000–01 onwards on a full resource accounting and budgeting basis

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's spending on the Promoting Science, Engineering and Technology for Women unit in each year from 1997–98 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [95806]

Ms Hewitt: The running cost expenditure for the Office of Science and Technology (OST) unit for Promoting Science, Engineering and Technology for Women, is not recorded separately from the rest of OST. The unit currently consists of four staff. Actual programme expenditure for the years 2000–01 and 2001–02, and budgeted expenditure for the years 2002–03, is shown as follows. Programme expenditure for the years 1997–98 and 1999–2000 was not recorded separately. The budget for 2003–04 is under review in the light of Baroness Greenfield's report "SET FAIR". The Government is considering the report carefully, and will respond in due course.

£,000

2000–01 Actual	*2001–02 Actual*	*2002–03 Budget*	*2003–04 Plans*	*2004–05 Plans*
178	197	200	200	200

Note:
Expenditure for 2000–01 onwards on a full resource accounting and budgeting basis.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the cost was of the Diversity Week held by her Department in June 2001. [95808]

Ms Hewitt: The cost of DTI's Diversity Week 2001 run for all departmental staff was £34,341.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons expenditure on ACAS has changed from 1996–97 to 2003–04; and if she will make a statement. [95811]

Ms Hewitt: ACAS's expenditure increased across the period to support increased levels of information and advice on employment relations to employers and employees and to meet individual conciliation costs associated with rising Employment Tribunal case loads.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's Innovation Expenditure in *(a)* 2003–04 and *(b)* 2004–05; and if she will make a statement. [95817]

Ms Hewitt: The Department is drawing up its plans and budgets for 2003–04 and 2004–05 in the light of the 2002 spending review. Information on the Department's planned expenditure for those years will be contained in its annual expenditure plans report for 2003–04 to 2005–06, which is due to be published in April.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's spending on consumer protection in each year from 1990–91 to 2003–04 (planned) *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* in real terms using 2000–01 prices; and if she will make a statement. [95818]

Miss Melanie Johnson: These figures are published each year in the DTI Government Expenditure Plans Reports. A table for the years requested is as follows.

Further information on consumer protection policy and expenditure are available in these Reports, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.DTI's Expenditure on Consumer Protection.

Figures taken from the DTI Government Expenditure Plans Reports.

Year	*£ million cash terms*	*£ million at 2000–01 prices*	*Prices*
1990–91[1]	39.0	29.1	72.956
1991–92[1]	39.0	30.9	77.406
1992–93	22.1	18.1	79.910
1993–94	23,5	19.7	81.886
1994–95	20.0	16.9	82.972
1995–96	21.0	18.3	85.336
1996–97	23.6	21.3	88.042
1997–98	23.9	22.2	90.759
1998–99	26.0	24.8	93.253
1999–2000	27.8	27.2	95.510
2000–01[1]	39.0	39.0	97.689
2001–02	34.0	34.8	100.000
2002–03	38.0	39.8[2]	102.500
2003–04[3]	47.2	50.6[2]	104.806

[1] These years include Investor Protection
[2] Excludes £10.3 million receipts
[3] Includes addition funding for White Paper Commitments
Note:
Adjusted to 2000–01 prices = £97.689

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list Task Forces which are being overseen by her Department. [95819]

Ms Hewitt: Details of my Department's Task Forces and similar groups are published in "Public Bodies 2002", which is available in the Libraries of the House. This information is expected to updated in "Public Bodies 2003" and will include the following additional groups formed since April 2002.

Ad hoc groups

Investment Committee

Advisory Panel on Management and Leadership

Sector Analysis Strategy Committee

Offshore Strategic Environmental Assessment Steering Group

Task Forces

Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS) National Network User Forum

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's total expenditure on *(a)* current and *(b)* capital items in (i) 2004–05 and (ii) 2005–06; and if she will make a statement. [95821]

Ms Hewitt: The Department's Expenditure Limits (DEL) for 2004–05 and 2005–06 are laid out in the spending review 2002 as follows:

£ million

	2004–05	*2005–06*
Resource DEL	5,084	5,564
Capital DEL	167	104

These figures exclude items of annually managed expenditure (AME) such as nuclear and coal health provisions.

Icelandic Water Trawlermen

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims for compensation for former Icelandic water trawlermen have been paid; how much has been paid; how many claims have been paid to *(a)* Grimsby, *(b)* Hull and *(c)* Fleetwood trawlermen; how many claims have been rejected; and how many remain to be decided. [96127]

Nigel Griffiths: Some 4,638 former Icelandic Water trawlermen have been paid a total of £40.1 million under the scheme. Of these, 794 livid in Grimsby, 1,748 in Hull and 355 in Fleetwood. Discounting duplicates, about 2,900 claims have been assessed as not qualifying for compensation. Currently 168 claims remain subject to review, or to appeal to the Independent Adjudicator, or their assessment has not yet been completed.

Miners' Compensation

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims for compensation under the Coal Workers Pneumoconiosis Scheme are being held up because they have a less than 10 per cent. assessment of disablement. [96265]

Mr. Wilson: As at 5 February 2003, 192 claims from men with a statutory 10 per cent. disability rating based on the presence of non-disabling pneumoconiosis had been received under the Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis Scheme. The Department is considering the implications for the scheme of claims where there is no disability.

Postal Services

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when she was first informed of the proposals to require member states to levy VAT on all postal services being discussed in the European Commission; and what representations she has made to the Commission in response to the proposal; [93796]

(2) what assessment she has made of the impact on the Royal Mail of the imposition of VAT on postal services; [93795]

(3) if she will make a statement on the level of VAT on postal services. [93797]

Ms Hewitt: No formal proposals have yet been made to alter the current EC wide VAT exemption for public postal services.

Small Retail Businesses

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to her answer of 8 January, *Official Report*, column 248W, on small retail businesses, what the annual UK turnover of small retail business was in the last year for which figures are available. [96765]

Nigel Griffiths: Table 1 shows estimated turnover at the start of 2001 in the UK in both all industries and in sector 52 (retail trade except of motor vehicles). It can be seen that SMEs (0–249 employees) account for approximately 51 per cent. of all turnover generated in the UK, but only 33 per cent. of all turnover generated in sector 52. These figures are based on a total business population of approximately 3.75 million businesses, of which all but 7,000 are SMEs.

Table 1: Amount of turnover (£ million) in the private sector and public corporations1

UK, number

	All	*SMEs*[2]
All industries	2,112,013	1,084,565
52 Retail trade, except of motor vehicles	235,306	76,789

[1] UK figures from SME Statistics 2001
[2] Businesses with less than 250 employees
Source:
Small Business Service

DEFENCE

Afghanistan

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what evidence there is of attacks by remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan since the end of the recent war; and if he will make a statement. [96980]

Mr. Hoon: The al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan was severely weakened by coalition military action. However, remnants of al-Qaeda and Taliban forces continue to pose a limited security threat in some regions of the country, and coalition operations to defeat them continue.

Civilian Ships

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures are in place to protect military personnel and cargoes on chartered civilian ships. [96512]

Mr. Ingram: A number of security measures are in place and include, but are not limited to: the careful routeing of the ships; Naval shipping providing protection, where deemed necessary; embarkation of military protection parties. I am withholding any further information on security measures, under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Civilian Staff (Colchester)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the total civilian staff of the Ministry of Defence in each year since 1980–81. [95797]

Dr. Moonie: The requested information is shown in the table:

Total permanent civilian staff[1] in the Ministry of Defence as of 1 April in each year since 1980–81

Thousand

	Number
1980	239.8
1981	229.6
1982	216.9
1983	208.9
1984	199.1
1985	174.1
1986	169.5
1987	164.0
1988	143.4

Total permanent civilian staff[1] in the Ministry of Defence as of 1 April in each year since 1980–81

	Thousand[2]
	Number
1989	141.3
1990	141.4
1991	140.2
1992	139.5
1993	129.2
1994	121.6
1995	116.1
1996	109.9
1997	109.2
1998	104.2
1999	100.9
2000	100.3
2001	98.4
2002	89.3
2003	[3]87.8

[1] Figures are for permanent staff and include full-time equivalent values for part timers.
[2] FTE.
[3] Figures are taken from 1 April each year except the 2003 data, which is taken from 1 January.

Construction and Refurbishment

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the construction and refurbishment projects being undertaken by his Department, *(b)* the contractors for each project and *(c)* the projects for which a building research establishment environmental assessment method document has been prepared. [96415]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Deepcut Barracks

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of Deepcut Barracks. [95401]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence gave on 25 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 2WS. Deepcut Barracks is one of the sites identified by the Defence Training Review rationalisation programme as likely to be surplus to requirements. A final decision on the future of tins site will be made in the light of the consideration of the options currently being sought from industry.

Defence Fire Service

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many fully equipped, modern fire engines the Defence Fire Service has at its disposal; and how these appliances are distributed geographically. [95584]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence has 187 fire fighting vehicles available within the United Kingdom. They are specifically provided for crash rescue cover at both operational military airfields and airfields associated with military airpower capability. In addition a number of military establishments and facilities are provided with domestic fire fighting cover where the resources of the local authority are not sufficient to meet the risk. The total figure includes vehicles that are in the ownership of contractors supplying a service and vehicles that are temporarily unavailable due to maintenance or repairs.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of the Defence Fire Service's fully equipped, modern fire engines were available to the Fire Brigade in case of an emergency from *(a)* 14 January 2003, *(b)* 21 January 2003 and *(c)* on 28 January 2003. [95585]

Mr. Ingram: No Defence Fire Service appliances were made available on the dates in question.

The overriding responsibility of the Ministry of Defence Fire Services is the protection of MOD vital assets, stores, equipment and facilities. The MOD has entered into agreements with some local fire authorities to provide first attendance fire cover to specific areas or to assist in emergency situations but that does not involve setting aside, over any specified period, any assets for that purpose.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what instructions have been given to the Defence Fire Service *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* at the MOD Kineton base to assist local fire brigades in emergencies; and whether these instructions have been altered in respect of dates when the fire brigade is on strike. [95586]

Mr. Ingram: The overriding responsibility of the Ministry of Defence Fire Services is the protection of MOD vital assets, stores, equipment and facilities. There are, however, standard arrangements in place, that allow the provision of assistance in times of emergency when resources are available. Over the years, in certain locations throughout the United Kingdom, the MOD has formalised these arrangements by entering into agreements with local fire authorities to provide first attendance fire cover to specific areas or to assist in emergency situations.

In relation to MOD Kineton a Memorandum of Understanding exists with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. This allows the Chief Fire Officer to call upon the services of Defence Fire Service Kineton in an extreme emergency or incident subject to the normal proviso that the Defence Fire Service may not be able to respond immediately owing to commitments within the Depot.

It has always been intended that during the fire dispute all MOUs or similar agreements with local fire authorities should remain effective. A decision was made locally at MOD Kineton that, because the armed forces would provide emergency fire cover both inside and outside the depot during strike periods, the depot fire appliances would not at those times respond to requests for assistance outside the perimeter. It has now been recognised that this instruction was unnecessary and consequently MOD Kineton are now able to fulfil the terms of its agreement with the Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. All other agreements with local fire authorities remain in force and have not been affected by the fire fighters dispute.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when fully equipped, modern fire engines of the Defence Fire Service based at MOD Kineton have been used alongside Warwickshire Fire Brigade, in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* 2003. [95587]

Mr. Ingram: In 2002 Defence Fire Service Kineton attended nine incidents at the request of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. In addition they attended a further five incidents immediately outside of the depot that had been reported directly to them, and where they in turn advised Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service of the situation.

No such requests have been made to date in 2003 nor has any other form of assistance been provided.

Departmental Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what buildings his Department owns in Washington DC, USA; what their purpose is; what their value is; and if he will make a statement. [95782]

Dr. Moonie: All 14 properties in Greater Washington DC, USA owned by the Ministry of Defence are houses used to accommodate MOD employees posted to the British Defence Staff at the Embassy in Washington. The total value, as assessed in 1999 was $5,960,000.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the latest value of his Department's land and building assets on Cyprus; what plans there are to dispose of these assets; what use is being made of them; and if he will make a statement. [95785]

Dr. Moonie: The total value of the Ministry of Defence land and building assets on Cyprus is estimated as in excess of £280,366,000, as published in the Departmental Resource Account 2001–02.

Most of the land and assets owned by Her Majesty's Government on Cyprus form the core of the Sovereign Base Areas (SB As) which are used as military bases, while protecting the interests of those resident or working in the SB As. There is no intention to dispose of any of the assets in the SB As in the foreseeable future.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his latest estimate is of the value of the Wellington Barracks in London; which units are using these barracks; what plans there are to sell them; and if he will make a statement. [95787]

Dr. Moonie: Wellington Barracks has an Asset Value of some £68 million. However, this does not represent the open market value which might be achieved were the site to be sold. As the site is not wholly owned by the Ministry of Defence, any receipt would have to be shared with the Crown Estate.

The units currently occupying the Barracks are:

1st Battalion Scots Guards

Flank Coy Scots Guards

Colonel Foot Guards

RHQ's of the Grenadier, Coldstream, Scots, Irish and Welsh Guards

Staff Bands of the Grenadier, Coldstream and Scots Guards

Garrison Sgt's Mess

There are no plans to dispose of Wellington Barracks.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his latest estimate is of the value of the Ministry of Defence facilities at Suffield, Canada; what their present purpose is; what plans there are to sell them; and if he will make a statement. [95788]

Dr. Moonie: The asset value of the British Army Training Unit Suffield (BATUS) is £70 million. BATUS is currently used for Armoured and Mechanised Battle-Group training. The Ministry of Defence is a lodger unit in the Canadian Forces Base, Suffield for the period of our Memorandum of Understanding with the Canadian Government which expires 2006 and will then be re-negotiated. It is not therefore within the gift of the Ministry of Defence to sell these facilities.

Depleted Uranium

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures have been put in place to protect UK troops in the Gulf from depleted uranium dust. [95917]

Dr. Moonie: General health and safety instructions for United Kingdom troops, which cover encounters with depleted uranium (DU), are incorporated in the Mounting Instructions for the operation which have been passed to the units involved. Additional safety instructions, covering all aspects of the hazard management of DU munitions in theatre, will shortly be issued by the Permanent Joint Headquarters through the operational chain of command to all units and formations deployed in the Joint Area of Operations. Furthermore, specific instructions and training packages exist for Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), Royal Armoured Corps and support personnel most likely to come into contact with DU munitions or dust. Radiation monitoring equipment has also been provided to some EOD units.

The safety instructions make clear that the risks from DU are far lower than those from other hazards arising from military operations and that combat and life-saving activities should never be delayed on account of concern over DU. They describe the potential risks and include pragmatic advice on procedures for minimising any potential intake of DU dust. The emphasis is on avoiding situations where DU dust may be encountered and on wearing appropriate respiratory protective equipment and protective clothing when it is necessary to enter potentially contaminated areas. They also include procedures for transporting and handling DU ammunition.

Radiation dosemeters have been issued to those who will spend time in tanks loaded with DU munitions and biological monitoring will be available for all members of the armed forces if DU is used. This will provide verification of the adequacy of the safety precautions. The biological monitoring policy is published on Ministry of Defence's internet site at: http://www.mod.uk/issues/depleted_uranium/du_biomonitoring.htm.

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the budgetary provision for expenditure on MOD research into depleted uranium munitions in 2003–04 is; and what percentage of the departmental budget for 2003–04 this represents; [96979]

(2) what his Department's budgetary provision for expenditure on MOD research into depleted uranium munitions was in 2003–03; and what percentage of the departmental budget this represented. [96984]

Dr. Moonie: Budgetary provision for research relating to depleted uranium munitions in the Ministry of Defence's Short Term Plan 2002–03 is £1.68 million in 2002–03 and £2.73 million in 2003–04.

These figures represent approximately 0.007 per cent. of MOD' s budget for 2002–03 and approximately 0.012 per cent. of MOD's budget for 2003–04.

These figures are currently being reviewed in the context of MOD's Short Term Plan 2003–04.

Empty Properties (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many empty MoD properties in the Greater London area and are to be disposed of on the private market; and if he will make a statement. [95596]

Dr. Moonie: There are no Ministry of Defence properties in Greater London which are completely empty and awaiting disposal on the open market. There are however, currently two sites which are partially vacant and are either on the open market or due to be offered in 2003–04. These include part of the TA Centre, Highwood Barracks, Dulwich and the Canteen site, Elmwood Ave, Feltham.

Fire Dispute

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what effect the firefighters' strike has had on the status of *(a)* HMS Exeter, *(b)* HMS Glasgow, *(c)* HMS Newcastle, *(d)* HMS Lancaster, *(e)* HMS St. Albans and *(f)* HMS Southampton, and the timing of their planned availability for service with the fleet. [95878]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Exeter, HMS Glasgow, HMS Newcastle, HMS Lancaster and HMS Southampton have all undergone changes to their programmes to allow their crews to support Operation Fresco. Although they were alongside for varying periods, with the exception of HMS Lancaster, their individual readiness states were not affected and subject to any essential maintenance and training requirements, they could have returned to sea within that readiness profile if their crews had been released from Operation Fresco duties. I am witholding details of ships' readiness in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information which relates to Defence, Security and International Relations. HMS St. Albans was damaged by the impact of a commercial ferry in bad weather conditions while St. Albans was alongside in Portsmouth on 27 October 2002. The collision meant that St. Albans was unable to continue with her operational sea training programme and her crew were used in support of Operation Fresco nevertheless, the ship would still be available for tasking within her readiness profile.

Forces' Communication Systems

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what problems have been discovered on the compatibility of the communications systems of the armed forces and the emergency services during the interim measures being put in place in advance of the introduction of Airwave. [95178]

Mr. Ingram: Airwave is a public safety radio service being implemented by police forces across the United Kingdom with the roll out programme due to be completed by 2005. It is Ministry of Defence policy to take up the Airwave service where interoperability with the emergency services is required. To ensure continued interoperability between the UK armed forces and the emergency services, during the police force roll out programme, interim communication arrangements have been out in place. While these interim arrangements do not provide the comprehensive interoperability that will be available when all users are on the Airwave system, they are as robust and flexible as possible: a deployable incident response communications capability is retained within the UK and where possible, the introduction of Airwave to the armed forces is being matched with that of the police forces. There are currently no reported problems with the interim arrangements.

Gulf War (Veterans' Illnesses)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the expenditure was in each year since 1997 on research into Gulf War veterans' illnesses, excluding sums spent on research by his Department into depleted uranium munitions; and what percentage of the annual departmental budget this represented in each case. [96978]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is set out in the table. All figures are at outturn prices and include VAT:

Financial year	*Expenditure*[1] *(£)*	*Defence budget (£ billion)*	*Percentage of Defence budget*
1996–97	4,000	22.0	0.0000
1997–98	899,000	20.9	0.0043
1998–99	579,000	22.5	0.0025
1999–2000	1,591,000	22.5	0.0070
2000–01	2,470,000	23.5	0.0105
2001–02	1,101,000	23.9	0.0046

[1] To the nearest £1,000

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures have been taken to ensure that servicemen preparing to be deployed in the Gulf do not suffer medical complications which armed forces personnel experienced after the Gulf War. [88332]

Dr. Moonie: The health and well-being of the personnel we deploy is of the greatest importance to us. Standard vaccinations to Service personnel are administered routinely. Service personnel who are offered the anthrax vaccine are provided with information to help them make an informed decision about immunisation. Personnel also receive pre-deployment and in-theatre health briefings which include information on prevalent diseases, hazards arising from potential environmental exposures, personal hygiene, stress, and acclimatisation to living in arduous environments.

Iraq

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantity, by weight, of bombs have been dropped on Iraq by UK planes since the inception of the no-fly zone. [96542]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* No ordnance was released prior to Operation Desert Fox which took place at the end of 1998. We do not hold data for this operation.

Between 1999 and 31 December 2002 the RAF, responding in self-defence against air defence targets, released 187.2 tonnes of ordnance.

Low Frequency Active Sonar

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the potential harm to marine mammals caused by Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS); when LFAS systems are scheduled to be fitted to Royal Navy vessels; what classes of warships are to be fitted with LFAS systems; and what discussions his Department has had with representatives of other NATO navies about the effect of Low Frequency Active Sonar on marine mammals. [95894]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence has conducted an Environmental Impact Assessment of Sonar 2087, a Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS) system. It is planned to be fitted in Type 23 Frigates between 2004 and 2013. The assessment indicated that the sonar has the potential to be harmful to marine mammals and developed a range of mitigation measures to minimise the impact. The assessment was subject to review by independent academic and scientific bodies. There are at present no plans to fit LFAS in any other Royal Naval vessels.

The Ministry of Defence is in continuous dialogue with its NATO counterparts over environmental research findings and other relevant scientific developments.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the naval capabilities of Low Frequency Active Sonar. [95895]

Mr. Ingram: The Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS) being developed for the Royal Navy will have the ability to detect, classify, localise and track hostile submarines whilst they remain outside the firing range of their own weapons systems. LFAS is planned to provide a force level, anti-submarine warfare capability in support of maritime operations.

Middle East (Health Advice)

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what health promotion advice is planned for troops deployed to the Middle East. [91820]

Dr. Moonie: Service personnel deploying to the Gulf region are given pre-deployment and in-theatre briefings on health and hygiene matters based on current health risk assessments. Briefings would include information on prevalent diseases, hazards arising from potential environmental exposures, personal hygiene, stress, and acclimatisation to living in arduous environments.

National Memorial Arboretum

Michael Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what funding his Department is providing for the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas; when this will be provided; what other support the MOD is providing for the National Memorial; and if he will make a statement. [96652]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence provides no funding or any other support for the National Memorial Arboretum. This arboretum is a private initiative which is administered by the National Memorial Arboretum Company Ltd. that has its own Board of Trustee Directors.

Nuclear Retaliation

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is with regard to nuclear retaliation by the UK or its allies in the event of the use of chemical or biological weapons in an attack by Iraq on *(a)* UK territory, *(b)* the territories of other states with which the UK has mutual defence commitments and *(c)* British and other forces engaged in military action against Iraq. [95962]

Mr. Hoon: The Government do not comment on hypothetical scenarios involving the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

The Government have made clear on many occasions that the use of United Kingdom nuclear weapons would only be contemplated in extreme circumstances of self defence. We made clear in the Strategic Defence Review New Chapter that aggression against us will not secure political or military advantage, but invite a proportionately serious response. Those, at every level, responsible for any breach of international law relating to the use of weapons of mass destruction will be held personally accountable.

Questions as to the policy of other Governments on these issues should be addressed to them.

Nuclear-Powered Submarines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many nuclear-powered submarines, excluding SSBNs, he plans to keep in the submarine fleet in addition to the Astute class, once it is completed. [95877]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 53W.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* health and *(b)* security risks the hulks of paid-off SSNs and former Polaris submarines pose. [95883]

Dr. Moonie: Stringent regulations govern nuclear health and safety at the Devonport and Rosyth dockyards where decommissioned nuclear submarines have been stored safely for some twenty years. The conditions of their storage are subject to rigorous safety standards set by the Navy's own assessor, the Chairman Naval Nuclear Regulatory Panel (CNNRP).

As soon as possible after a nuclear submarine leaves operational service the reactor is defuelled, any other significant mobile radiation sources are removed and the vessel prepared for safe storage afloat. Daily inspections are carried out and regular maintenance periods ensure the vessel is maintained to a high standard of preservation and safety. Local authorities also carry out independent monitoring and evidence to date shows that external radiation levels are within permissible limits and pose no health risk to the public.

The decommissioned submarine hulks pose no security risk. A number of reviews have been completed of the security of storage sites, including a recent review at the Devonport site.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether hulks of paid-off SSNs and former Polaris submarines have been dismantled. [95885]

Dr. Moonie: None of the 11 nuclear-powered submarines that have been paid-off have been dismantled, and there are no plans to do this ahead of the work of the ISOLUS project to find a suitable way of storing radioactive material from decommissioned submarines on land.

Currently, as soon as possible after the submarine leaves naval service, the reactor is defuelled, any other significant mobile radiation sources are removed and the vessel prepared for safe storage afloat.

Operation Telic

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether protest action taken by Greenpeace hindered preparations for Operation Telic; and if he will make a statement. [96938]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 6 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 402W, to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

Pyridostigmine Bromide

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on recent research on the possible link between pyridostigmine bromide and brain cell damage. [95922]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

RAF

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Tornado, *(b)* Harrier and *(c)* Jaguar RAF aircraft have been flown in combat operations during their operational lives; and if he will make a statement. [95777]

Mr. Ingram: The information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

RAF Portreath

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what land assessments and additional studies have been undertaken by the Government or agencies on behalf of the Government with respect to *(a)* past and *(b)* current activities and the environment at RAF Portreath at Nancekuke in Cornwall in the last 30 years. [96733]

Dr. Moonie: The following environmental surveys have been undertaken at RAF Portreath in the last 30 years:

Title	*Date*
Water Sampling by National Rivers Authority	1990
Quarterly Water Sampling by Defence Scientific and Technical Laboratory (DSTL)	1999-on going
Phase 1 Land Quality Assessment by RAF Command Scientific Support Branch	1999–2000
Phase 2 Land Quality Assessment by Enviros Aspinwall Consultants	2000–01

Royal Fleet Auxiliary Tanker Fleet

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the capability of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker fleet to supply the Royal Navy. [95893]

Mr. Ingram: In July 2000 we commenced a detailed study to determine the long-term requirement for future afloat support, including the capability currently provided by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. As a direct result of this work, a number of broad future requirements were identified, and I informed the House on 17 July 2002 of the formation of the Military Afloat Reach and Sustainability (MARS) Integrated Project Team (IPT). The MARS IPT is currently in the early stages of investigating potential solutions to the delivery of Future Afloat Support. At this stage it is yet to be decided the exact mix of vessel type and numbers required to provide this capability and the method by which the capability will be acquired. We expect this programme to deliver the first elements of this future capability by the end of this decade. In the meantime, we remain receptive to innovative and cost effective proposals from industry and industrial consultation is in progress.

Service Accommodation (Germany)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the costs of upgrading armed services accommodation in Germany in each year from 1998–99 to 2009–10; and if he will make a statement. [95791]

Dr. Moonie: Expenditure on routine improvements to accommodation in the garrisons in Germany before 2002–03 forms part of their overall property management budget and this expenditure is not recorded centrally.

However, approximately £3.2 million extra was spent in Germany during 2001–02, as part of Project READER, to provide early improvements to single living accommodation.

In addition to the completion of Project READER this year, specific programmes are being developed to upgrade over 8,000 quarters owned by the German Federal Government between 2003 and 2012. Over the

next 10 years we also intend to upgrade 5,400 single living bedspaces to en-suite in line with improvements planned for the United Kingdom.

In total, we expect to spend some £3.6 million on these projects during 2002–03. The detailed programme between 2003 and 2010 has yet to be finalised. Total costs are provisionally some £360 million.

Service Personnel

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his Answer of 28 January, *Official Report*, column 852W, on service personnel, what is the *(a)* establishment and *(b)* actual number of operators and engineers for the Containers Handling Rough Terrain Fleet; and how many are (i) reservists (ii) medically downgraded, (iii) on active service and (iv) deployed on operations; and if he will make a statement. [95951]

Mr. Ingram: The right hon. Adam Ingram MP holding answer 6 February 2003 Tradesmen of all three services who use Mechanical Handling Equipment could be expected to operate and maintain the small Container Handling Rough Terrain (CHRT) fleet. There is no dedicated establishment of operators for this one equipment and it is not therefore possible to answer the specific questions posed.

Tank Procurement

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many tanks were owned by the UK armed forces in each year since 1980–81; and if he will make a statement. [95779]

Mr. Ingram: The United Kingdom armed forces owns a fleet of 386 Challenger 2 Main Battle Tanks. For previous years, the information is included in the Ministry of Defence Performance Report (1997 onwards) in the table showing Army Equipment Holdings within the scope of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. For the period 1991 to 1996 the information was published in the Statement of the Defence Estimates (SDE) for each year. Prior to 1991, this information was provided in the SDE but in a different format, based on the force structures at that time. These documents are held in the Libraries of the House.

Troops (Disclaimers)

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether British troops are being asked to sign disclaimer forms prior to receiving injections as part of preparations for possible deployment to the Gulf. [92871]

Dr. Moonie: There is no requirement for Service personnel who are offered vaccination to sign any waivers or disclaimers, whether they accept the vaccinations or not. All vaccinations are administered on a voluntary basis and as part of the individual giving their informed consent to receive the vaccination, they are advised of the consequences of their refusal, and of any possible side-effects of the vaccine. Units may, if required, maintain administrative records of which personnel have received the necessary briefings, or need to be re-offered boosters, so that the continuity of immunisation programmes can be maintained. None of these records constitutes a legal waiver or disclaimer, and none supplants the Ministry of Defence's responsibilities in respect of the health and safety of Service personnel.

Type 23 Frigates

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Type 23 frigates which *(a)* will and *(b)* will not be fitted with Sonar 2087. [95890]

Mr. Ingram: It is planned to fit Sonar 2087 in twelve of the sixteen Type 23 Frigates. The first six are likely to be HMS Westminster, Northumberland, Richmond, Somerset, Grafton and Sutherland. The other six ships have yet to be selected.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to reduce the total of Type 23 frigates. [95891]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 710W, to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr Hancock) and to the answer my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence gave on 30 April 2002 *Official Report*, column 746W, to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin).

University Fees

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the conditions under which armed forces personnel may obtain *(a)* payment of (i) university fees and (ii) other expenses and *(b)* repayment of university-related debts previously incurred in civilian life; how many (A) men and (B) women obtained such payments in the last academic year; and what the total cost of such payments was. [94483]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Vacant Ministry Buildings

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his latest estimate is of the value of the land and buildings owned by his Department and its agencies in Germany; what proportion of the buildings are vacant; what plans there are to dispose of these assets; and if he will make a statement. [95792]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence does not own any buildings or facilities in Germany. The barracks and buildings which are used are provided by the German Government under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and Supplementary Agreements.

Vaccine Schedule (Gulf Deployment)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what evidence he has assessed on whether the anthrax vaccine to be used by UK troops in the Gulf protects *(a)* against the strain of anthrax reportedly held by Iraq and *(b)* for long periods. [95925]

Dr. Moonie: We have set out our assessment of Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. Iraq admitted to UNSCOM in 1995 that it had produced anthrax as a biological weapon fill for ballistic missile warheads and

bombs. It declared that it had possessed a number of different strains of the micro-organism. There is no evidence to suggest that Iraqi Forces possess a strain or strains of anthrax that would defeat the United Kingdom anthrax vaccine or other vaccines. Independent medical advice confirms that immunisation is safe and effective against anthrax used as a biological weapon. No vaccine is 100% effective which is why we use it in concert with other defensive measures, including respirators, protective clothing and other medical countermeasures such as antibiotics.

Immunisation against anthrax requires an annual booster to maintain a sufficient level of protective immunity.

Vaccines

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel have volunteered to receive *(a)* anthrax vaccines and *(b)* other vaccines; and what percentage of those offered the injections this represents. [92144]

Dr. Moonie: According to centrally held records, as at 21 January 2003, 16,538 personnel had been offered immunisation against anthrax, of whom 8,103 had accepted, an uptake rate of 49 per cent. Information on the uptake of other vaccines is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what impact vaccines administered to Her Majesty's armed forces have been found to have on fertility; and if he will make a statement. [93470]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* We are not aware of any clinical evidence to suggest that the vaccines offered to Service personnel have any impact on fertility.

Warship Hull Design

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the value of passive defence principles in warship hull design since the attack on the USS Cole. [95879]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence has an ongoing pro-active research and development programme to address the value of all aspects of warship hull survivability, including passive defence principles, from potential external threats, including munitions, explosive devices and biological and chemical agents.

The result of this work is used to inform the operation of, and improvements to, existing warships and made available to Industry in the context of contracting for the designs of new warships.

Whitehall

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his latest estimate is of the value of Ministry of Defence buildings in Whitehall, London; what the value is of each building; and if he will make a statement. [95789]

Dr. Moonie: The information is as follows:

Building	*£ million*
Great Scotland Yard	2
Old War Office	170
Horseguards	3.207
Main Building	85 (but projected to be circa 350 on completion in April 2004)
Northumberland House	12

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Ministry of Defence staff work in buildings in Whitehall, London; and if he will make a statement. [95790]

Dr. Moonie: There are approximately 3,400 Ministry of Defence staff working in six MOD buildings in the Whitehall area. It should be remembered that of these three, Main Building is currently undergoing a major redevelopment.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment (Autism)

18. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to support people with autism who want to work. [96335]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: People with autism can access the full range of Jobcentre Plus employment programmes aimed at helping people with disabilities to find work, including Workstep and Access to Work.

The Department also has a contract with the National Autistic Society's Prospects service to develop and test ways of helping people with autism and Asperger syndrome into work.

Pensions

21. **Angela Watkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the most recent Office for National Statistics estimates of the value of private pension funds. [96338]

Mr. McCartney: The Office for National Statistics estimate that the total assets of self-administered pension funds were as shown in the table. The latest year for which data are available is 2000. Since then the total will have been affected by a number of factors, including movements in asset prices. Until later data are available we cannot assess their impact. These figures exclude personal and some occupational pension schemes. Figures for 2001 are expected to be available from ONS around spring 2003.

Market value in current prices

	£ billion
1997	656.9
1998	699.2
1999	812.2
2000	765.2

The caveats to note are as follows:

This data are provided by The Office for National Statistics (ONS series code AHVA).

The ONS statistics are based on sample surveys which are grossed to a population drawn from the National Association of Pension Funds Yearbook. The resulting figures are raised by a further uplift factor to allow for pension funds which are not members of the trade association. This factor reflects information from the Share Ownership Survey conducted by ONS and information from the Occupational Pensions Supervisory Authority. The data are subject to errors inherent in survey-based data.

The data cover self-administered pension funds only. A self-administered pension scheme is defined as an occupational pension scheme with units invested in one or more managed schemes or unit trusts. The trustees of these types of schemes can employ either an in-house fund manager to take the day-to-day investment decisions or they can opt to use an external manager to manage the investment. The data exclude personal pensions, unfunded and notionally funded schemes and fully insured schemes. An insured scheme is one where the scheme's trustees hold, as a sole asset, an insurance policy contract or an annuity contract.

Unfortunately data are not available on the value of pension fund assets which are excluded from the figures quoted in the PQ answer.

Poverty

22. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the effects of recent Government policy on benefits upon families with children at *(a)* average and *(b)* below average household income. [96339]

Malcolm Wicks: A full analysis of the income distribution is published annually in the Households Below Average Income series, and analysis of Government action to alleviate poverty is published annually in the Opportunity for all series. Both are available in the Library.

As a result of our personal tax and benefit measures, by April this year, all families with children will be on average £1,200 a year better off. Moreover, increases have been targeted so that families with children in the poorest 20 per cent. of the population will be on average £2,400 a year better off.

Occupational Pension Schemes (Compensation)

23. **Kevin Brennan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, if he will introduce legislation to create a compensation fund for pensioners affected by the wind-up of occupational pension schemes following company failure. [96340]

Mr. McCartney: A compensation scheme already exists to provide compensation for losses caused by dishonesty where the employer is insolvent. Proposals to increase the amount of compensation payable to 100 per cent. of actual loss are set out in the Pensions Green Paper "Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement" (Cm 5677).

Proposals to introduce some form of insurance, perhaps a Central Discontinuance fund, are also set out in the Pensions Green Paper. These proposals would provide all scheme members with greater protection in cases where their company winds-up with insufficient funds to meet their pension liabilities.

But before deciding what changes to implement, we will take into account responses from the consultation process.

The protection that people receive if their pension scheme is wound up is very important. That is why we are looking carefully at proposals that would: share out scheme assets more fairly, introduce a centralised "clearing house" or some form of insurance, increase the compensation payable to members in the case of fraud or dishonest; and strengthen the protection for members whose solvent employer chooses to wind-up a scheme.

The Government want to ensure that when a scheme winds up, the assets are divided among scheme members as fairly as possible. Through the Green Paper we are consulting on whether people who are approaching retirement age should be given a higher priority when scheme assets are distributed on wind-up, than at present. Or whether people who have been members of their pension scheme for a number of years should be given a higher priority.

We are also consulting on whether there should be a fairer sharing of assets between those with larger and smaller pensions when a scheme winds up. Possibly setting a cap on the level of pension that those with the highest pensions might receive, if there are limited assets available in the scheme.

We are considering moving pension schemes up the order of priority for payment. Possibly creating a new category of creditor, which would give pension schemes higher priority than at present.

We are also seeking views on other approaches to dealing with under-funded defined benefit schemes that are wound up because their sponsoring employer becomes insolvent:

A form of insurance (possibly a central discontinuance fund) that enables members to be more confident that, if their employer becomes insolvent with an under-funded pension scheme, they will receive the benefits promised.

A centralised arrangement or "clearing house" into which people whose employer became insolvent could pay the funds that they receive on wind-up. The "clearing house" would seek to buy the best available deferred annuity from an insurance company and should be able to negotiate better annuity rates.

Insurance or a centralised "clearing house" might have advantages, providing better protection for scheme members where a company becomes insolvent and is forced to close its under-funded scheme. However, the costs would need to be balanced against the greater overall level of security offered.

A compensation scheme already exists to provide compensation for losses caused by dishonesty where the employer is insolvent. Proposals to increase the amount of compensation payable to 100 per cent. of the actual loss are set out in the Green Paper.

When solvent employers start winding up their under-funded defined benefit pension schemes, this also leaves many scheme members in financial difficulty. So, we are also seeking views on changes to the debt on the employer provisions that might result in more funds being put into a scheme when a solvent employers chooses to wind it up.

Benefit Payments (Post Offices)

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the number of benefit recipients that are being paid in cash at post offices. [93378]

Malcolm Wicks: Approximately 58 per cent. of claimants currently receive their benefit and pensions in cash at the post office and 42 per cent. are paid direct into a bank or building society account at the time of making the claim.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many benefit claims are collected each week in cash at post offices; and how many are collected *(a)* by the recipient and *(b)* by an agent. [92318]

Malcolm Wicks: The number of order book foils and girocheques cashed each week at post offices is approximately 12 million.

Some customers who are paid direct into an account can also collect their benefit in cash at post offices through network banking arrangements at the post office. However, there is no data available on the number of benefit claims collected in this way.

The information on the number of agents who collect benefit at post offices is only fully available for recipients of income support, jobseekers allowance and minimum income guarantee and this is provided in the table:

Income support, jobseekers allowance and minimum income guarantee records not paid direct into bank or building society accounts as at 28 December 2002

Benefit	*Claimant accounts with an agent recorded*	*Claimant accounts without an agent recorded*
Income Support	44,250	1,719,646
Jobseekers Allowance	1,581	548,221
Minimum Income Guarantee[1]	83,568	1,293,659
Total	129,399	3,561,526

[1] Full figures are not available due to present transfers to Pension Centres.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his answer of 21 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 260W, on benefit payments, how many of the customers who opted for payment into a bank or building society account selected accounts that are accessible via post offices. [94032]

Malcolm Wicks: The information is not available in the form requested. The information we collect within the Department does not differentiate between basic bank accounts and current bank accounts therefore we cannot distinguish which account is available at the post office. However there are now network banking arrangements in place that allow more people than ever before to access their money at post offices.

Direct Credit Scheme (Pensions)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions under what circumstances someone will be judged to be unable to manage an account under the new direct credit scheme for state pension payments; how long the assessment process will take to judge someone unable to manage an account under the direct credit scheme; what measures are in place to ensure the continuation of payments while an assessment of a person's ability to manage an account is carried out; and whether a recipient of the state pension will be subject to reassessment on the matter of ability to manage an account. [90650]

Malcolm Wicks *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* Customers will be provided with information on the account options available as part of the move to direct payment. Customers will be able to consider these options and choose the account that best suits their needs and circumstances.

At present 85 per cent. of our customers (including 90 per cent. of pensioners) already have access to a suitable account for direct payment. We recognise that for some people a full bank account may not be suitable. If a customer feels unable to cope with one of these accounts a basic bank account or a post office card account may be a better option as they are very straightforward to operate.

A basic bank account will not normally have cheque book or overdraft facilities and a post office card account will only accept benefit, pension or tax credit payment into it and it has no other facilities such as overdrafts. Therefore there is no reason why the overwhelming majority should not be able to open an account that they can operate.

The Department understands that clearly there will be some customers, who, for a variety of reasons, cannot or will not open a current or basic bank account, and who cannot open a post office card account. To make these payments we are developing an exceptions service, which will be available at outlets including the Post Office.

Disability

Mr. Dhanda: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what plans he has to extend *(a)* women's and *(b)* disabled rights to membership of private clubs. [96341]

Maria Eagle: On 22 January, my right hon. Friend announced that the draft Disability Bill that we intend to publish later this year would contain provisions to bring membership of larger private clubs within the Disability Discrimination Act and that we would consult widely on how and when the practical changes involved would take effect. The position of women in relation to membership of private clubs is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women.

Hepatitis C (Compensation)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive on the exemption of the proposed compensation payments for hepatitis C sufferers in Scotland from rules on benefits clawback. [96336]

Malcolm Wicks: We are aware of the Scottish Executive's proposals to compensate people who have contracted hepatitis C from contaminated blood products.

Discussions about these proposals and their impact on the payment of social security benefits are ongoing. No conclusions have yet been reached.

Housing Benefit

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what proportion of housing benefit recipients in private accommodation in each English region are in local authority arranged temporary accommodation. [91689]

Malcolm Wicks: The available information for 2000–01 is in the table.

		Local authority tenant boarders		*Private tenant boarders*	
Government office region	*Housing benefit recipients*	*By number*	*As proportion of caseload[1] (%)*	*By number*	*As proportion of caseload[2] (%)*
England	3,268,000	11,000	0.34	38,000	1.16
North East	250,000	[3]	[3]	2,000	0.8
North West	534,000	1,000	0.19	6,000	1.12
Yorkshire and the Humber	356,000	2,000	0.56	4,000	1.12
East Midlands	241,000	[3]	[3]	2,000	0.83
West Midlands	360,000	[3]	[3]	4,000	1.11
East	275,000	[3]	[3]	3,000	1.09
London	601,000	6,000	1.0	8,000	1.33
South East	380,000	1,000	0.26	5,000	1.32
South West	272,000	[3]	[3]	5,000	1.84

[1] Local Authority tenant boarders are defined as people who have been placed in temporary accommodation by the authority and a charge for that accommodation is paid to the authority.
[2] Private tenant boarders are defined as people who pay a private landlord for temporary bed and breakfast or hostel accommodation.
[3] Signifies the data is negligible.
Notes:
1. The data refer to households claiming housing benefit, which may be a single person, a couple or a family. More than one benefit household can live in one property, for example two or more adults in a flat or house share arrangement.
2. Data for any non-responding authorities will have been estimated.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.
4. Data are not collected separately on the number of people staying in private local authority arranged temporary accommodation that is not a board and lodge establishment.
5. Figures exclude housing benefit extended payment cases
Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System Quarterly 100 per cent caseload stock-count, averaged over May, August, November 2000 and February 2001

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of reducing the eligible rent of all housing benefit claimants by £10 per week and introducing a £10 per week housing credit for all recipients of the working tax credit who are either renters or homebuyers with a mortgage. [91548]

Malcolm Wicks: The estimate requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

NI Contributions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the ages of the women who *(a)* revoked and *(b)* did not revoke their reduced rate National Insurance contribution elections during 1978–79. [90625]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The ages of the women who *(a)* revoked and *(b)* did not revoke their reduced rate National Insurance contribution elections would be available only for the year requested at disproportionate cost. Available estimates based on a 3 per cent. sample of the National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2) are in the table. However, the reduction in the numbers paying at the reduced rate will be due only in part to those actively revoking their election.

Thousand

Age during 1978–79 tax year	*Revoked election*	*Continuing election*
16 to 20	0.2	0.8
21 to 30	27	386
31 to 40	72	1,242
41 to 50	61	1,468
51 to 60	42	817
>60	6	316
Total	208	4,230

In 1978–79 married women paying at the reduced rate made up some 45 per cent. of the total number of women paying National Insurance contributions. Latest published figures for 2000–01 indicate that this has fallen to around 1 per cent. It is estimated that the current number of married women paying at the reduced rate is around 80,000.

Pension Age Addition

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what plans he has to increase the pension age addition for those over 80. [96337]

Mr. McCartney: The 25 pence age addition was introduced by the Conservative Government in 1971. We have gone much further. We have introduced measures which from October 2003 will mean that the poorest third of pensioner households will have gained over £1,500 a year in real terms.

We have introduced free TV licenses from age 75 worth over £100 a year, winter fuel payments of £200 per year for eligible households paid to some 11 million people in 8 million households and the minimum income guarantee which means that no single pensioner has to live on less than £102.10 and no couple on less than £155.80 from April.

In Scotland, nearly 1 million people got winter fuel payments last winter and some 185,400 are in receipt of minimum income guarantee. In the Edinburgh West constituency, some 17,500 people received winter fuel payments last winter and around 1,400 are in receipt of the minimum income guarantee.

We are going further still with the introduction of pension credit from October 2003.

We have therefore found a better way to help pensioners with the lowest incomes.

The age addition will be maintained, but on its own it is not the most cost-effective way to help elderly pensioners.

Pensioners (Lancashire)

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions What recent steps he has taken to improve the financial position of pensioners in Lancashire. [96334]

Mr. McCartney: Over 35,000 people in Lancashire benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee—a policy we introduced—and receive an average £47 a week. 216,000 pensioners have benefited from the above inflation increases in the State Pension. Additionally 233,000 people received a Winter Fuel Payment of up to £200. Those Lancashire pensioners eligible for Pension Credit stand to gain around £400 a year on average.

The creation of The Pension Service provides an ideal opportunity to further encourage pensioners to take up their entitlements. The newly opened Burnley pension centre currently employs around 387[1] staff, and will have responsibility ultimately for around 500,000 customers. It has an active local service providing direct support to customers through appointment based and drop in advice surgeries and places a great deal of importance in outreach activity in order to maximise take up. There are currently 106 staff carrying out local service activities in Lancashire and Cumbria, including a number of surgeries in the South Ribble area including weekly surgeries at Leyland council offices.

[1] Expressed as full-time equivalent unit

Post Office Card Accounts

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps his Department is taking to encourage the use of a post office card account; and if there will be a limit on the number of such accounts. [92001]

Malcolm Wicks: The Department's information campaign, which is central to the move to direct payment, provides customers with full information on all banking options available. This includes information on the post office card account and advises customers to contact the Department should they want to open one.

There will be no limit on the number of post office card accounts however as we have made clear on a number of occasions this type of account will not be the best option for many people as it only has very limited features—for example, it will not be able to receive payments of wages, it has no direct debit facility, and can only be used when post office branches are open.

It is important to remember that the post office card account is only one of three options that will be available to customers (standard bank/building society account, basic bank/building society account or post office card account). Customers will be supplied with the information they need to choose the account option which best meets their needs and circumstances.

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether he intends to limit the number of post office card accounts issued to benefits customers. [91133]

Malcolm Wicks: No.

As we have made clear on a number of occasions the post office card account will not be the best option for many people as it only has very limited features—for example, it will not be able to receive payments of wages, it has no direct debit facility, and can only be used when post office branches are open.

It is important to remember that the post office card account is only one of three options that will be available to customers (standard bank/building society account, basic bank/building society account or post office card account). Customers will be supplied with the information they need to choose the account option which best meets their needs and circumstances.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of people in Afghanistan she estimates had access to clean water in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 2000 and *(d)* now. [96472]

Clare Short: Historical data on Afghanistan is very limited. Statistics on access to drinking water have not been collected consistently within Afghanistan. In September 2001, the WHO and UNICEF produced a Joint Monitoring Report which provided the following

figures on the percentage of the population with access to improved drinking water sources for the period 1980 to 2000:

	Percentage
1980	13
1985	21
1988	21
1990	23
1991	79
1994	13
1997	13
1999	28
2000	13

However, these estimates rely on ad-hoc surveys conducted by donors and may not represent the full picture as the surveys were not always conducted throughout the whole country and the different surveys relied on different methodologies. It is likely that sudden changes in the coverage (eg. 1990–91) are mainly explained by changing methodologies.

The most recent UNICEF estimate for the percentage of the population with access to safe water remains 13 per cent.

African Union

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the outcomes of the most recent meeting of the African Union in Ethiopia. [96154]

Clare Short: The 3 February African Union Extraordinary Summit was held in Addis Ababa and attended by about 35 African Heads of State and government. In their opening addresses, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa (Chairperson of the African Union) and Amara Essy (Interim Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union) both urged that an African Union Peace and Security Council should be established to lead Africa's work on conflict prevention and resolution. The UK supports the establishment of this body. A communiqué on conflict resolution was released following the meetings supporting efforts to resolve conflicts throughout Africa and urging that the Iraq crisis continue to be addressed through the UN. We understand that a number of amendments to the AU's Constitutive Act and a range of other issues, such as the roles and involvement of women and the African diaspora in the continent's development, were also discussed.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether representatives of her Department attended the most recent meeting of the African Union in Ethiopia. [96155]

Clare Short: No DFID representatives attended the 3 February meeting of African Union Heads of State in Ethiopia. This extraordinary Summit was internal to the African Union.

African Union

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial support her Department is providing to the African Union. [96153]

Clare Short: DFID's has an existing agreement with the Conflict Management Centre of the African Union to provide capacity building support. Under the agreement, we are providing financial support equivalent to £677,933 over a period of 27 months from June 2001 to August 2003. We are in discussion with the African Union about provision of further support after the current agreement expires. Our work with the Conflict Management Centre is funded from the Africa Conflict Prevention Pool as part of the UK's cross-departmental work on conflict resolution in Africa.

Botswana

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what importance her Department accords the rights of indigenous peoples in Botswana in developing her Department's aid programmes for Botswana. [96161]

Clare Short: DFID's Southern Africa Strategy, published in October 2002, notes the challenge faced by San communities in Botswana in overcoming social, political and economic exclusion and the importance of this issue being addressed in the government of Botswana's National Development Programme. DFID's support for rural development in Botswana aims to assist San communities as well as other poor people.

International Aid Assistance

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her estimate is of UK spending on international aid assistance as a percentage of gross national product, in each year from 1980–81 to 2004–05 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [95831]

Clare Short: The record of UK spending on development assistance as a percentage of gross national income since 1980 is as follows:

Year	Percentage
1980	0.35
1981	0.43
1982	0.37
1983	0.35
1984	0.33
1985	0.33
1986	0.31
1987	0.28
1988	0.32
1989	0.31
1990	0.27
1991	0.32
1992	0.30
1993	0.31
1994	0.31
1995	0.29
1996	0.27
1997	0.26
1998	0.27
1999	0.24
2000	0.32
2001	0.32
2002	0.32
2003	0.33
2004	0.35

Her Majesty's Government committed in the 2002 spending review to reach 0.40 per cent. of GNI by 2005–06. We are also committed to reaching the UN target of 0.7 per cent. of GNI for oda, but no timetable has been set for achieving this. Levels of oda after 2005 will depend on the outcome of future spending reviews.

Iraq

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures are being taken to make the oil for food programme in Iraq more effective. [95166]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

We continue to do all we can to make the Oil For Food (OFF) programme more effective in order to improve the humanitarian situation for the Iraqi people. The Goods Review List (GRL), a UK initiative implemented in July 2002, has significantly improved the flow of civilian goods to Iraq. Only military-related goods are now subject to review by the UN Sanctions Committee. But the Iraqi regime regularly attempts to hamper the programme. It has, for example, failed to spend over $3.8 billion of humanitarian funds lying unallocated in the UN account, and has delayed delivery of up to $2.3 billion worth of goods already approved by the UN.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether she will make it her policy to fund contingency preparations by humanitarian agencies in the event of war with Iraq. [96131]

Clare Short: My Department's regular funding to the UN and other humanitarian agencies includes provision for emergency preparedness for a variety of contingencies across the world. Following recent discussions with UN OCHA and other donors, I am supplementing this funding with an additional £3.5 million contribution to support UN humanitarian contingency planning for Iraq. This money will be allocated to a range of UN agencies likely to include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and UNSECOORD. UN agencies are planning for a variety of contingencies. We are keeping this situation under regular review and maintain close contact with UN agencies and other donors.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many third country nationals she estimates will leave Iraq in the event of military conflict, broken down by country of origin. [96163]

Clare Short: Refugee agencies have made a range of estimates, based on different scenarios, for the number of third country nationals who could be affected in the event of conflict in Iraq. If there is a conflict, we will work with others to minimise massive movements of people and provide support through the UN for those in need.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what level of funding the UNHCR has provided for support to Iraqi refugees in Iran in each of the last 12 years; and what the United Kingdom contribution has been in each year. [96168]

Clare Short: UNHCR fund specific refugee groups or specific regions when donors earmark their funding accordingly. If no earmarked funding is available for specific programmes, UNHCR use funds earmarked for that region, or, if no regional funds have been earmarked, from completely unearmarked funds.

UNHCR's earmarked funding for Iraqis in Iran since 1990 is as follows:

	US$
1990	787,402
1991	58,810,332
1992	2,000,000

There has been no earmarked funding for Iraqis in Iran since 1992.

UNHCR's earmarked funding for south-west Asia, which may have partly been used to fund Iraqis in Iran, is as follows:

	US$
1992	2,240,000
1993	0
1994	0
1995	0
1996	284,174
1997	2,421,348
1998	1,000,000
1999	900,000
2000	290,103
2001	3,623,942
2002	856,193

None of the above funds were provided by the UK.

DFID is not currently providing funding to UNHCR for the Iraqi refugees in Iran. DFID's funding has been channelled through the AMAR International Charitable Foundation, a London based NGO.

DFID has provided £2.25 million in funding to AMAR over the last three years in support of their health care and water and sanitation interventions to the 95,000 Marsh Arabs and refugees. Further support for the future is under consideration. Support has focused on the provision of medical care and the improvement of sanitary conditions.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of *(a)* shelter and *(b)* food for Iraqi citizens fleeing to (i) Turkey, (ii) Saudi Arabia, (iii) Kuwait, (iv) Jordan and (v) Syria in next three months. [96167]

Clare Short: Responsibility for such assessments rests with UNHCR and WFP, who are engaging in planning for a range of contingencies. My Department is in regular contact with these and other UN agencies, and I am confident their planning is as good as it can be given the uncertainties and difficulties involved.

Ivory Coast

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the political situation in the Ivory Coast, with particular reference to the recent peace deal. [96149]

Clare Short: Her Majesty's Government welcomes the agreement signed by the Ivorian political forces in Linas-Marcoussis on 24 January 2003and approved by the subsequent Conference of Heads of State, which we consider provides a basis for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. However the situation in Cote d'Ivoire remains unstable and it is vital that the different sides take the necessary steps to implement the agreement without delay, to avoid further deterioration. We are continuing to monitor the humanitarian impacts of the situation closely.

Jammu and Kashmir (Funding)

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had with *(a)* the administration in Jammu and Kashmir and *(b)* the Government of India regarding funding by her Department for projects in Jammu and Kashmir. [95983]

Clare Short: When I visited India in December last year I discussed the development needs of the state of Jammu and Kashmir with the Minister of External Affairs, Mr. Yashwant Sinha, and the Minister of Finance, Mr. Jaswant Singh. My officials have since written and spoken to officials from the Ministry of Finance, emphasising my Department's willingness to support the social and economic development of the state. The most recent of these meetings took place on 7 February, when it was agreed that they should meet with members of a special task force that has been set up by the Government of India to co-ordinate international assistance to the state.

In December last year officials from my Department met with the Finance and the Planning Secretaries of the state. In January the Head of DFID's India Office accompanied the British high commissioner on a visit to Jammu and Kashmir and met with senior politicians and officials. DFID officials have subsequently met with the Resident Commissioner for Jammu and Kashmir in New Delhi.

Kalahari

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has made to the Government of Botswana regarding their policy of relocating San Bushmen of the Kalahari. [96158]

Clare Short: The British High Commissioner to Botswana most recently discussed the relocation of San communities with the Government of Botswana in December 2002. This was the most recent in a series of discussions in which we have consistently expressed concerns over this issue.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what conditions were imposed on Botswana with regard to the receipt of aid from the EU for the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR); and what assessment her Department has made of these conditions. [96159]

Clare Short: Conditions for release of EC resources are agreed between the EC and recipient governments for individual projects and programmes, and normally relate to project implementation issues. The EC/ Botswana Wildlife Conservation and Management Programme has two objectives: (i) conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in four protected areas and adjacent wildlife management areas, and (ii) to enable local communities to develop sustainable use of wildlife and natural resources within these areas. The programme contains one element which foresees possible activities in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR). The Programme began only recently and the EC advise that so far all conditions have been met.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid the EU has provided to support the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in each of the last five years. [96160]

Clare Short: In the past five years the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) has been the object of two EU environmental programmes: (i) the Wildlife Conservation and Utilisation in central and southern Botswana, started in 1995. It aims to achieve a sustainable pattern of natural resources utilisation in four protected areas in central/southern Botswana, including the CKGR, through support to management, infrastructure, equipment, training and community projects. The EU contribution is €6.500.000; (ii) the Wildlife Conservation and Management Programme began in September 2002. Its aims are summarised in my reply to question 4847. The EU contribution is €14.000.000. It is not possible to break these two figures down to an annual expenditure purely on the CKGR.

Central Kalahari Game Reserve (Bushman Relocation)

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many bushmen of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve her Department estimates to have been forcibly relocated by the Botswana Government in each of the last six years. [96157]

Clare Short: My Department does not hold such. In his State of the Nation address in October 2001 the President of Botswana said that 2,169 people had relocated in recent years leaving 559 still inside. It is not clear what proportion of the first figure moved voluntarily to new settlements. We estimate that there are now less than 100 people inside the reserve. The Government of Botswana say no force was used in the relocation.

Mozambique

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support she provides for the development of public service broadcasting in Mozambique. [96365]

Clare Short: DFID does not provide direct support for the overall development of public service broadcasting in Mozambique.

However, DFID for the past two years has supported an educational radio programme through public radio (Radio Mozambique) in Zambezia Province, modelled after the early Archers programmes in the UK. This consists of a soap opera and magazine programmes in

local languages which raise issues such as HIV/AIDS, children's health, land conflicts and new agricultural techniques, while providing advice and discussion.

A recent independent survey estimated that about half the population of the province (1.6 million people) listen regularly, and are able to identify the characters and many of the educational messages. In these isolated and poor country areas with few other external sources of information, the programme is playing a vital role.

Since 2002 a Media Support Partnership MSP has been funded through the National Aids Council, which itself is supported by DFID, to support community radio networks in rural areas of mainly southern Mozambique.

Sierra Leone

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate has been made of the numbers of *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect beneficiaries of the Community Integration Programme in Sierra Leone; what estimate has been made of the cost per beneficiary; what assessment has been made of the value added by the programme; how many individual projects there are in the programme; what further plans there are for the programme; and if she will make a statement [95935]

Clare Short: The Community Reintegration Programme (CRP) is helping to re-establish inclusive social, economic and cultural networks at community level in northern Sierra Leone. This is leading to the reintegration of former ex-combatants and other war-affected people into viable and stable communities

The CRP began in March 2001 and initially covered three Chiefdoms within Port Loko District. It has since been extended to 42 northern Chiefdoms within the Districts of Bombali, Tonkolili, Kambia and Port Loko. Management of the CRP is contracted out to Agrisystems Limited, a consultancy specialising in post-conflict management.

The work involves understanding community needs, fostering reintegration and reconciliation, reviving agricultural production, supporting small-scale enterprise development, rehabilitating physical infrastructure and improving water, sanitation and health.

The CRP has worked directly to identify and cater for the priority needs of approximately 100,000 people in more than 200 communities. Indirectly, between 700,000 and 800,000 people are benefiting within the targeted Chiefdoms. Additionally, the CRP is also assisting the work of National Commission for Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR) by providing vocational training programmes and toolkits for over 5,000 ex-combatants and unemployed youths.

The 279 projects so far supported under the CRP have:

through women's groups and agricultural associations, provided seeds and tools to more than 12,000 rural families;

returned more than 7,000 acres (3,000 ha) of agricultural land to sustainable production;

supported more than 160 small businesses and associations through business skills training and the provision of grants for revolving credit;

constructed and rehabilitated five key road arteries including repairs to bridges, culverts and ferries;

rehabilitated 15 schools;

built and rehabilitated civic structures, including 14 police stations, court barries, markets and a customs building;

supplied 20,000 families with clean, potable water;

conducted 80 community based health education and HIV/AIDS campaigns.

In addition to these works, the value-added component is significant. The Programme has helped to;

build capacity of implementing partners and local government, that will leave behind a core of national expertise able to design, implement and monitor community-based programmes;

promote reconciliation and unification through the funding and management of sporting and cultural events;

address environmental and production concerns through the establishment of community forest nurseries and community fisheries to offset the over-exploitation of scarce natural resources;

A total of £12.9 million has been committed to the programme. It is scheduled to finish in September 2003.

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the number of beneficiaries of the project on the repair of the Mabanta ferry, Port Luko district in Sierra Leone; and what the cost of this project was. [95936]

Clare Short: The Mabanta Ferry is one of five river ferries being rehabilitated through the DFID Community Reintegration Programme in northern Sierra Leone. They are helping to re-establish the transport network and link remote communities to the main market centres.

The Mabanta ferry benefits an estimated 150,000 people in four remote chiefdoms. The work cost £18,000, and was completed in January 2003.

The key benefits of the project have been:

To open up the once isolated and abandoned Sanda Magbolonton Chiefdom;

Increase opportunities for commerce and access to markets for agricultural produce;

Encourage the re-entry of service providers engaged in poverty reduction activities;

Increase inter-chiefdom and inter-tribal reunification and reconciliation;

Improve the standard of education of children, in Sanda Magbolonton Chiefdom in particular, by facilitating the return of qualified teachers who left because of the absence of the ferry;

Improve access to health services.

Staff Numbers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development for what reasons staff numbers in her Department have changed between 1997–98 and 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [95833]

Clare Short: The increase in DFID's staff numbers reflects the growth in the size of the aid programme and the remit of the Department. Since 1997 we have devoted more resources to the analysis of development issues and to influencing partner governments and organisations.

As a proportion of DFID's total development budget staff costs, as reflected by the paybill, fell from 1.5 per cent. in 1997–98 to 1.3 per cent. in 2001–02.

World Food Programme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the estimated amount of food aid required by the World Food Programme is; and how much has been distributed to *(a)* Zambia, *(b)* Zimbabwe, *(c)* Malawi, *(d)* Mozambique, *(e)* Lesotho, *(f)* Swaziland and *(g)* Angola. [96129]

Clare Short: The World Food Programme estimated their food aid requirement for the southern Africa region (excluding Angola) to be approximately 990,000 MT for the period 1 July 2002 through 30 June 2003. Approximately 830,000 MT of food aid have secured, leaving a shortfall of 160,000 MT.

The WFP distribution for the southern Africa region for July through December 2002 was 271,053 MT.

(a) Zambia: 31,506 MT
(b) Zimbabwe: 96,26[illegible] MT
(c) Malawi: 105,898 MT
(d) Mozambique: 14,301 MT
(e) Lesotho: 13,307 MT
(f) Swaziland: 9,778 MT

We are awaiting figures for January 2003 which should be made available later this month. Additional food was provided by other agencies and by governments in the region.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Permits

Mr. Brazier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were granted work permits in each of the past seven years. [95246]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2003]*: The number of work permits issued in each of the last seven years is as follows:

Year	*Number issued*
1996	38,256
1997	44,958
1998	53,962
1999	60,743
2000	88,651
2001	120,823
2002	136,152

Mr. Brazier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many work permits were granted in the last year for which figures are available, broken down by *(a)* country of origin, *(b)* whether the permit was open or specific to one type of employment and *(c)* category of employment; and what proportion were granted (i) in-country and (ii) in the UK. [95247]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2003]*: A work permit is issued in respect of a specific post with a specific employer. The existing work permit arrangements are demand-led and are not targeted upon particular nationalities.

The figures for the top 20 nationalities for which work permits have been approved while the overseas worker was in this country in the calendar year 1 January 2002—31 December 2002 are given in the table:

Country of origin	*Country work permits approved*
India	13,434
South Africa	7,192
Philippines	6,465
Australia	4,308
USA	4,027
Zimbabwe	3,254
China	2,346
Nigeria	2,231
New Zealand	2,129
Pakistan	1,850
Malaysia	1,518
Japan	1,491
Canada	1,182
Ghana	932
Kenya	737
Jamaica	721
Russia	635
Mauritius	578
Trinidad and Tobago	539
Sir Lanka	449
Total	65,394

The figures for the top 20 nationalities for which work permits have been approved before the overseas worker travelled to the United Kingdom in the calendar year 1 January 2002—31 December 2002 are given in the table:

Country of origin	*Out-country work permits approved*
USA	18,993
India	18,395
South Africa	6,528
Philippines	6,313
Australia	4,181
Japan	2,613
Canada	2,599
China	2,244
Pakistan	2,156
Malaysia	1,807
Poland	1,689
New Zealand	1,357
Russia	1,346
Bulgaria	953
Ghana	801
Jamaica	792
Nigeria	785
Zimbabwe	770
Bangladesh	751
Hungary	675
Total	89,050

The figures for the top 20 occupations for which work permits have been approved in the calendar year 1 January 2002—31 December 2002 are given in the table.

Occupational category	*Work permits approved*
Nurse	28,642
Other Managerial Related Occupation	12,760
Teacher (School/College	8,353
Other Health/medical Occupation	7,004
Other IT Related Occupation	69,935
Software Engineer	6,768
Chef	5,724
Other Engineering Occupation	5,140
Researcher	4,140
Analyst Programmer	4,009
Other Financial Occupation	3,807
System Analyst	3,760
Doctor	2,439
Other Hotel and Catering occupation	2,243
Accountant	1,944
Marketing/Sales Manager	1,245
Other Educational/Cultural Occupation	1,114
Fashion (Model)	1,077
Business Analyst	1,052
Project Manager	909
Total	108,975

Advisory Panel on Country Information

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will establish the Advisory Panel on Country Information under section 142 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. [95952]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* We expect to establish the Advisory Panel on Country Information in the coming months.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements and funding are or will be in place to assist the Advisory Panel on Country Information to carry out its functions under section 142(3) of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. [95953]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* A secretariat will be established to provide support to the Advisory Panel on Country Information.

The cost of any fees, allowances or expenses will be met from within existing funds available to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate.

Asylum Seekers

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what constitutes an exceptional case for the purposes of the Home Office's discretion to grant permission to work for asylum seekers. [96544]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* Each case is considered on its individual merits. Permission to work would be granted if no decision had been made on the application for asylum and where the asylum seeker was able to demonstrate that there were compelling exceptional or compassionate circumstances which justified granting permission to work.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the asylum application made by Mr. Samir Ameur on 16 March 1999 will be determined. [94444]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* I wrote to the hon. Member on 17 January 2003, and again on 6 February 2003.

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people residing in Boston and Skegness *(a)* have had their initial application for asylum rejected and have submitted an appeal, *(b)* have applied for asylum and *(c)* have had an asylum appeal rejected. [95705]

Beverley Hughes: Asylum applications data are not available at regional level except by port (for those applications made at port—these accounted for 36 per cent. of applications in 2001). Corresponding information on initial decision outcomes, appeal cases and dismissed appeal cases, relating to persons in particular areas of the United Kingdom is also unavailable. The requested information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that asylum seekers and recognised refugees who are eligible to vote are on the electoral register. [96238]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The Representation of the People Act 1983 clearly stipulates who can and cannot vote in the United Kingdom. Asylum seekers are not eligible to vote and neither are refugees unless they become citizens of the United Kingdom. A visa allowing foreign nationals to stay in the United Kingdom indefinitely is not the same as citizenship and therefore, does not entitle a person the right to vote.

Programmes for people seeking naturalisation will include information on the electoral process in the United Kingdom

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to use Beachley Barracks, Sedbury, Chepstow, in Gloucestershire as a dispersal centre for asylum seekers. [96233]

Beverley Hughes: This property has not been considered to date by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) for emergency accommodation, dispersal accommodation or as an induction centre for the housing of asylum seekers. Site searching for suitable sites for an accommodation centre has continued as previously announced. We will not be putting into the public domain details of any sites unless and until they are considered to be a serious prospect for the siting of an accommodation centre.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the total level of asylum support *(a)* fraud and *(b)* overpayment in each year since the establishment of NASS. [95130]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The Home Office does not currently have an estimate of the level of asylum support fraud or the overpayment that could be related to this. However, we have established a dedicated team to investigate potential fraud in the asylum support system. We have also set up a team to conduct an audit of those cases supported by local authorities to assist the local authorities in identifying potential fraud in those cases. As part of the National Asylum Support Service regionalisation programme the structure and responsibilities of the

investigations teams are being re-assessed with a view to strengthening the teams and improving working practice.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003 (refs 91210, 91211 and 91212), what the total level of fraud was in the 1,286 cases where NASS support was terminated; and if he will make a statement. [95220]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) does not keep a central record of the level of fraud in individual cases.

Correspondence

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will respond substantively to the letter sent to him by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell on behalf of Mr. T. Dethridge of Epsom, dated 20 November 2001. [96491]

Hilary Benn: A reply to the letter was sent on 31 January 2003. I apologise to the hon Member for the delay in replying.

GPs

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many general practitioners have been accepted for entry to Britain under *(a)* the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme and *(b)* through work permits in the past year. [95470]

Beverley Hughes: The number of general practitioners approved during the period 5 February 2002 to 4 February 2003 are as follows:

	Number
Work Permits	53
Highly Skilled Migrant Programme	9

Highly Skilled Migrants Programme

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications have been *(a)* made and *(b)* accepted for the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme, broken down by (i) nationality and (ii) occupation. [95469]

Beverley Hughes: Since the launch of the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme on 28 January 2002, 2,809 applications have been received up to 5 February 2003. 1,414 of the applications have been approved. The nationality information requested is set out in the table. At present it is not possible to supply the occupational information requested due to the limitations of the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme database. However, the database is being re-written to ensure that information of the type requested is extracted and published during the next financial year.

Country	*Total applications received*	*Total applications approved*
Albania	4	1
Algeria	3	1
Argentina	25	18
Armenia	1	1
Australia	151	98
Azerbaijan	2	1
Bahrain	1	—
Bangladesh	34	17
Barbados	6	2
Belarus	5	2
Bolivia	1	—
Botswana	1	—
Brazil	16	8
BNO	20	9
Bulgaria	12	6
Burkino Faso	1	—
Cameroon	6	1
Canada	79	59
Chile	5	4
China	60	37
Colombia	43	8
Congo	1	—
Costa Rica	1	1
Cuba	2	—
Cyprus	3	2
Czech Republic	1	1
Dominican Republic	2	1
Ecuador	2	1
Egypt	29	13
Estonia	2	2
Ethiopia	1	—
Gambia	5	1
Georgia	3	2
Ghana	37	5
Grenada	1	1
Guatemala	1	—
Guyana	3	2
Hong Kong	5	4
Hong Kong—British	1	1
Hong Kong—Chinese	3	3
Hungary	5	5
India	440	231
Indonesia	4	2
Iran	49	19
Iraq	24	8
Israel	17	10
Jamaica	29	11
Japan	11	9
Jordan	11	3
Kazakhstan	4	4
Kenya	63	17
Kyrgystan	2	—
Latvia	1	—
Lebanon	5	4
Liberia	1	—
Libya	4	2
Lithuania	15	10
Malawi	7	—
Malaysia	26	16
Malta	5	3
Mauritius	5	1
Mexico	13	5
Moldova	2	2
Mongolia	2	2
Morocco	5	3
Myanmar	5	2
Namibia	2	1
Nepal	7	3
New Zealand	35	10
Nigeria	300	34
Pakistan	199	61
Palestine	2	—
Panama	1	1
Peru	4	3
Philippines	12	5
Poland	10	7

Country	Total applications received	Total applications approved
Rep of Korea	1	1
Romania	17	9
Russia	52	39
Rwanda	1	1
Senegal	2	—
Sierra Leone	6	3
Singapore	26	15
Slovakia	3	2
Slovenia	2	2
South Africa	122	87
South Korea	6	4
Sri Lanka	33	10
St Kitts	1	1
St Lucia	1	1
Sudan	19	6
Switzerland	2	1
Syria	5	—
Taiwan	4	2
Tanzania	12	5
Thailand	3	2
Tunisia	1	—
Turkey	28	12
Turkmenistan	1	1
Uganda	9	1
Ukraine	23	13
USA	374	336
Uzbekistan	1	—
Venezuela	14	7
Vietnam	1	1
Yugoslavia	5	3
Zambia	26	9
Zimbabwe	102	33
Total	2,809	1,414

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Oliver Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners since January 1999 have been released on the home detention curfew scheme; how many of those released had been sentenced for *(a)* homicide and attempted homicide, *(b)* other violence against the person, *(c)* drug offences, *(d)* assaults and *(e)* other offences; what the average sentence (i) received and (ii) served was; what the average period spent on the scheme was in respect of each offence; how many prisoners in each of the above categories have (A) breached the conditions of the curfew, (B) disappeared and been recaptured, (C) disappeared and remain unlawfully at large and (D) had their licences revoked with reasons; what the offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme were while on the scheme, including offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence; what the offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme who committed a further offence while on the scheme that was similar in character to that for which they were originally convicted were, including offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence; and if he will make a statement. [96227]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* It has not been possible to collate the information in the time available and I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my reply in the Library.

Infanticidal Mothers

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many mothers convicted of murdering their infant children are in prison in the UK; and if he will list them. [95590]

Hilary Benn: The number of mothers convicted of murdering their infant children who are in prison in England and Wales at 3 February 2003 is four.

Information relating to Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for Ministers in the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme; [95038]

(2) if he will estimate the cost, per offender per month, of the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme. [95034]

Hilary Benn: The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP) was launched in 2001 to provide the courts with a tough community based programme designed to tackle persistent young offenders. It provides unprecedented levels of supervision, including electronic monitoring, with programmes designed to tackle the underlying causes of the offending behaviour. ISSP is available for those on bail, on community sentences (the Supervision Order and Community Rehabilitation Order) and those on the community phase of the Detention and Training Order. It costs £1,416 per offender per month.

The main programme is being evaluated by Oxford University: the final report with reconvictions is due in March 2004.

Overstayers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many individuals have applied to the Home Office under the Registration Scheme for Overstayers, as provided for in Section 9 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; how many of those cases are awaiting determination; and if he will make a statement. [95051]

Beverley Hughes: 15,315 applications were received by the closing date (revised figure following a full review). As at the end of September 2002, which is the latest date for which confirmed figures are available, 13,214 cases were awaiting determination. The target for consideration of all cases is April 2003 and arrangements are in place to determine the outstanding cases by that date.

Probation Service

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many probation officers there were in England and Wales in 1985; and what the most recent figure is. [95480]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is as follows:

England and Wales

	31 December 1985	*31 December 2001*
Chief Officers	56	42
Deputy/Assistant Chief Officer	201	294
Senior Probation Officers	1,047	1,106
Maingrade Probation Officers	5,039	6,027
Total	6,344	7,469

Notes:
1. The latest figures available now are at 31 December 2001
2. 7,919 actual people (including part-time) 7,506 (whole-time equivalent).

Source:
Figures obtained from RDS Probation Statistics.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what help will be given to the Probation Service in Minehead to find new premises. [95120]

Hilary Benn: The estates management team in the Probation Directorate is working with the Avon and Somerset Probation Area to find better and more economical accommodation for staff based in Minehead. The objective is to enhance probation services delivery by targeting resources in the town, in order to deal more effectively with offenders.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total funding for probation services was in Somerset in *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02 and *(c)* 2002–03. [95121]

Hilary Benn: The funding for Somerset Probation Committee in 2000–01 was £3.761 million from Home Office grant plus £0.918 from Somerset county council.

Somerset was amalgamated with Avon on 1 April 2001 when the new National Probation Service was created and therefore funding for Somerset was subsumed within Avon and Somerset Probation Board funding for 2001–02 and 2002–03. No separate funding information for Somerset is therefore available. Funding for the new Avon and Somerset Board was £13.480 million and £15.972 million respectively.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many probation officers there were in Somerset in *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02 and *(c)* 2002–03. [95123]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is as follows:

England and Wales—Number of probation officers

	(a) 2000–01	*(b) 2001–02*
Probation Officers	186.0	197.0
Probation Service Officers	87.5	108.6
Total	273.5	305.6

Note:
Figures are not yet available for 2002–03

Source:
Figures obtained from RDS Probation Statistics 2001

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the level of recruitment was for the Probation Service in Avon and Somerset in *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03. [95118]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is as follows:

	April 2001 to March 2002	*April 2002 to date*
Starters	125	75
Leavers	108	65

Source:
Figures obtained from RDS Probation Statistics

Travellers

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the oral answer by the Under-Secretary of State to the hon. Member for New Forest, East on 20 January, on new measures to simplify the removal of travellers from unauthorised sites, what discussions he has had with the Deputy Prime Minister on the issuing of new Planning Policy Guidance to make it easier for local authorities to obtain planning permission for local authority sites for travellers. [92957]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* I understand from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that Guidance on the planning aspects of sites for gipsies is set out in Department of the Environment Circular 1/94. This guidance applies equally to local authorities' own sites as well as to applications for planning permission from gipsies themselves or others wishing to develop land for use as a gipsy caravan site. Local authorities may grant themselves planning permission for their own development, but they must make planning applications in the same way as any other person and follow the same procedures as would apply to applications by others. The procedures which deal with development undertaken by local authorities are contained in the Town and Country Planning General Regulations 1992. There are no plans for central Government to issue further planning guidance on this matter.

We are though working closely with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to produce operational guidance on managing unauthorised encampments. This guidance will be issued for consultation shortly.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Medical Schools

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many applications for medical training have been received by each medical school in each of the last five years. [85493]

Margaret Hodge: The latest available figures are in the table. Figures for 2002 will be available from UCAS in February. Over the last five years there have been changes to the application procedures for medical courses. As from 2000, applicants to medicine could make up to four applications where as in previous years the limit was six.

Applications via UCAS to full-time courses in pre-clinical medicine

Institution name	*Academic year of entry*				
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Cambridge University	1,323	1,208	1,239	1,193	1,206
Imperial College[1]	4,835	3,542	3,512	2,747	2,627
King's College[1]	5,309	5,584	4,027	3,040	3,109
Oxford University	684	727	615	629	767
Queen Mary and Westfield College[1]	2,555	2,711	2,403	1,741	1,672
St. George's Hospital Medical School[1]	1,524	1,817	1,854	1,689	1,851
The Queen's University of Belfast	715	683	595	531	485
University of Aberdeen	1,363	1,438	1,412	1,136	1,086
University of Birmingham	2,400	2,137	1,995	1,567	1,625
University of Edinburgh	2,756	2,777	2,599	1,974	2,073
University of Leeds	3,279	3,015	2,781	2,049	1,925
University of Liverpool	2,089	2,224	2,322	1,692	1,314
University of Manchester	3,177	3,047	2,620	1,608	1,749
University of Nottingham	3,305	3,189	3,195	2,075	1,812
University of Sheffield	3,390	3,638	3,460	2,497	2,390
University of Warwick	0	0	0	0	598
University College London[1]	5,240	5,002	4,672	2,439	2,143
University of Bristol	2,617	2,697	2,456	1,757	1,853
University of Dundee	1,674	1,626	1,667	1,284	1,260
University of Glasgow	1,510	1,606	1,528	1,163	1,137
University of Leicester	2,451	2,576	2,137	1,949	1,325
University of Newcastle Upon Tyne	2,571	2,253	2,181	1,599	1,706
University of Southampton	2,179	2,413	2,683	2,192	2,385
University of St. Andrews	0	0	0	583	593
University of Wales College of Medicine	1,688	1,546	1,576	1,164	1,203
Grand Total[2]	58,642	57,467	53,533	40,300	39,996

[1] All part of the University of London.
[2] Includes a small number of erroneous applications which were incorrectly completed.

Bureaucracy Task Force Review

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the time scale is for the bureaucracy task force review of the higher education sector. [94074]

Margaret Hodge: The Government will respond to the Better Regulation Task Force report "Higher Education: Easing the Burden" in February. As I have already announced, I have set up a stakeholder group, chaired by Professor David VandeLinde, the Vice-Chancellor of Warwick University, to implement the appropriate recommendations and to identify other areas where we can remove unnecessary bureaucracy in higher education.

Further Education

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many students in *(a)* further education colleges, *(b)* sixth form colleges, *(c)* schools and *(d)* other centres of learning have completed (i) NVQs and (ii) GNVQs in each year since 1997. [89314]

Margaret Hodge: The number of awards of (i) NVQs and (ii) GNVQs made to candidates, by centre type, in each academic year since 1997 are in the following tables. Information for GNVQs for 2000–2001 is not available on a consistent basis to previous years because of changes to the data collection procedures that came into affect after the launch of Curriculum 2000.

The number of full NVQs awarded per year now appears to have peaked. There are three main reasons for this:

(i) In some sectors, when NVQs were first introduced, there was significant demand from the existing workforce. However, demand in those sectors is now mainly confined to new entrants and so year on year numbers have fallen.

(ii) Measures taken to improve the quality assurance of NVQs have resulted in the withdrawal of some providers and some employers.

(iii) There may have been movement from NVQs to vocationally-related qualifications (VRQs), which have now been accredited into QCA's National Qualifications Framework. The total number of all Vocational Qualifications (including NVQs) awarded has increased from 991 thousand in 1996–97 to 1.047 million in 2000–2001.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Young People and Audlt Skills has asked the Government's three key partners in this area (QCA, Learning and Skills Council and Sector Skills Development Agency) to produce proposals to develop and implement a new framework for all vocational qualifications. The partners are due to report by the end of March 2003.

GNVQs at all levels are gradually being replaced by other vocational qualifications. In September 2000 New Vocational A levels, also known as AVCEs (Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education) replaced Advanced GNVQs. The first full AVCE awards were made at the end of the 2-year cycle in summer 2002.

NVQ awards by assessment centre by year in the UK

Awards (thousands

Centre type	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*19992000*	*2000–01*
School	12.4	11.2	11.5	10.0
FE college/Tertiary college	172.6	164.0	181.6	168.0
Sixth form college	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.7
Adult education centre	3.9	2.9	2.7	2.5
University or other higher education centre	4.0	3.9	4.1	3.7
Private training provider	191.8	170.9	163.9	130.1
Local government/central government.NHS	5.4	4.6	3.6	3.0
Voluntary organisation	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	00
Employer	47.6	47.3	40.6	36.4
HM prison/youth offender institution	1.2	[1]—	1.4	1.2
Armed forces	4.6	3.2	3.5	3.0
Overseas centre	0.0	6.0	5.2	2.3
Other	[1]—	11.5	19.0	36.6
Total	446.0	428.2	438.9	398.4

[1] Less than 1000
[2] Numbers may not add up to row and column totals due to rounding
Source:
National information system for vocational qualifications

GNVQ awards by assessment centre by year in the UK

Centre type	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
School	35.1	40.6	45.2
FE college/Tertiary college	54.6	58.3	58.7
Sixth form college	10.7	11.1	11.2
Adult education centre	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
University or other higher education centre	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Private training provider	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Local government/central government/ NHS	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Voluntary organisation	0.0	0.0	0.0
Employer	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
HM prison/youth offender institution	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Armed forces	0.0	0.0	0.0
Overseas centre	0.0	[1]—	[1]—
Total	101.6	111.8	116.6

[1] Less than 1000
[2] Numbers may not add up to row and column totals due to rounding
Source:
National information system for vocational qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many shortage subject bursaries has been awarded to new further education lecturers; and what changes he plans in the scheme for these bursaries. [92762]

Margaret Hodge: There have been 174 applications approved by the Learning and Skills Council for 'Golden Hello' payments between 1 October 2002 and 13 January 2003 to new recruits to further education teaching in designated shortage subject areas. Take up to date has been modest but we are working with the Learning and Skills Council to develop better awareness of Golden Helios. We intend to review the scheme to ensure it is effective and appropriately targeted.

Higher Education

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills with reference to his recent White Paper Cmnd 5735 on The Future of Higher Education, what plans he has to ensure that students from the poorest backgrounds will not be deterred from applying to universities which charge the maximum graduate contribution per year; and if he will make a statement. [93748]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* As set out in "The Future of Higher Education" (Cm 5735), fair access means that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background. We know that raising participation and standards through our reforms of secondary and further education is critical to widening access.Our unified AimHigher programme will raise aspirations among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Students from the poorest backgrounds will be eligible to have up to £1,100 of their fees paid, and student grants of 1,000 will be reintroduced for those from low income families From 2006 any university which wishes to charge variable fees will be required to have an Access Agreement which will be approved and monitored by the Access Regulator The Regulator will seek to extend current good practice through, for example, bursary schemes and other financial measures. The maximum fee will be capped in real terms for the duration of the next Parliament at £3,000. Additionally no student or family will have to pay fees before or while they are studying. Students will be able to defer their fees as for the current maintenance loans. The threshold at which repayment starts will be raised to 15,000, to make repayment easier for everyone. Repayments are income contingent and no real interest will be charged on student loans. Graduates will only be expected to pay back what they have borrowed in real terms.

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the drop-out rates were *(a)* in the first year, *(b)* in the second year and *(c)* in the third year for undergraduates in each university and higher education institution in each of the last five years. [94702]

Margaret Hodge: The available information on drop-out rates, showing first year and full course figures for each HE institution in the UK, is contained in "Performance Indicators in Higher Education", published annually since 1999 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Copies of the four publications can be found in the House Library.

The latest edition, published in December 2002, gives figures for students starting full-time first degree courses in the United Kingdom in 1999–2000. Table 3 shows rates of non-continuation after the first year of study and Table 5 gives drop-out rates across the full course.

Figures published in 2002 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that the UK as a whole has one of the lowest non-completion rates among OECD countries.

Hull University

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many students attending Hull University have taken out student loans in each year since 1997; and what is the total amount of money borrowed. [94296]

Margaret Hodge: The number of students attending Hull University who have taken out a student loan, and the total amount of money borrowed, in academic years 1997–98 to 2001–02 is shown in the table:

Academic year	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[1]	*1999–2000*[2]	*2000–01*[2]	*2001–02*[2]
Total number of borrowers of which:[3,4,5]	2,000	4,600	4,900	6,300	6,700
Mortgage style loans[5]	2,000	3,100	1,800	600	100
Income contingent repayment loans[5]	N/A	1,500	3,100	5,700	6,600
Total amount borrowed of which:[4,6,7]	3.1	8.6	12.3	19.2	21.2
Mortgage style loans	3.1	4.7	2.6	0.8	0.1
Income contingent repayment loans[7,6,4]	N/A	3.9	9.7	18.4	21.1

[1] New student support arrangements in higher education came into effect in September 1998. For the first year of the new scheme, eligible new entrants received support for living costs through both grants and loans. Grants, which were assessed against family income, on average formed about a quarter of the support available. All students were entitled to a non income-assessed loan, which comprised the remaining three quarters of support available.

[2] New entrants to higher education in 1999–2000, together with those who started in 1998–99, received support for living costs solely through loans which are partly income-assessed. Grants for living costs are no longer available except for some limited allowances, e.g. for students with dependants; single parent students; and disabled students. Grants for students with dependants and single parent students are income-assessed but the Disabled Students' Allowance is not. From 1999–2000 student loans have been made available to those aged 50 to 54 who plan to return to work after studying.

[3] Student loans are available to eligible students normally domiciled in the United Kingdom.

[4] Refers to loans advanced in the target year only, which include those students in their first, second, third and any subsequent year of their course. Includes hardship loans but excludes fixed rate loans of £500 for part-time students introduced in September 2000.

[5] Number of borrowers shown to the nearest one hundred.

[6] The amount of loan available is assessed by local education authorities in England and Wales for eligible students who are normally domiciled in their area and studying in the UK.

[7] £ million.

Source:
The student loans company.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many students *(a)* paid tuition fees and *(b)* were exempt from paying tuition fees at Hull University in each year since 1997. [94297]

Margaret Hodge: The information is not available in the requested format. The student support arrangements up to, and including, academic year 1997–98 included the payment of tuition fees in full from public funds on behalf of eligible students domiciled in England and Wales. New student support arrangements came into effect at the start of academic year 1998–99 when new entrants to higher education were expected to contribute towards the cost of their tuition (£1,000 in 1998–99). The amount of the contribution depended on family income.

The number of students attending Hull University and who entered higher education from 1998–99, who were assessed by their local education authority (LEA) for their eligibility for student support under the new arrangements, and the numbers on whose behalf a payment of tuition fees was made from public funds, is shown in the table. Students who did not apply to their LEA for assessment are excluded.

Data for academic year 1998–99 are not available at institutional level.

Number of students attending Hull university who were assessed for eligibility for tuition fee support[1,2]

Academic year[3]	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Number assessed for tuition fee support	3,000	5,700	6,700
Number of students who received either a full or partial public contribution towards the cost of their tuition[4]	1,600	3,200	3,600

[1] Students normally domiciled in England and Wales; excludes students normally domiciled in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the EU.

[2] Students who applied to their local education authority for eligibility assessment.

[3] Data for academic year 1999–2000 comprise students who entered higher education in 1998–99 and 1999–2000; data for 2000–01 comprise those who entered in 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01; and data for 2001–02 those students still in study from 1998–99 onwards and new entrants from 2001–02.

[4] Excludes those students assessed to pay the full contribution towards their tuition costs.

Source:
Student Loans Company

Post-16 Education

Paul Farrelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimates he has made of how many pupils from each social class entered *(a)* further

education and *(b)* higher education in each local education authority area in each academic year since 1990. [91750]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

School Sport

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the impact of school sport on *(a)* exclusion rates, *(b)* GCSE and A-Level Grades and *(c)* classroom behaviour. [95859]

Mr. Miliband: Evidence from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's physical education (PE) and school sport investigation suggests that high quality sport impacts on many areas of school improvement, including attainment, behaviour, attitudes to learning and attendance. The changes in behaviour have been particularly encouraging. Where schools have invested in developing high quality PE and school sport at lunchtimes, behaviour has consistently improved. Further information on the results of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's investigation is available on their website. "Game Plan", a joint report published on 19 December 2002 by the Cabinet Office and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, examined the effect of sport and physical activity on educational outcomes.

The Government are investing £459 million over the next three years (2003–04 to 2005–06) to deliver a joint Department for Education and Skills and Department for Culture, Media and Sport Public Service Agreement target to enhance the take up of sporting opportunities by five to 16-year-olds. The objective is to increase the percentage of school children who spend a minimum of two hours each week on high quality PE and school sport, within and beyond the curriculum, to 75 per cent. by 2006.

Schools Wages

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average wage paid is in 2002–03 per student in primary and secondary schools in shire local education authorities, broken down by authority. [96507]

Mr. Miliband: My Department collects information on the costs of staff in schools only as part of Outturn statements, so information about 2002–03 will not be available until the end of this year.

Student Loans

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will set a limit on the duration of student loans beyond which all outstanding debt will be written off. [94783]

Margaret Hodge: Write-off arrangements for student loans are already in place. Under the current income-contingent loans scheme a borrower's loan is written off when they reach the age of 65, if they die, or if they become permanently disabled.

Students (Social Class Origins)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what mechanism is used to record the social class origins of students in higher education. [83861]

Margaret Hodge: The social class of students in HE is derived from data included on the application form which applicants submit to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Applicants aged under 21 provide the occupation of their parent and those aged 21 or over give their own occupation. This information is then used to assign each student to one of six standard social class categories based upon the Standard Occupational Classification published by the Office for National Statistics.

UCAS covers applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses only, but not all students entering these courses apply via UCAS: some, notably mature students, apply direct to the institution. Data on the social class of students on postgraduate and part-time undergraduate courses is not held centrally.

University Access Process

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how his Department will collate information on parents' level of education through the university access process announced in the Government's The Future of Higher Education White Paper. [94057]

Margaret Hodge: Currently data on parental education are not collected centrally. The Department is setting up a group with external partners to discuss how appropriate and robust data might best be collected.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what impact his proposals will have on students studying in Scotland and Wales. [94755]

Margaret Hodge: Under current arrangements, students who ordinarily live in England and Wales will be eligible for funding provided by the UK Government, including the new higher education grant being introduced in 2004–05, regardless of where in the UK they undertake their higher education course.

Vocational and Technical Courses

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average costs of *(a)* vocational and *(b)* technical courses in higher education in England were in the last 12 months. [83936]

Margaret Hodge: The information is not held centrally. However, the methodology used by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to determine funding allocations recognises that some subjects, such as those which involve laboratory or workshop activities, require higher levels of resource to those which are mainly classroom based.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the departmental expenditure limits are in her Department's *(a)* resource and *(b)* capital budget for (i) museums, galleries and libraries, (ii) arts, (iii) sport, (iv) historical buildings, monuments and sites, (v) the Royal Parks, (vi) tourism, (vii) gambling and the National Lottery, (viii) ERDF, (ix) broadcasting and media, (x) commemorative services, (xi) administration and research and (xii) unallocated provision for (A) 2001–02, (B) 2002–03, (C) 2003–04, (D) 2004–05 and (E) 2005–06. [95909]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The departmental expenditure limits for the resource and capital budgets for the Department for Culture Media and Sport for 2001–02 and projections to 2003–04 are set out by sector in the table on page 104 and 105 of the 2002 Departmental Report (Cm 5423). Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 Departmental Report in the spring.

Greater London Assembly

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what financial assistance her Department gave to the Greater London Assembly in 2002; and for what projects. [95850]

Dr. Howells: In 2002–03 my Department made a tourism grant of £1.9 million to the Greater London Authority for the promotion of London to tourists (as a destination in its own right and as a gateway to the rest of the UK) and for the improvement of tourism amenities and facilities.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many times since 2001 she has taken flights on departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied her on each trip. [95395]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is given in the following table:

Date	*Type*	*Class*	*Accompanied*
July 01 x 2	Government Flights	n/a	0 person
Sept 01	Scheduled	Business Class	1 person
37894	Scheduled	Business Class	1 person
37681	Government Flight	n/a	0 person
37803	Government Flight	n/a	0 person
Aug 02 x 2	Scheduled	Business Class	1 person
Sept 02	Scheduled	Business Class	1 person
37623	Scheduled	Business Class	1 person

All ministerial travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Libraries of both Houses.

Portsmouth Historic Dockyard

Mr. Fisher: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will place in the Library a copy of Sir Alan Borg's report on the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. [96949]

Dr. Howells: The report on the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard was commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In response to the report, the Dockyard attractions have agreed to adopt an integrated approach to the management of their activities through a new non-charitable company which is expected to be in place by summer 2003. I will place a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

Premises Licences

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport whether the cost of a premises licence will be the same to a public house whether it chooses to apply only for a licence to sell alcohol or whether it chooses to apply for multiple permissions licence under the Licensing Bill. [96879]

Dr. Howells: Under the provisions of the Licensing Bill, the cost of an application for a premises licence would remain the same whether a public house applied only for permission to sell alcohol or for multiple permissions including, for instance, the provision of regulated entertainment, including live music.

Public Entertainment Licences

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many premises are covered by the public entertainment licence; and how many more she expects will have to apply for a licence to provide public entertainment under the proposed Licensing Bill. [96878]

Dr. Howells: The Regulatory Impact Assessment that was published alongside the Licensing Bill states that just over 9,000 on-licensed premises and registered members clubs hold permanent public entertainment licences or certificates of suitability. An estimated 37,000 temporary public entertainment licences are also issued each year.

Under the provisions of the Bill there will be no separate licence for the provision of public entertainment. Permission to carry on any of the activities licensable under the Bill will be covered by a single premises licence. It will cost no more, in terms of time or money, to apply for a licence permitting the sale of alcohol and the provision of entertainment than it would to apply for one permitting the sale of alcohol only. The Government expect that the removal of the cost deterrent in applying for permission to provide entertainment, along with the provision of a less bureaucratic system and measures to prevent unnecessary conditions being attached to licences by licensing authorities, will encourage many more premises to take the opportunity to provide public entertainment.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many statutory instruments were

issued by the National Heritage Department in each year between 1992 and 1997; and how many have been issued by her Department since May 1997. [89849]

Dr. Howells: The number of Statutory Instruments (including Orders in Council) issued by the Department for National Heritage in each year between 1992 and 1997 are as follows:

	Number
1992	3
1993	16
1994	21
1995	15
1996	21
1997 (up to 30 April)	10

The number of Statutory Instruments (including Orders in Council) issued by the Department[1] in each year since 1 May 1997 are as follows:

[1] The name of the Department changed in August 1997 from the Department for National Heritage to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

	Number
1997	19
1998	23
1999	24
2000	18
2001	18
2002	29
2003	2

Television Licences

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioners have claimed free television licences in *(a)* Haltemprice and Howden and *(b)* the East Riding of Yorkshire in each year since 1997. [96712]

Dr. Howells: Free television licences for the over-75s were introduced in November 2000; no free licences were available prior to that date. TV Licensing, who administer the concession as agents for the BBC, are not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. However, estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 5,900 people aged 75 or over living in the Haltemprice and Howden constituency and 19,500 in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

Vehicle Fleets

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel, on an annual basis, over each of the past three years, in renewal of her Department's and agencies' vehicle fleet on a lower emission basis. [96447]

Dr. Howells: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport does not have a vehicle fleet. Ministerial and official cars are supplied, with driver, as required by the Government Car and Despatch Service. The Royal Parks Agency vehicle fleet has used 'green' fuels for some years. Over the last three years, the Agency has converted or acquired vehicles which are duel fuelled, liquefied petroleum gas/petrol. Of a 42 vehicle fleet, 30 (cars, vans and minibuses) are duel fuel, eight (4x4s, horsebox) are diesel and four (motorcycles) are petrol.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the annual rate is at which her Department has renewed its vehicle fleet by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel over the last three years. [96452]

Dr. Howells: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport does not have a vehicle fleet. Ministerial and official cars are supplied, with driver, as required by the Government Car and Despatch Service.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Beta-interferon

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when Beta-Interferon will be available for sufferers of multiple sclerosis in Northern Ireland. [95837]

Mr. Browne: I refer the hon. Lady to my answer of 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 114W.

Corporal Punishment

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he expects the office of Law Reform in the Department of Finance and Personnel to have completed its analysis of the responses to the public consultation on "Physical Punishment in the Home-Thinking about the Issues, Looking at the Evidence". [91351]

Mr. Pearson: I would refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 377W.

Departmental Underspending

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures are being taken to deal with departmental underspends; and if he will make a statement. [95096]

Mr. Pearson: I would refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 426W).

Dysphasia

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many young people have been diagnosed with dysphasia in the last five years in each of the Education and Library Board areas. [96662]

Mr. Browne: The information requested is not available.

Fair Employment Tribunals

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many complaints have been made to Fair Employment Tribunals in each of the past three years; and what percentage in each year were settled or withdrawn before the case reached tribunal hearing. [93932]

Jane Kennedy: The information for the last three years is set out in the following table.

Year	*Total complaints*	*Percentage of which were withdrawn or settled before full tribunal hearing1*
2000	561	30
2001	613	23
2002	481	6

[1] The information relates to complaints withdrawn or settled before progressing to a full hearing. In a number of cases some preliminary hearings or hearings of directions will have taken place.

Giant's Causeway

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the future development of the Giant's Causeway. [94452]

Angela Smith: The Giant's Causeway has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in recognition of its international importance to the conservation of geological features. It is one of only three natural World Heritage Sites in the United Kingdom.

World Heritage Sites are places or buildings of outstanding heritage value and, accordingly, the Department of the Environment attaches great importance to their protection for the benefit of future generations as well as our own. Planning policies for the protection of World Heritage Sites applicable to the Giant's Causeway are set out in the Planning Policy Statement (PPS 6): Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage. I believe that these policies are proving effective in protecting the Causeway and its immediate vicinity. Development proposals affecting the Giant's Causeway and its setting are carefully scrutinised in order to determine the impact on critical views of and from the site, access and public approaches to the site, and its appreciation and enjoyment by visitors.

The Department is reviewing the planning policy framework for the Giant's Causeway and its setting. The Department's Environment and Heritage Service is preparing management plans for the Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the World Heritage Site. The Planning Service is preparing a new statutory development plan for the Northern Area which involves the Giant's Causeway. The draft development plan will be published in the autumn of 2003.

I am of course aware that the Moyle District Council has recently resolved to proceed to rebuild that portion of the visitor centre that was destroyed by fire in 2000. My colleague, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) is currently engaged in a series of meetings with key interests in relation to the interpretation of the World Heritage Site. He and I are determined to find the best way to achieve this.

Health Care Staff (Impersonation)

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many incidents where individuals were discovered in hospitals in Northern Ireland pretending to be health care staff there have been in the last three years. [96571]

Mr. Browne: No such incidents have been reported.

Housing

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will amend the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum of the Draft Housing (NI) Order to reflect the concerns of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Social Development Committee in terms of *(a)* introductory tenancies, *(b)* large scale voluntary transfers, *(c)* homelessness, *(d)* new build and *(e)* anti-social behaviour; and if he will make a statement. [96392]

Mr. Browne: No. The purpose of the Explanatory Memorandum is to give a broad explanation of the provisions included in the Order and no amendment is required.

Maternity Provision (Belfast)

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the costs were of publishing and posting the November 2002 consultation document, "A New Centralised Maternity Hospital for Belfast". [95836]

Mr. Browne: The cost of designing and printing the consultation document "A New Centralised Maternity Hospital for Belfast", published in November 2002, was £10,455.

The publication was posted to a wide range of organisations and individuals at a cost of £9,230. A number of copies were distributed by courier at a cost of £48.

Mental Health

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in improving the treatment of mental health patients in each Board area. [95150]

Mr. Browne: This information is not available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people in each Board area are suffering from mental health problems. [95156]

Mr. Browne: Information on the total number of people suffering from mental health problems is not available, as many people with such problems are not in contact with healthcare providers. However, at 31 March 2002 there were 12,605 people in the Mental Health Programme of Care who were in contact with Social Services. These people are likely to be those with the more severe forms of mental health problems. The

breakdown by Health and Social Services Board area is shown in the following table. The figures refer to people with mental illness and exclude those with dementia or learning disability.

Health and Social Services Board	*People in contact with Social Services*
Eastern	4,857
Northern	3,192
Southern	2,199
Western	2,357
Northern Ireland	12,605

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much of the mental health budget in each health board area is spent on *(a)* staff, *(b)* property and *(c)* care. [95157]

Mr. Browne: The Health and Social Services Boards reported expenditure in total of some £128 million in 2001–02 on the care of people with mental illness. This can be analysed by Health and Social Services Boards as follows:

£000s

Board	*Total spend 2001–02*
EHSSB	52.0
NHSSB	28.3
WHSSB	25.2
SHSSB	22.8
Total	128.3

No break down is available centrally of the amount spent specifically on staff, property and direct care within these overall totals.

Northern Ireland Cancer Plan

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on plans to bring forward a Northern Ireland Cancer Plan. [95969]

Mr. Browne: The Campbell Report "Cancer Services—Investing for the Future" provides the core plan for the development of cancer services in Northern Ireland. The Department's cancer strategy is underpinned by the wider public health strategy, including Investing for Health, the Palliative Care Report and separate initiatives on screening for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer.

Nursing

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many nurses in each Board area have left the health service in each of the last two years. [95149]

Mr. Browne: The information requested is detailed in the following tables.

Figures in the following tables relate to nursing staff (including midwives) in each Health and Social Services Board that have left the health service in the last two years—leavers are defined as those who were in employment at the start of the year but who weren't in employment in the NI Health and Personal Social Services at the end of the year.

Nursing leavers between September 2000 and September 2001

Board	*Headcount*	*WTE*[1]
Eastern Board	488	411.88
Northern Board	137	113.21
Southern Board	119	97.82
Western Board	126	111.49
Total	870	734.40

[1] Whole time equivalent

Nursing leavers between September 2001 and September 2002

Board	*Headcount*	*WTE*[1]
Eastern Board	594	516.74
Northern Board	126	105.75
Southern Board	141	118.49
Western Board	116	102.93
Total	977	843.91

[1] Whole time equivalent

Organ Retention (Royal Victoria Hospital)

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what provision has been made to assist relatives to deal psychologically with recent revelations of organ retention at the Royal Victoria hospital. [95841]

Mr. Browne: The Clinical Psychology Department of the Royal Group of Hospitals allocated resources to run a dedicated telephone enquiry line. Those in need of psychological support were identified and clinical psychology staff made themselves available to set up and attend meetings between families and hospital staff. Following the establishment of the DHSSPS Human Organs Enquiry Line on 20 November 2002, the enquiry line at the Royal was closed. Callers to the DHSSPS enquiry line are made aware that psychological support is available.

Organ Retrieval (Royal Victoria Hospital)

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what procedure is to be followed by relatives who wish to retrieve organs retained by *(a)* the Royal Victoria Hospital and *(b)* the Coroner; and what avenues are open to relatives if their request is denied. [95838]

Mr. Browne: Relatives wishing to make inquiries about the retrieval of retained organs should contact the DHSSPS human organs inquiry line on 08088008810. The enquiry line operator will then liaise with the relevant acute hospital trust or state pathology department as appropriate.

The Royal group of hospitals has a general policy that all organs reclaimed by relatives will be returned.

If a request to return organs is denied by the Coroner the decision cannot be appealed, except that all legal decisions can be challenged in the courts by way of judicial review.

Physiotherapy

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will increase resources available for the recruitment of physiotherapists; and if he will make a statement. [95152]

Mr. Browne: The budget for 2003–04 will enable the Health and Personal Social Services to maintain and improve a range of services. It is a matter for Boards, Trusts and other bodies concerned to agree on the detailed level of service provision, including any associated recruitment of staff.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on recruitment patterns of physiotherapists in Northern Ireland. [95159]

Mr. Browne: The recruitment of staff, including physiotherapists, is a matter for individual Health and Social Services Trusts taking into account factors such as service needs and available resources.

Post-Mortems

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many post mortems have been conducted in Northern Ireland in each of the last three decades. [95842]

Mr. Browne: The Chief Medical Officer's Report on Organ Retention, "The Investigation into Retained Organs", published in May 2001, records that between 1970 and 2000 a total of 49,310 post mortems were carried out in Northern Ireland. A further breakdown of these figures in the form requested is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under what circumstances a post mortem can be conducted on a child without the consent of the parents. [95835]

Mr. Browne: Under Section 28 of the Coroners' Act (NI) 1959 the Coroner has the power to order a post mortem without the need for consent from the parent or legal guardian. All hospital post mortems carried out on children require the consent of those with parental responsibility.

Pre-school Education

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether children in their immediate pre-school year will be offered funding through the Pre School Education Advisory Group scheme; and if he will make a statement. [94434]

Jane Kennedy: The objective of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme, which is planned and delivered by a Pre-school Education Advisory Group in each education and library board area, is to provide a year of funded pre-school education for every child in Northern Ireland whose parents wish it. This is achieved through the funding of places in pre-school settings which meet the Programme's quality standards. In order to give parents a choice of pre-school setting, funded places are available both in statutory nursery schools and units and in some 400 voluntary and private playgroups.

Parental demand for funded places is estimated at up to 90 per cent. of the immediate pre-school year group, but factors such as the geographical distribution of places may involve a level of provision slightly in excess of that. The number of places funded by the Department of Education has increased from 11,100 in 1997 to 21,600 in this school year, representing an increase in coverage from 45 per cent. to an estimated 92 per cent. of the immediate pre-school year group.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much funding has been allocated to each of the Education and Library Boards for pre school education for 2003–04 [94435]

Jane Kennedy: No specific allocations are made to Education and Library Boards for the core funding of pre-school education. The relative levels of initial funding for 2003–04 for pre-school education will not be known until Resource Allocation Plans are drawn up by each board and approved by the Department of Education. However, the following earmarked allocations have been made to the respective boards as part of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme for 2003–04.

	£000
BELB	720
WELB	1,593
NEELB	2,007
SEELB	1,676
SELB	1,858

These amounts represent the recurrent funding for each board in respect of: places funded in voluntary and private sector playgroups and in new statutory nursery schools and units opened between the 2002 and 2003 school censuses; the costs of furnishing and equipping new nursery schools and units opening during the 2003–04 financial year; and administration and publicity costs.

Pre-school Places

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time pre-school places are funded under the NI Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity, Measure 4, Investing in Early Learning in Northern Ireland in (i) controlled, (ii) maintained and (iii) grant-maintained integrated schools; and if he will make a statement. [86868]

Jane Kennedy: A total of 11.34 million Euros (of which 8 million Euros is the EU contribution) is available to the Department of Education under Measure 3.4 of the European Union's Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme for securing the building of controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium pre-school education facilities in local communities. The Measure will allow the Department to reclaim capital expenditure on a programme of nursery units, either built or to be built. The programme must, however, go through the application and selection procedure required by the EU. This procedure has not yet been concluded, and at this stage it is not possible to attribute the establishment of any units to Measure 3.4.

To date, however, 33 of the units for which the Department expects to reclaim the EU contribution have opened. These are providing places for 1,326

children in total—702 in controlled schools (26 full-time, 676 part-time), 494 in maintained (130 full-time, 364 part-time), 78 in integrated (26 full-time, 52 part-time) and 52 in Irish medium (all part-time).

TK-ECC

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to assist TK-ECC and its workforce as a result of the announcement of redundancies at its Dundonald plant. [95533]

Mr. Pearson: TK-ECC at Dundonald is facing a decision about making reductions to its workforce by up to 300 jobs. This is a commercial decision, forced on a company which is in a commodity market where margins are continually tight. Invest NI has been working with the company to help it achieve efficiencies and operational improvements. A competitiveness assessment has been undertaken to identify areas requiring development and improvement and Invest NI has offered assistance for a consultancy assignment aimed at improving the factory layout, production and materials handling processes.

Regional staff of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) have already been in contact with the company to discuss the services DEL can provide to support any employees who might be affected should the company be forced to implement staff reductions. While appreciating the early offer of help, the company has decided to defer detailed discussions with DEL regional staff until a decision has been made on the timing of any actual reductions which may take place and how they may be implemented.

Ulster Hospital

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the situation at the Ulster hospital, with special reference to bed capacity, trolley waits, delayed discharges and the level of funding of the hospital from the 1990s. [95970]

Mr. Browne: The recent pressures at the Ulster hospital have exceeded the available bed capacity and have resulted in some patients having to wait on trolleys before a bed becomes available. The staff at the hospital have responded with great commitment and have tried to minimise the impact of these pressures.

A number of actions are being taken to provide a resolution to the underlying problems. There is a very significant expansion and redevelopment scheme under way at the Ulster hospital, which will increase bed capacity and improve acute services in the area. This has included the provision of 20 extra acute beds, which were opened in December 2002.

The Trust is continuing in its efforts to minimise the number of delayed discharges, and the hospital discharge team has been successful in resettling a number of patients on a fast-track basis to community care accommodation. In order to free beds for acute admissions, the Trust also utilises beds in the Ards and Bangor community hospitals for suitable patients.

The Trust is also working closely with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, on a Service Improvement Project, which aims to improve throughput and maximise the use of bed capacity at the Ulster hospital.

With regard to resources, the level of funding for the Trust has increased from £48 million in 1993–94 to £144 million in 2001–02.

WALES

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many times since 2001 he has taken flights on departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied him on each trip. [95397]

Peter Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Strategic Rail Authority

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, what representations he has made to the Strategic Rail Authority in relation to the maintenance of rail services within the Wales and Borders franchise; and if he will make a statement. [96806]

Peter Hain: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary and I have had discussions with SRA representatives about a number of issues, including the new Wales and Borders franchise.

The Authority have made it clear that they will not consider any franchise proposals that suggest a closure of routes in Wales.

Students (National Assembly)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will establish an inquiry into leaks to media concerning the question of further devolution of powers with regard to tuition fees and maintenance grants to the National Assembly for Wales; [96992]

(2) if he has established whether the press were in possession of information on the question of further devolution of powers with regard to tuition fees and maintenance grants to the National Assembly for Wales in advance of contacting his Press Office. [96990]

Peter Hain: No.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Services Commission

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many Legal Services Commission practices were issued in *(a)* 2000 and *(b)* 2002. [95483]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I believe the hon. Member is referring to the number of contracts issued by the Legal Services Commission during 2000 and 2002. The number for both civil and criminal contracts are recorded.

The Legal Services Commission introduced contracting for civil legal aid from January 2000. On 1 January 2000, 5,012 general civil contracts were issued. A further 330 general civil contracts were issued during the rest of that year.

In 2002, 213 additional contracts were issued.

The Commission introduced contracting for criminal legal aid from April 2001. In 2001 3,055 general criminal contracts were issued.

In 2002, a further 141 contracts were issued.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by her Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92235]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The information requested, and available without disproportionate cost, is set out in the table. The increased spend on advertising and publicity by the Lord Chancellor's core Department in 2000–02 was mainly accounted for by a public information campaign about the services of the new Community Legal Service, which was launched in April 2000.

Lord Chancellor's Departments' Spending on Advertising and Publicity, 1995–96 to 2002–03

£

	Advertising	*Publicity*
1995–96		
Lord Chancellor's Department		
Court Service	0	0
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	13,180
Public Guardianship Office	0	0
Public Record Office	175	14,660
HM Land Registry	9,795	60,400
1996–97		
Lord Chancellor's Department	0	11,600
Court Service	0	0
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	13,730
Public Guardianship Office	0	0
Public Record Office	1,270	35,950
HM Land Registry	11,800	78,650
1997–98		
Lord Chancellor's Department	136,730	6,000
Court Service	0	36,950
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	14,670
Public Guardianship Office	0	66,900
Public Record Office	4,065	46,840
HM Land Registry	12,365	163,100
1998–99		
Lord Chancellor's Department	422,000	399,300
Court Service	5,000	136,000
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	15,140
Public Guardianship Office	0	70,200
Public Record Office	7,150	38,000
HM Land Registry	9,000	84,775
1999–2000		
Lord Chancellor's Department	0	235,410
Court Service	18,180	33,140
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	110,865
Public Guardianship Office	0	78,900
Public Record Office	2,600	115,500
HM Land Registry	13,385	158,790
2000–01		
Lord Chancellor's Department	4,179,300	1,347,600
Court Service	42,500	27,650
Northern Ireland Court Service	4,680	38,460
Public Guardianship Office	0	70,600
Public Record Office	8,730	62,250
HM Land Registry	2,445	60,900
2001–02		
Lord Chancellor's Department	0	694,345
Court Service	0	212,700
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	27,880
Public Guardianship Office	0	68,760
Public Record Office	5,250	61,900
HM Land Registry	0	140,000
2002–03—forecast		
Lord Chancellor's Department	15,800	835,575
Court Service	31,450	37,420
Northern Ireland Court Service	0	0
Public Guardianship Office	0	0
Public Record Office	4,535	63,250
HM Land Registry	14,000	154,000

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Afghanistan

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the reconstruction programme in Afghanistan. [96473]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

Substantial progress has been made since November 2001. The effectiveness of the reconstruction programme has depended on joint efforts by the UN, the international community, the private sector, NGO's and the Government.

The Transitional Administration has set out a National Development Framework for Afghanistan and the Ministry of Finance and Central bank have rebuilt the central financial systems of government and have started to collect domestic revenues. 3 million children have returned to school. 4.5 million are expected to attend in the new school year, starting at the end of March. The major Kabul-Kandahar-Herat road, Kabul-Jalalabad road, and Pakistan border to Jalalabad road are being refurbished. The World bank is supporting the rebuilding of Kabul power station and airport.

However, much more remains to be done. Effective development in Afghanistan requires greater security in the provinces, strengthened capacity of the Transitional Administration and the continued commitment of the international community. The forthcoming Development Forum meeting of donors and the Transitional Administration in Kabul in March will discuss next steps in implementing the Government's National Development Framework.

Al-Qaeda Radio Stations

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether al-Qaeda radio stations operate from inside Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [96983]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Al Qaeda operatives communicate in a variety of clandestine ways. We are not aware of any Al Qaeda radio stations in Afghanistan.

Botswana

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government are taking to provide assistance to the Government of Botswana in dealing with the flow of illegal immigrants entering the country from Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [96297]

Mr. Straw: None. The Government of Botswana have sought no assistance from us. We will consider any requests sympathetically.

Burma

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sanctions have been imposed by the EU against members of the Burmese Government; whether persons who are subject to sanctions can enter the EU; and if he will make a statement. [96193]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The EU visa ban is targeted towards Senior Members of the Burmese State Peace and Development Council, senior members of the military and security forces who formulate, implement or benefit from policies that impede Burma's transition to democracy, senior Burmese tourism officials and the family members of all the categories listed above.

People covered by the ban are not allowed to enter the EU unless they are visiting the EU for the sole purposes of attending United Nations' events. In the case of the Burmese Foreign Minister, there is also provision for a visa to be issued when, by the agreement of all member states, the visit is deemed to be in the interests of the European Union.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which members of the Burmese Government are subject to EU sanctions; and if he will make a statement. [96181]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The EU Common Position visa ban and asset freeze is targeted on Senior Members of the Burmese State Peace and Development Council, senior members of the military and security forces who formulate, implement or benefit from policies that impede Burma's transition to democracy, senior Burmese tourism officials and the family members of all the categories listed above. It is reviewed and updated regularly, most recently in October 2002.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of EU sanctions in promoting human rights in Burma. [96182]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The EU Common Position contains an arms embargo, a ban on EU high-level visits to Burma, a ban on defence links, a ban on the sale of items that can be used for repression or torture, a ban on non-humanitarian assistance and a visa ban and asset freeze on senior members of the regime and armed forces. In addition the European Community suspended Burma's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) trading privileges in response to the use of forced labour and HMG does not encourage trade, investment or tourism with Burma.

All these measures are designed to press the Burmese regime and those who support and benefit from its misrule to allow progress to be made to bring about national reconciliation, respect for human rights and democracy in Burma. UK pressure will be maintained until Burma is irreversibly committed to substantive, lasting political change.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister, who attended the EU-ASEAN meeting in Brussels on 27 and 28 January, was subject to EU sanctions; what representations his Department made to EU partners on the matter; and if he will make a statement. [96192]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The EU visa ban applies to senior members of the Burmese State Peace and Development Council. The Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister, U Khin Maung Win, is a Vice-Minister, not a full Minister, and is therefore not subject to the ban.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence he has

collated on improvements in human rights in Burma between January 2002 and January 2003; and if he will make a statement. [96183]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The overall human rights situation in Burma remains extremely poor and a matter of grave concern.

There were some very modest improvements in limited areas of human rights in Burma between January 2002 and January 2003, such as the release of political prisoners—over 200 in this period, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and some cooperation between the Burmese regime, the United Nations and certain international non-governmental organisations.

However, these limited improvements do not provide any assurance that the Burmese regime is now committed to substantively improving its human rights record or ending the violence and abuses in the ethnic minority areas of Burma. And since autumn 2002 there has been increasing reports of fresh restrictions of freedom of expression and politically inspired detentions and arrests in Burma.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking to seek the improvement of human rights in Burma; and if he will make a statement. [96184]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The EU Common Position is designed to encourage national reconciliation respect for human rights and democracy in Burma. The UK annually co-sponsors resolutions on the human rights situation in Burma at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the UN Commission on Human Rights. On 20 January, the UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations made a statement in the UN that included expressing concern at the use of child soldiers in Burma. We are active in the International Labour Organisation to seek to press for the end of forced labour in Burma. We also use bilateral and multilateral events to press for rapid and sustained improvements in Burma's human rights record.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department have had with ASEAN nations regarding the promotion of human rights in Burma; and if he will make a statement. [96185]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We take advantage of our regular bilateral and multilateral contacts with all ASEAN nations to press for an improvement in Burma's human rights record. Most recently on 27 January my right hon. the Foreign Secretary stressed to ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Brussels the need for all countries to encourage national reconciliation, respect for human rights and democracy in Burma.

Cayman Islands

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the implications for British legal links with the Cayman Islands of the collapse of the Eurobank case; and if he will make a statement. [93959]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 28 February 2003]:* None. The legal relationship remains unchanged as set out in the Cayman Island Constitution.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will assess the conduct of the UK security services in the issues which caused the collapse of the Eurobank case in the Cayman Islands; and if he will make a statement. [93961]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* It is not the policy of HMG to comment on the activities of the UK security services, which are outside the scope of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (paragraph 6, part 1).

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on *(a)* the Eurobank case and *(b)* relations with the Government of the Cayman Islands. [93962]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Eurobank case was brought to trial on the basis of serious money laundering charges. The trial came to an end when the Attorney General decided to offer no further evidence. The Chief Justice then directed the jury to find the four defendants not-guilty on each of the six charges.

Our aim, with the Cayman Islands authorities, has been to take action against allegations of money laundering. This objective should enjoy widespread support in the Cayman Islands if its reputation as a well-regulated and reputable financial centre is to be preserved.

My noble Friend Baroness Amos, Overseas Territories Minister, has been in regular touch (both by letter and telephone) with the Leader of Government Business in the Cayman Islands to discuss the issues raised. She plans to visit Grand Cayman as part of a long-planned Caribbean trip in mid-February.

Eurobank

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what costs have been incurred by his Department's budget from the collapse of the Eurobank case; and if he will make a statement. [94408]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer of 30 January 2003]:* None, apart from the travel and subsistence costs of the FCO's Deputy Legal Adviser, currently in the Cayman Islands, which will fall to the Department. He visited after the court had announced a decision.

Falklands Visit

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the visit by HM Ambassador to Argentina to Port Stanley was announced; whom he met; what discussions were held on what topics; and what reasons underlay the terms of the press conference with local journalists. [96296]

Mr. Straw: Our Ambassador to Argentina, Sir Robin Christopher, visited the Falkland Islands on his way back to Buenos Aires following leave in the UK. His main purpose was to brief Island Councillors and the Governor on Argentina and to discuss planning for the construction of the proposed memorial to the Argentine fallen at the Darwin cemetery, as envisaged in the Joint Agreement of July 1999.

Iraq

Dr. Jenny Tonge To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what his estimate is of the cost in US dollars of administrating Iraq in the event of regime change following war in Iraq; [96162]

(2) what estimate his Department has made of the cost in US dollars of administering Iraq in each of the first 10 years following any possible regime change. [96165]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No decision has been made to take military action against Iraq. Since we cannot know in advance the circumstances of a post-Saddam Iraq, we are not in a position to estimate accurately Iraq's possible requirements, whether financial or material.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list those contracts for supply of medical equipment and products to Iraq which have been vetoed by *(a)* member states of the UN Security Council and *(b)* the UN Security Council since imposition of sanctions; [96103]

(2) if he will list the nature and value of contracts for the supply of medical equipment and products to Iraq which have been permitted to take place from UK companies since the imposition of sanctions. [96104]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This question could be answered comprehensively only by researching United Nations records for the last 12 years, which could be done only at disproportionate cost.

As part of our policy to do all we can to improve the humanitarian situation of the Iraqi people, the UK has rejected contracts for exports to Iraq only where there is serious concern about their potential use in Iraq's military or weapons of mass destruction programmes. The Iraqi regime meanwhile continues to hamper the humanitarian programme, cutting its medical sector funding in 2002 by 75 per cent. and diverting to military use trucks supplied under the programme for delivering humanitarian goods inside Iraq.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish a revised version of the UK Dossier on Iraq of September 2002. [96950]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are no plans at present for the publication of a revision of the September dossier.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many UN inspectors were present in Iraq in each year between 1991 and 1998; and which *(a)* weapons of mass destruction, *(b)* their precursors and *(c)* missile delivery systems were destroyed in each of those years. [96750]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The numbers of inspectors on the ground in Iraq constantly varied during the period in question. As a general rule, there was an average of 80 inspectors in country at any given time.

Details of UNSCOM's activities in Iraq are available on the UN internet site at www.un.org/depts/unmovic.

Language Courses

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what language courses are offered by his Department to staff being posted overseas; and what the cost of these programmes has been in each year since 1997. [96303]

Mr. Straw: The amount of language training offered to staff posted overseas depends on the nature of the job to which they are posted. For those posted to a job which requires them to be able to speak a language to a certain level, they will receive the training necessary to reach the appropriate level. This can vary from a few months for basic training in the more straightforward European languages such as French or Spanish to up to two years for the hard languages like Arabic, Chinese or Japanese. For staff whose job overseas does not require them to be able to speak the local language, 100 hours language training is available to enable them to cope with the basic needs of everyday living. This 100 hours is also offered to spouses and partners.

The cost of this language training for each of the years since 1997 is as follows:

Year	£
1997–98	1,967,196
1998–99	2,262,308
1999–2000	2,255,815
2000–01	2,322,356
2001–02	2,347,896
2002–03	2,519,883

Osama bin Laden

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from intelligence sources concerning progress made towards the apprehension of Osama bin Laden; and what evidence he has collated that Osama bin Laden is alive. [95317]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received a number of reports concerning Osama bin Laden. It is the practice of successive Governments not to comment on intelligence matters. The Security and Intelligence Agencies are outside the scope of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Paragraph 6, Part I).

Palestine (British Citizens)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department will take measures to increase the safety of British citizens in Palestine; and if he will make a statement on the safety of international humanitarian workers in the Middle East. [95834]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to our current Travel Advice for Israel and the Occupied Territories which includes a section on safety/ humanitarian experts (www.fco.gov.uk).

Staff Vacancies

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what staffing vacancies there are in *(a)* the sections of his Department dealing with Eastern Europe and the applicant states and *(b)* in the respective British embassies. [96299]

Mr. Straw: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has no current vacancies in the sections of the Department which deals with Eastern Europe and the applicant states. There are three vacancies in the respective embassies, namely:

Bucharest, Second Secretary Political—officer preparing to go out.

Moscow, Entry Clearance Officer—officer preparing to go out.

Tirana, Deputy Head of Mission—officer preparing to go out.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what staffing vacancies there are in *(a)* sections of his Department dealing with the European Union and *(b)* in the relevant embassies. [96300]

Mr. Straw: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has one current staffing vacancy in the section of the Department which deals with the European Union. There are three in our Embassies in the European Union. The vacancies are:

Brussels, Embassy Registry Officer—to be selected shortly.

European Union Department (External), Twinning Officer—seeking candidate.

The Hague, Second Secretary-Political—officer preparing to go out.

Madrid, HM Ambassador—officer preparing to go out.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many telephone helplines are sponsored by his Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95717]

Mr. Rammell: The FCO will operate one national rate helpline once the Interactive Voice Recognition system for Consular Travel Advice is operational.

Temporary Promotions

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many and what proportion of civil servants based in *(a)* embassies and *(b)* the sections of his Department dealing with the European Union are on temporary promotion. [96301]

Mr. Straw: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has six civil servants in our Embassies and 12 in the sections of my Department who deal with the European Union who are on temporary promotion. These represent 2 per cent. and 12 per cent. of the totals respectively.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many and what proportion of civil servants based in *(a)* embassies and *(b)* the sections of his Department dealing with Eastern Europe and the applicant states are on temporary promotion. [96302]

Mr. Straw: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has eight civil servants in our embassies and seven in the sections of my Departments dealing with Eastern Europe and applicant states who are on temporary promotion. These represent 3 per cent. and 10 per cent. of the totals respectively.

Venezuela

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on the unrest in Venezuela; [96550]

(2) what impact the unrest in Venezuela has had on trade between the United Kingdom and Venezuela. [96551]

Mr. Rammell: We are following developments closely. In our regular contacts with the government and opposition we have stressed the importance of respect for the constitution and democratic principles, and supported the efforts of the Organisation of American States (OAS) to resolve the crisis.

We welcome the recent easing of tension and resumption of economic activity. Venezuelan ports closed since the beginning of December have reopened.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment the Government have made of the impact that illegal immigrants crossing the border from Zimbabwe may have upon *(a)* the economy and *(b)* HIV/AIDS levels in Botswana; and if he will make a statement. [96298]

Mr. Straw: Formal assessment of impact is a matter for the Government of Botswana. But we know that illegal immigration from Zimbabwe is placing an increasing strain on government services in Botswana.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Transport and Social Exclusion Report

Mr. Todd: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when the Social Exclusion Unit will publish its report on Transport and Social Exclusion; and if he will make a statement. [93832]

Mrs. Roche: The unit published an interim report on transport and social exclusion in May 2002.

The unit's final report will be published shortly.

Community Plan

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to publish his community plan; and what topics he expects it to cover. [94779]

Mr. McNulty: The Communities Plan was published on 5 February. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Gloucestershire County Council

Mr. Drew: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the reasons for the reduction in the grant for 2003–04 to Gloucestershire County Council;

what notice he gave to that authority of the change; and what discussions he plans to have with Gloucestershire County Council on the implications of the reduction of its grant. [97281]

Mr. Raynsford: In 2003–04 Gloucestershire County Council will receive a grant increase of £20.5 million or 7.1 per cent. This is £0.4 million less than the figure announced at the provisional settlement. The reason for the change is that, as is the case every year and as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister made clear in the formal consultation letter sent to all authorities at the time of the December announcement, the calculations for the final settlement use more up-to-date data than are available for the provisional settlement. Local authorities and the LGA know that the consequence of using updated data is that there are always changes in grant allocations between provisional and final settlement. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will explain the changes as they affect Gloucestershire to the council should they so wish.

Housing (Right to Buy)

Matthew Green: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the total value of discounts provided under the Right to Buy scheme was in each year since 1980. [90984]

Mr. McNulty: The total value of discounts on local authority sales into owner-occupation, including Right to Buy, in England since 1980–81 is presented below, along with the number and market value of properties purchased, expressed in real cost terms at 2001–02 prices.

Local authority dwelling sales into owner occupation—England

	All sales for owner occupation				*of which: Sales under RTB*	
	All sales (number)	*Market value (£ million)*	*Discount allowed (£ million)*	*RTB sales (number)*	*Market value (£ million)*	*Discount allowed (£ million)*
1980–81	68,200	2,680	1,040	2,300	n/a	n/a
1981–82	128,200	4,907	2,074	105,200	n/a	n/a
1982–83	181,200	6,551	2,774	167,100	n/a	n/a
1983–84	119,000	4,620	1,930	106,300	n/a	n/a
1984–85	91,400	3,838	1,687	77,500	n/a	n/a
Five year total	588,000	22,596	9,505	458,400		
Five year average	117,600	4,519	1,901	91,700		
1985–86	82,300	3,615	1,661	72,100	n/a	n/a
1986–87	85,300	4,115	1,909	76,700	n/a	n/a
1987–88	103,400	5,445	2,575	93,700	n/a	n/a
1988–89	144,600	8,349	4,149	135,700	n/a	n/a
1989–90	141,800	8,136	4,145	133,800	n/a	n/a
Five year total	557,500	29,660	14,440	512,100		
Five year average	111,500	5,932	2,888	102,400		
1990–91	81,200	4,656	2,440	76,300	n/a	n/a
1991–92	53,900	2,898	1,491	48,300	n/a	n/a
1992–93	42,100	2,149	1,096	37,700	n/a	n/a
1993–94	50,300	2,480	1,231	44,700	n/a	n/a
1994–95	46,200	2,268	1,128	43,300	2,163	1,091
Five year total	273,800	14,450	7,386	250,300		
Five year average	54,800	2,890	1,477	50,100		
1995–96	33,200	1,558	773	31,500	1,504	760
1996–97	35,200	1,607	774	33,200	1,537	765
1997–98	42,100	1,998	980	41,300	1,954	973
1998–99	41,100	2,012	1,006	40,300	1,972	999
1999–2000	55,000	2,845	1,367	54,300	2,797	1,358
Five year total	206,500	10,020	4,900	200,600	9,764	4,855
Five year average	41,300	2,004	980	40,100	1,953	971
2000–01	53,000	2,796	1,286	52,400	2,742	1,278
2001–02[1]	52,500	2,826	1,222	52,000	2,783	1,215
Cumulative totals						
1980–81 to 2001–02	1,731,300	82,348	38,740	1,525,800	n/a	n/a
1994–95 to 2001–02	358,300	17,909	8,537	348,300	17,452	8,439

[1] Denotes provisional.

Notes:

1. Monetary values are expressed in real terms (at 2001–02 prices, using GDP deflators) to the nearest £ million.
2. Number of sales are presented to the nearest 100.

Source:

DOE/DETR/DTLR/ODPM P1B housing activity quarterly returns.

Human Rights Act

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether inspectors of the Audit Commission are given training in the effect of the Human Rights Act 1998 upon their role, with particular reference to Article 6 of the ECHR. [96672]

Mr. Leslie: As part of their induction training, all Audit Commission inspectors are made aware of the implications of the Human Rights Act for the principles to be applied when carrying out their work.

Local Government Funding

Gregory Barker: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what representations his Department received *(a)* prior to and *(b)* since the announcement of the Local Government Finance settlement for East Sussex concerning the treatment of cost of living in the local government funding formula; and if he will make a statement; [96256]

(2) what representations he has received from East Sussex County Council concerning the effect that the Local Government Finance settlement will have on *(a)* education, *(b)* core services and *(c)* the level of council tax in the county; and if he will make a statement; [96258]

(3) what representations he has received from East Sussex County Council concerning the effect that the Local Government Finance settlement will have on public services in the county. [96262]

Mr. Raynsford: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister received two letters from East Sussex County Council in response to the consultation on the Review of Formula Grant Distribution and three letters during consultation on the provisional local government finance settlement 2003–04. East Sussex were also able to make representations on our proposals at a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green. These raised a number of issues including the implications of our proposals for education, core services, the level of council tax in the county and the consequences for public services. The cost of living and the level of the County's GDP were also raised. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister considered carefully all the comments made alongside all others as we took final decisions on the settlement.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the average local government finance settlement for 2003–04 is for county councils; and how much each county council is to receive. [96257]

Mr. Raynsford: The table shows the adjusted 20020–03 grant, the 2003–04 grant, the change in grant and the percentage change in grant for (i) county councils, (ii) total county councils and (iii) the average for county councils.

£ million

Local authority	*Adjusted 2002–03 Grant*	*2003–04 Grant*	*Change*	*Percentage change*
Bedfordshire	209,784	224,590	14,806	7.1
Buckinghamshire	233,998	249,072	15,074	6.4
Cambridgeshire	265,525	288,141	22,615	8.5
Cheshire	339,034	365,698	26,664	7.9
Cornwall	282,017	298,191	16,174	5.7
Cumbria	281,052	293,654	12,601	4.5
Derbyshire	397,119	427,956	30,837	7.8
Devon	358,546	373,500	14,954	4.2
Dorset	174,408	181,213	6,805	3.9
Durham	311,778	333,050	21,271	6.8
East Sussex	266,207	276,280	10,073	3.8
Essex	734,306	761,871	27,565	3.8
Gloucestershire	288,776	309,229	20,453	7.1
Hampshire	605,064	627,971	22,907	3.8
Hertfordshire	574,613	597,107	22,495	3.9
Kent	781,352	812,456	31,105	4.0
Lancashire	680,497	712,003	31,506	4.6
Leicestershire	298,556	318,181	19,624	6.6
Lincolnshire	360,893	385,279	24,386	6.8
Norfolk	420,255	446,132	25,878	6.2
North Yorkshire	294,210	309,455	15,245	5.2
Northamptonshire	351,203	380,354	29,151	8.3
Northumberland	182,768	191,953	9,185	5.0
Nottinghamshire	408,973	439,735	30,762	7.5
Oxfordshire	291,955	310,051	18,097	6.2
Shropshire	150,584	158,679	8,094	5.4
Somerset	257,167	274,081	16,913	6.6
Staffordshire	422,817	452,723	29,906	7.1
Suffolk	349,614	370,939	21,325	6.1
Surrey	458,205	481,468	23,263	5.1
Warwickshire	246,921	267,478	20,557	8.3
West Sussex	364,889	379,642	14,753	4.0
Wiltshire	204,417	222,637	18,219	8.9
Worcestershire	257,351	272,811	15,460	6.0
Total shire counties	12,104,854	12,793,577	688,723	5.7
Average shire counties	356,025	376,282	20,257	5.7

Mr. Maude: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what proportion of local government revenues were derived from council tax in each of the past five years. [96525]

Mr. Leslie: The proportion of local government revenue expenditure financed from the council tax in the last five years is tabled as follows:

Income from council tax as a percentage of local government spending

Year	*Percentage*
1998–99	25
1999–2000	25
2000–01	25
2001–02[1]	25
2002–03[2]	26

[1] Provisional figures
[2] Budgeted figures
Source:
1998–99 to 2001–02 Revenue Summary Returns. 2002–03 Budget Estimate Returns.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what proportion of local authorities' budgets were ring-fenced in each of the past five years. [96526]

Mr. Raynsford: Revenue: The following table shows the percentage of local authorities' budgets that has been ring-fenced for the years 1998–99 to 2002–03. It also shows the percentage of government funding to local authorities (Aggregate External Finance, AEF) that has been ring-fenced over this period. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has recently changed the definition of ring-fencing, to better encompass the range of grants that have been developed. The key distinction

remains between grants that attempt to control spending by the local authority, and those that do not. The full definitions are contained in the Freedoms and Flexibilities for Local Government announcement published on 26 November. The following table uses the new definitions. On the old definitions ring fencing in 2002–03 would be 14.8 per cent. of AEF and 11.1 per cent. of budgets.

Government are committed to keeping ring fencing to the minimum necessary. On current plans, the rising trend shown in the table will be reversed and fall below 10 per cent. by 2005–06.

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Percentage of AEF	3.9	4.9	6.5	7.4	12.5
Percentage of budget	3.7	4.1	5.6	7.3	9.8

The 26 November Freedoms and Flexibilities announcement detailed the further freedoms from ring-fencing for high performing councils.

Parliamentary Constituencies Act

Ian Lucas: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will amend schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 to make the Electoral Quota a fixed number and not recalculated at each periodical review. [94782]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to amend schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act, which in any event, would not be appropriate while the Boundary Commissions are engaged in the fifth general review of parliamentary constituencies. This will not be complete until late 2006.

Regional Bodies

Andrew Selous: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the locations of the offices of regional bodies and agencies, in the Eastern region for which his Department is responsible, broken down by county. [95060]

Mr. Leslie: The following table shows the locations of regional bodies and agencies in the East of England for which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible by county:

Name of organisation	*Address*	*Town*	*County*
Fire and Rescue Service	Southfields Road, Kempston	Bedford	Bedfordshire
Health and Safety Executive	14 Cardiff Road	Luton	Bedfordshire
Vehicle Certification Agency	Millbrook Proving Ground, Millbrook, Nr Amptill	Bedford	Bedfordshire
Valuation Office Agency	Chaddesley House, 12a Lime Street	Bedford	Bedfordshire
The Rent Service	1st Floor Clody House, 90–100 Collingdon Street	Luton	Bedfordshire
Community Fund	2nd Floor, Elizabeth House, 1 High Street, Chesterton	Cambridge	Cambridgeshire
Eastern Rent Assessment Panel	Great Eastern House, Tenison Road	Cambridge	Cambridgeshire
Fire and Rescue Service	Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Hinchingbrooke Cottage, Brampton Road	Huntingdon	Cambridgeshire
Valuation Office Agency	Block A Government Offices, Brooklands Avenue	Cambridge	Cambridgeshire
Valuation Tribunal Service	3rd Floor, Stuart House, St. Johns Street	Peterborough	Cambridgeshire
Valuation Office Agency	3rd Floor, Churchgate, New Road	Peterborough	Cambridgeshire
The Rent Service	1st Floor, 27–28 Bridge Street	Cambridge	Cambridgeshire
Fire and Rescue Service	Rayleigh Close, Rayleigh Road, Hutton	Brentwood	Essex
The Rent Service	1st Floor, St. Mary's House, 90 Victoria Road	Chelmsford	Essex
Valuation Office Agency	East Anglia Group Office, London House, New London Rd	Chelmsford	Essex
Valuation Office Agency	34 Southway	Colchester	Essex
Valuation Tribunal Service	Sherbourne House, 71 Collingwood Road	Witham	Essex
Health and Safety Executive	39 Baddow Road	Chelmsford	Essex
Fire and Rescue Service	Old London Road	Hertford	Hertfordshire
Valuation Office Agency	St. Albans Group Office, St. Peters House, 45 Victoria St	St. Albans	Hertfordshire
Valuation Tribunal Service	6a St. Andrew Street	Hertford	Hertfordshire
Audit Commission	St. Mary's House, Duke Street	Norwich	Norfolk
Valuation Office Agency	Rosebery Court, Central Avenue, St. Andrew's Business Park	Norwich	Norfolk
Fire and Rescue Service	Brigade Headquarters, Whitegates, Hethersett	Norwich	Norfolk
Valuation Tribunal Service	Queens House, Queens Road	Norwich	Norfolk
Health and Safety Executive	Kiln House, Pottergate	Norwich	Norfolk
The Rent Service	3rd Floor Rouen House, Rouen Road	Norwich	Norfolk
Audit Commission	Springvale Court, Hadleigh Road, Sproughton	Ipswich	Suffolk
Valuation Office Agency	St. Clare House, Greyfriars	Ipswich	Suffolk
Fire and Rescue Service	Headquarters, Colchester Road	Ipswich	Suffolk
The Rent Service	Adelphi House, Turret Lane	Ipswich	Suffolk
Valuation Tribunal Service	46–48 Westgate Street	Ipswich	Suffolk
East of England Local Government Conference	Flempton House, Flempton	Bury St Edmunds	Suffolk
East of England Regional Assembly	Flempton House, Flempton	Bury St Edmunds	Suffolk

Regional Government

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what has been the annual budget of *(a)* SEEDA, *(b)* SEERA and *(c)* GOSE in each year since their inception. [97408]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is set out in the table.

Annual budget-running costs

£ million

Year	*GOSE*	*SEEDA*	*South East England Regional Assembly*
1995–96	8.3	-	-
1996–97	8.4	-	-
1997–98	8.5	-	-
1998–99	8.6	[1]0	-
1999–2000	8.7	5.2	0.3

Annual budget-running costs

£ million

Year	*GOSE*	*SEEDA*	*South East England Regional Assembly*
2000–01	9.0	6.3	0.4
2001–02	9.7	7.1	1.0
2002–03	10.8	[2]11.2	1.3

[1] Set up costs incurred by GOSE and therefore came out of GOSE budgets

[2] Forecast spend from single capital pot allocation

Social Housing (Preston)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the ways in which the proposals in his statement to the House on 5 February on social housing will enable Preston City Council to respond to its backlog of social housing refurbishment. [96749]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's statement set out the proposals subsequently published in "Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future". This states that local authorities will be able to choose the right approach for additional investment in the stock that they own from the existing three options of: stock transfer; The Private Finance Initiative; and for high performing local authorities Arms Length Management Organisations. Authorities can use different options from this list for different parts of their stock, as part of an overarching strategy. This has been made possible through the removal of some of the barriers that prevented some authorities from using stock transfer. These options should enable Preston to respond to its backlog.

Standards Board

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many complaints have been made to the Standards Board about members of *(a)* parish, town and community councils and *(b)* other councils in each year since its inception; of those how many have (i) been upheld, (ii) been partially upheld, (iii) been rejected or withdrawn and (iv) remain undetermined; and if he will make a statement on the nature of the complaints upheld and the disciplinary measures imposed. [94871]

Mr. Leslie: The number of allegations of councillor misconduct received by the Standards Board for England between November 2001 (when new codes of conduct were first adopted) and 31 March 2002, and between 1 April 2002 and 31 December 2002 (the latest date for which full figures are available) are set out in Table A.

Table A

	November 2001 to March 2002	*April 2002 to December 2002*
Parish and town councils[1]	24	1,093
Other councils	34	927

[1] The Standards Board for England cannot consider allegations relating to members of community councils, which are Welsh local authorities.

The decisions taken on the 2,078 allegations listed above are set out in Table B.

Table B

Cases which the Standards Board decided should not be investigated	1,198
Cases awaiting a decision by the Standards Board	172
Cases under investigation	510
Cases where the investigating Ethical Standards Officer reported that there was no evidence of a breach of the code	60
Cases where the investigating Ethical Standards Officer reported that no action need be taken	102
Cases where the investigating Ethical Standards officer reported that the matter should be referred to the President of the Adjudication Panel[1]	36
Total	2,078

[1] On 16 January the Adjudication Panel heard the first case referred by an Ethical Standards Officer. The Panel concluded that the code had been breached, and the Councillor concerned was suspended for one year from being a member of his authority.

PRIME MINISTER

Al-Qaeda

Mr. Allen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the countries where Al-Qaeda and associated terrorist organisations are known to *(a)* maintain bases, *(b)* conduct training, *(c)* recruit personnel and *(d)* receive financial support; and what requests the Government has made to governments of such countries to prevent these activities. [96128]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) in the House on 5 February, 2003, *Official Report*, column 265–66.

E-mail Addresses

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Prime Minister by what e-mail address members of the public may contact him; when it became active; and the number of e-mails received in each month since activation. [97474]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Guildford (Ms Doughty) on 6 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 399W.

Euro

Keith Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister if he will take steps to enhance popular support for the euro prior to the assessment of the five economic tests set out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. [96877]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him in the House on 5 February, *Official Report*, columns 264–65.

Iraq

Mr. Pike: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list each action taken by *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the UN over the last 12 years to secure the disarmament of Iraq in accord with the ceasefire in 1991. [96136]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom has supported all the UN Security Council Resolutions relating to Iraqi disarmament obligations. We were one of the principal architects of UNSCR 1284 which

established UNMOVIC as the successor organisation to UNSCOM in 1999, and of UNSCR 1441 last December.

Reports of UNSCOM, UNMOVIC and IAEA activities in pursuit of their mandates to ensure Iraqi disarmament can be found on their respective websites www.un.org/depts/unmovic and www.iaea.org/worldatom.

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what the basis is for the figure of 20,000 Iraqi intelligence officers as cited in the dossier he published on Iraq on 3 February; [96141]

(2) what the basis is for the assertion in the dossier on Iraq he published on 3 February that all the hotels and offices used by UNMOVIC and IAEA have had surveillance equipment installed by Iraq. [96142]

The Prime Minister: It is a Government document based—as stated on its front cover—on a number of sources, including intelligence material. The first and third sections of the document, which gave rise to most of the media coverage on publication, are based largely on intelligence material. The first section describes the extreme lengths to which Saddam has gone to hide his weapons and obstruct the inspectors. The third section of the document describes the impact of the regime on the Iraqi people. The second section describes how the regime is structured. Some of that is based on work by Dr. Ibrahim al-Marashi which, as my office have already made clear, in retrospect, we should have acknowledged.

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what the basis is for the assertion in his dossier on Iraq published on 3 February that Iraq's Government has sought out personal information on UNMOVIC personnel in order to exploit any weaknesses. [96370]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him today.

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the terrorist groups he believes to have links with the Iraqi Government. [96924]

The Prime Minister: Iraq has a long record of support for terrorism; this includes support for radical Islamic groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Palestinian terrorist groups (e.g. Abu Nidal), the activities of the MeK against Iran, payments to the families of suicide bombers as well as the assassination of political opponents in Iraq and abroad. Saddam Hussein tried to assassinate President Bush and the Emir of Kuwait in 1993.

For links with al-Qaeda, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness West (Mr. Kennedy) in the House on 5 February 2003, *Official Report*, columns 265–66.

Israel (Defence Exports)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with the Israeli Labour leader regarding the liberalisation of defence exports to Israel. [94577]

The Prime Minister: I met Amram Mitzna on 9 January and our discussions were on the middle east peace process. The issue of defence exports was raised and I made clear that there is no arms embargo on Israel. We continue to support Israel's right to defend itself, within international law; and to buy arms from British suppliers for this in accordance with the consolidated European Union and national arms export licensing criteria.

Lord Birt

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister on what policy areas Lord Birt is working. [96478]

The Prime Minister: Lord Birt was appointed in October 2001 as my unpaid strategy adviser. The nature of Lord Birt's work is to provide me and other Cabinet Ministers with long-term internal strategic analysis and policy thinking.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Prime Minister how many times since 2001 he has taken flights within his official duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied him on each trip. [95381]

The Prime Minister: I travel making the most efficient and cost-effective arrangements. My travel arrangements are in accordance with the arrangements for official travel set out in chapter 7 of the Ministerial Code, and the accompanying guidance document, Travel by Ministers.

My office keeps records of my home and overseas travel. Since January 2001, I have been on 85 RAF flights, including six by RAF helicopter. I have made three flights by chartered helicopter. A judgment is always made about what is the most appropriate form of travel in the time available. In line with normal practice appropriate officials and security personnel accompanied me.

Ministers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how many Government *(a)* Secretaries of State, *(b)* other Ministers, *(c)* Parliamentary Private Secretaries and *(d)* Whips have been in place in each year from 1980–81 to 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [95826]

The Prime Minister: The numbers of Government Ministers and Whips are limited by the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975 and the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975.

The numbers of Ministers for the years requested are set out in publications such as Dod's Parliamentary Companion and British Political Facts, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Parliamentary Private Secretaries are not Ministers. The normal rules on their appointment are one each per Cabinet Minister and Minister of State.

HEALTH

Learning Disability

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the NHS budget has been spent on learning disability in each year since 1979. [94418]

Jacqui Smith: Our White Paper, "Valuing People", A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century, published in March 2001, encourages better integration of health and social care services for people with learning disabilities. To gain a full picture of expenditure on this group it is necessary to look at trends in both areas. Their combined spending on learning disability in 2000–2001 was 3.3 billion.

"Valuing People" also encouraged the National Health Service to treat learning disabled people in mainstream services rather than specialist services wherever appropriate. Information about NHS expenditure on learning disability is available only for specialist learning disability services. It is not collected separately on the expenditure associated with their use of primary and secondary care services. Available details of the proportion of total expenditure that went on social services and specialist NHS services for learning disabled people are shown in the table. "Valuing People" announced two new funds. In April 2002, we introduced the learning disability development fund (LDDF). The £22.6 million LDDF revenue comes from that element of the old long-stay adjustment within general health allocations, which is released as former long-stay patients die. This is being targeted on the priorities set out in Valuing People, including modernising day services, completing the re-provision of the remaining long stay hospitals and enhancing leadership in learning disability services. LDDF revenue is also being used to fund the Valuing People support team. LDDF capital, of £16.7 million in 2002–03, is supporting the development of integrated health and social services facilities for children and young people with severe disabilities and complex needs, specialist services for people with severe challenging behaviour and supported living approaches for people living with older carers.

The £2.3 million implementation support fund was introduced for three years from April 2001 and is focussing on advocacy, a national learning disability information centre and helpline, in partnership with Mencap and a number of development projects.

Financial year	*Percentage of total NHS expenditure on specialist learning disability services*	*Percentage of total social services expenditure on learning disability services*
1978–79	3.6	[1]—
1979–80	3.7	[1]—
1980–81	3.6	[1]—
1981–82	3.6	[1]—
1982–83	3.6	[1]—
1983–84	3.5	[1]7.0
1984–85	3.4	7.3
1985–86	3.4	7.5
1986–87	3.2	7.6
1987–88	3.2	8.0
1988–89	3.5	8.3
1989–90	3.5	8.8
1990–91	3.3	9.3
1991–92	3.7	9.9
1992–93	3.8	10.2
1993–94	3.9	10.3
1994–95	3.7	[2]12.8
1995–96	3.6	12.9
1996–97	3.7	13.0
1997–98	3.7	13.3
1998–99	3.6	13.8
1999–2000	3.5	13.6
2000–01	3.4	13.6
2001–02	3.2	13.6
2001–02	3.2	[3]—

Notes:

[1] Figures for social care expenditure on learning disability are unavailable for the years 1978–79 to 1982–83.

[2] The proportion of social care expenditure spent on the learning disabled changed significantly from 1994–95 mainly because the basis of data collection changed from that year. The revised data collection more accurately reflected CIPFA accounting conventions. Figures for expenditure on the learning disabled from 1994–95 include fieldwork, senior management and purchasing costs and management and support costs.

Alzheimer's Disease

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's in each year since 1992. [96097]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not routinely collect such information.

Area Child Protection Committees

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list ACPCs which have representatives from Youth Offending Teams sitting on them. [95989]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally.

In accordance with "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (1999), the Government's child protection guidance, the area child protection committee (ACPC) should make appropriate arrangements to involve youth offending teams in its work as needed.

Audiology Treatment

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the Government's response to the Audit Commission proposals that audiology waiting times should be collected and targeted. [95986]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The Department collects data on waits for first outpatient appointments and inpatient admissions. This provides a broad overview of waiting times for a range of services provided by consultants. These services cover consultation, diagnosis and treatment and the information has proven itself to be valuable for managing the national health service.

By reducing maximum waits for outpatient and inpatient treatment, we will drive down waiting times across the board.

We are in the process of modernising the hearing aid service and demand for hearing aids tends to rise as soon as sites are modernised and digital hearing aids are available free on the NHS. The modernisation project team at the Royal National Institute for the Deaf and the Modernisation Agency are working with sites to help them reduce waiting times and we are currently testing ways of boosting NHS capacity by involving private sector partners.

Carers (Leeds)

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* carers and *(b)* young carers of school age there are in (i) the Leeds, West constituency and (ii) the city of Leeds; what support is given to (A) carers and (B) young carers of school age; and if he will make a statement. [96975]

Jacqui Smith: The information on numbers of carers is not held centrally.

Carers are entitled to an assessment to determine their needs as carers and eligibility for support. The carers grant, worth £100 million next year, provides money for local councils to provide short breaks for carers to enable them to continue in their caring role. Following my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement in July 2002, the grant will continue until 2006, during which time it will more than double to £185 million to provide extended care and 130,000 further breaks to carers.

Additionally for young carers, we are supporting the development of over 100 projects across the country to give carers of school age access to appropriate advice, information and support or leisure.

Child Protection

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance based on the conclusions of the Victoria Climbié inquiry has been issued to social services departments about the criteria which must be satisfied before a case involving a vulnerable child is closed. [96036]

Jacqui Smith: No guidance has yet been issued based on the conclusions of the Victoria Climbié inquiry. We have announced that we will be issuing new guidance, to reach all professional staff dealing with the safeguarding of children, within three months of 28 January 2003, the date of publication of the inquiry's report.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what formal links operate between multi-agency public protection panels and area child protection committees. [96064]

Jacqui Smith: No formal links between multi-agency public protection panels (MAPPPs) and area child protection committees (ACPCs) currently exist.

The Joint Chief Inspectors' report, "Safeguarding Children", published on 14 October 2002, contains a recommendation that the Home Office should ensure that the relationship between MAPPPs and ACPCs is clarified.

The Government have welcomed the publication of this report and will respond in full to its recommendations in the spring.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce child safeguards plans modelled on youth offending teams. [96107]

Jacqui Smith: On 30 October 2002, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that we will be publishing a Green Paper on Children at Risk. We are examining a range of options, including those relating to child protection and youth offending, as part of the work on the Green Paper.

Children Act

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend the range of agencies included in sections 27 and 47 of the Children Act 1989. [96112]

Jacqui Smith: On 30 October 2002, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that we will be publishing a Green Paper on Children at Risk. We are examining a range of options relating to possible reforms of child protection, and its related legislation, as part of the work to develop the Green Paper.

Children in Care

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements are in place for social services departments responsible for looked after children to alert other agencies by electronic means about children who go missing from their usual place of residence. [95994]

Jacqui Smith: "Children Missing from Care and Home—a guide to good practice", was issued to every English local authority in November 2002, under section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which means that, expect in exceptional circumstances, councils must follow its advice.

The guidance requires that, where a child in care is assessed to be missing, the authority responsible for their care must ensure that all is being done to locate them and return them to a place of safety. In order to do this the authority will have to inform the police and other relevant agencies and should also usually inform the child's parents. In individual cases, local authorities will be responsible for deciding on the most effective method for alerting the police and other agencies.

Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 670W, on the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health, how many days per month the *(a)* chairman, *(b)* chief executive

and *(c)* each commission are contracted to work in their duties for the new Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health. [96086]

Mr. Lammy: The Chair of the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health is appointed to work around 10–12 days a month. Commissioners have a time commitment of around 2.5 days a month. The Chief Executive is contracted on a full-time basis.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many cardiac interventionists his Department plans to recruit from abroad; [95633]

(2) how many cardiac interventionists his Department has recruited from abroad. [95634]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* The international recruitment of doctors makes an important contribution to the expansion of the medical workforce required by the NHS Plan.

As a result of the International Recruitment campaign, two cardiologists have been recruited by the national health service.

The number of cardiac interventionists who will be recruited through this campaign is dependent upon the number of trusts that wish to fill vacant posts.

Day Care Services

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to regulate day care services for adults. [96404]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* During the passage of the Care Standards Act 2000 we undertook to review, a year after the creation of the National Care Standards Commission, the possibilities for introducing regulation of day services which provide personal or nursing care. We are currently considering how to conduct the review and will publish our conclusions later in the year.

Drugs Bill

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total drugs bill was for the *(a)* hospital and community health service and *(b)* family health service for the most recent year for which figures are available. [95736]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is shown in the table.

Total drug expenditure, England 2001–02

	Outturn (£ million)	*Growth (percentage)*
Family Health Service Drug Expenditure	5,707	10.7
Hospital Community and Health Services Drug Expenditure	1,723	12.6
Total Drug Expenditure	7,430	11.1

External Consultancy

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92238]

Mr. Lammy: Expenditure by the Department, each agency and non-departmental public body (NBPB) on external consultancy each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03, is shown in the table.

£million

	Financial year							
	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Department	19.363	14.699	12.694	7.332	8.132	6.531	6.800	[1]2.943
Agencies								
MDA	0.077	0.054	0.149	0.075	0.182	0.151	0.088	[2]0.130
MCA	0.154	0.229	0.330	0.515	0.001	0.411	0.449	[2]0.204
NHS Estates	1.692	1.149	1.025	0.926	1.705	3.064	4.339	[2]4.588
NHS PA	[3]—	[3]—	0.008	0.022	0.003	0.47	0.007	[2]0.005
NHS PASA	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	0.865	1.127	[2]0.581
Exec NDPBs								
CHI	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	0.969	0.976	[2]0.631
GSCC	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	0.035	[2]1.513
HFEA	0.028	0.072	0.005	0.019	0.033	0.005	0.451	[2]0.565
NCSC	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	0.631	[2]0.905
NRPB	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025	0.025	[2]0.050
NBSB	0.059	0.061	0.063	0.074	0.404	0.562	0.305	[2]0.202
PHLSB	0.076	0.684	0.555	0.843	0.856	0.911	0.495	[2]0.440

[1] Spend to December 2002
[2] Planned spend
[3] Organisation not established
Notes:
MDA—Medical Devices Agency
MCA—Medicines Control Agency
NHS Estates—Estates Agency
NHS PA—Pensions Agency
NHS PASA—Purchasing & Supply Agency
CHI—Commission for Health Improvement

GSCC—General Social Care Council
HFEA—Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority
NCSC—National Care Standards Commission
NRPB—National Radiological Protection Board
NBSB—National Biological Standards Board
PHLSB—Public Health Laboratory Service Board
Figures have only been provided for Executive NDPBs as advisory NDPBs are non spending bodies and therefore do not hold budgets.

Food Standards Agency

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the results of annual public opinion polls conducted by the Food Standards Agency on its effectiveness in gaining public trust; what plans he has to commission an independent appraisal from *(a)* the National Audit Office and *(b)* other bodies; and if he will make a statement. [96130]

Ms Blears: The Food Standards Agency (FSA) commissions an annual survey of public attitudes to food safety and standards issues that also examines levels of consumer confidence in the FSA. The surveys were undertaken by an independent research company, following a competitive tendering exercise carried out under Government procurement guidelines. The first Consumer Attitudes Survey was conducted during the first year of the FSA's establishment and was published in February 2001. The second survey was published in February 2002 and the third will be published shortly. Copies of the surveys are available on the FSA's website at www.food.gov.uk or on request from the FSA.

Therefore I see no reason to commission an independent study to measure levels of public trust in the FSA. It is a matter for the Comptroller and Auditor General, as head of the National Audit Office, to determine which subjects to review and whether or not to report to Parliament on them. I understand the NAO currently has an examination of service delivery under way, one part of which is reviewing aspects of the performance achieved by the FSA. The Comptroller and Auditor General will report to Parliament on this in due course.

Free Eye Tests

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many free eye tests were given to *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* other people in (i) West Sussex and (ii) England in each year since 1997. [96099]

Mr. Lammy: The table shows the number of national health service sight tests paid for in West Sussex Health Authority for 1997–98 to 2001–02. Figures for the number of sight tests by age are not collected centrally. The nearest eligibility category for pensioners is those aged 60 and over.

Eligibility to NHS sight tests was extended to those aged 60 and over from 1 April 1999. There was an increase of 2.4 million sight tests between 1998–99 and 1999–2000. It is fair to assume that the vast majority of this increase was due to newly eligible people aged 60 or over obtaining NHS sight tests.

General ophthalmic services: number of sight tests paid for in West Sussex Health Authority and England for the year 1997–98 to 2001–02

Thousand

Year	*Sight tests for those aged under 60*	*Sight tests for those aged 60 and over*	*Total number of sight tests*
West Sussex			
1997–98	—	—	95.4
1998–99	—	—	97.3
1999–2000	75.6	73.7	149.3
2000–01	77.0	77.4	154.4
2001–02	68.1	84.2	152.3
England			
1997–98	—	—	6,991.3
1998–99	—	—	6,992.3
1999–2000	6,038.0	3,301.4	9,399.4
2000–01	5,813.8	3,753.3	9,567.1
2001–02	5,794.4	4,013.0	9,807.4

GPs

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioner vacancies there are in the Forest of Dean constituency. [96543]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* The information requested is not available centrally. Statistics on general practitioner vacancies were collected by health authority area. For the twelve months between 1 March 2001 and 28 February 2002, the number of GP vacancies within the former Gloucestershire health authority area was 28.

Health Centre (Rossendale)

Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the LIFT funding for a new health centre in Stacksteads, Rossendale is *(a)* time limited and *(b)* dependent on the site chosen for the project; and who is responsible for imposing such conditions. [95594]

Jacqui Smith: The central funding provided by the Department to support the East Lancashire local investment finance trust (LIFT) is being made available during the financial years 2002–03 and 2003–04.

Prioritised LIFT schemes for the East Lancashire LIFT were published in their strategic service development plan in August 2002, all of which have been agreed by local stakeholders.

Herbal Medicines

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adverse reactions to *(a)* herbal medicines and *(b)* vitamins and minerals there have been in each year since October 1996. [94225]

Ms Blears: The Yellow Card Scheme provides for voluntary reporting of suspected adverse drug reactions by general practitioners, hospital doctors, dentists, coroners, pharmacists and nurses. As the scheme is voluntary, not all adverse reactions are reported. The Yellow Card Scheme was extended to include unlicensed herbal remedies in October 1996.

The table provides a breakdown of the number of reports of suspected adverse reactions received through the Yellow Card Scheme in association with products containing herbal ingredients or vitamin and minerals.

	Number of reports of suspected adverse reactions	
Received year	*Herbals*	*Vitamins and minerals*
1996	36	106
1997	46	106
1998	40	129
1999	64	159
2000	139	129
2001	74	90
2002	63	47

It is important to remember that a report of a suspected adverse reaction does not necessarily mean that the herbal product, vitamin or mineral caused it.

Herbal medicines and vitamin and mineral products are often supplied without prescription, and are often taken without advice from doctors or pharmacists. It is generally recognised that the reporting rate for medicines supplied over the counter (OTC) is lower than that of suspected adverse reactions associated with prescription medicines. To encourage reporting of suspected adverse reactions with OTC medicines, the Yellow Card Scheme was recently extended to include nurses as reporters, and will be extended to include patient reporting via NHS Direct in the near future.

HFEA

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he will take to prevent a conflict of interest arising from membership of the HFEA Committee by holders of a licence issued by the Human Fertilization Embryology Authority; and if he will make a statement. [93393]

Ms Blears: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has strict protocols on this matter and requires members to declare conflicts of interest at any meetings and on any issues being discussed by the Authority. HFEA members' interests are listed in the HFEA annual reports.

Hospital Discharge

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when his Department plans to issue the hospital discharge workbook in *(a)* hard copy and *(b)* electronic form; [95738]

(2) what the total cost of revising the hospital discharge workbook was; and what the reasons for the delay in revising the document were; [95739]

(3) what assessment he has made of the dangers of discharging older people from hospital on a Friday. [95740]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 5 February 2003]:* "Discharge from Hospital: Pathway, Process and Practice", was published on 27 January 2003 on the Department's website. Hard copies are available, free of charge, on request. The total production cost of revising the workbook was £94,658. We waited for organisational change in the national health service to be completed to ensure that the revision would remain relevant. The revision was commissioned in summer 2002 and completed in six months.

The workbook emphasises the importance of ensuring that all the necessary support services for effective hospital discharge are in place for patients, irrespective of the day on which their discharge from hospital occurs.

In-patient Beds (Inner London)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the demand was for in-patient beds in inner London hospitals in each year since 1990. [94289]

Mr. Hutton: This information is not held centrally. Information on the average daily number of beds for each national health service trust and with summaries for England and NHS regions from 1996 is available from the Department of Health website at http://www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity/

Interferon

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the drug pegylated interferon is recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence for statutory funding by primary care trusts; and if he will make a statement. [95855]

Ms Blears: The Department and the Welsh Assembly Government asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to appraise the clinical and cost effectiveness of pegylated interferon alpha 2a and alpha 2b for hepatitis C as part of its '7th Wave' work programme. A first draft of the guidance, the appraisal consultation document, will be issued for consultation to the registered stakeholders in the summer, and the guidance is due to be issued in November 2003.

IT Projects

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the full results of the Gateway Review process into *(a)* proposed upgrades of the NHSnet, *(b)* reprocurement of the NHSnet, *(c)* a national scheme for electronic bookings, *(d)* replacement of the Nation-wide Clearing Service (NWCS) and *(e)* a national scheme for electronic patient records; and if he will make a statement. [94600]

Ms Blears: New and large-scale procurement projects in central Government are subject to Gateway Reviews. The process examines a project at critical stages to provide assurance that it can progress successfully to the next stage. The Review provides project teams with advice and guidance from fellow practitioners and in order to maintain the integrity of the advice, this is held to be completely confidential by both parties. The Gateway Review process is not an audit.

Recommendations are made to the senior responsible officer, in this case Sir John Pattison, on good practice in key areas such as programme management, risk management and involving key stakeholders. The national programme is taking their key recommendations on board as appropriate to help prepare for implementation and the next stage in the Gateway Review.

The upgrade to NHSnet capacity has been approved by Her Majesty's Treasury and is not subject to the Gateway Review process.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the Regional Information Systems Plan at the Wessex Regional Health Authority with regard to current national NHS IT projects; and if he will make a statement. [94601]

Ms Blears: A number of lessons have been learnt about the effective procurement of information systems for the health services. These have been taken into account in national guidance and procurement procedures.

Mental Health

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department collates concerning the time taken for manic depression to be diagnosed from initial consultation to final diagnosis. [96638]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not collected centrally.

NHS Treatment Abroad

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was to the NHS *(a)* in total and *(b)* per patient of the 234 patients treated for joint replacement and cataract operations in Germany and France under the Government pilot. [92556]

Mr. Hutton: The original overseas treatment pilot project undertaken by the Government treated a total of 190 patients of which 109 were treated in France and the remaining 81 in Germany.

The total cost of treatment within the project was £1.1 million.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his most recent estimate is of the forecast financial surplus or deficit for 2002–03 for each trust within the Thames Valley Strategic Health Authority area. [95606]

Ms Blears: The audited information in respect of the financial performance of national health service trusts in the Thames Valley Strategic Health Authority area for 2002–03 will be published in their annual accounts. The audited information will be available centrally in autumn 2003.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the projected overspend for each NHS trust in this financial year. [96409]

Mr. Hutton: The audited information in respect of the 2002–03 financial performance of all national health service trusts will be published in their individual annual accounts. The audited information will be available centrally in autumn 2003. We have no plans to publish unaudited information.

Patients Forums

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 686W, when he expects the first patient forum to be established; and what the timetable is for the establishment of patient forums across the country. [96085]

Mr. Lammy: The Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health is responsible for recruiting members, appointing staff and putting in place the infrastructure for patients' forums. This process will be well under way by the time community health councils are abolished in September and the Commission will be working towards the achievement of full coverage of forums by the end of the year.

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* primary care trust allocations are for (i) 2003–04, (ii) 2004–05 and (iii) 2005–06 and *(b)* notional primary care trust allocations will be for those years on the assumption that the allocations formula for 2002–03 was still used, for (A) each primary care trust within the Thames Valley Strategic Health Authority area and (B) the Thames Valley as a whole. [95605]

Ms Blears: Central information regarding allocations is held on primary care trust (PCT) basis. PCT revenue allocations for 2003–04, 2004–05 and 2005–06 in the Thames Valley Strategic Health Authority area are shown in the table.

Information on what PCT allocations would have been using the formula for 2002–03 is not available. Having introduced changes to the weighted capitation formula, following a wide ranging review, there was no operational reason to produce notional allocations based on an old formula.

Thousand

	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
Bracknell Forest	76,897	83,840	91,268
Cherwell Vale	91,592	100,434	109,922
Chiltern and South Bucks	117,675	128,126	139,308
Milton Keynes	167,638	183,498	200,679
Newbury and Community	74,039	81,251	89,016
North East Oxfordshire	50,193	54,983	60,151
Oxford City	142,974	155,681	169,243
Reading	160,450	175,771	192,392
Slough	98,923	108,728	119,200
South East Oxfordshire	57,710	63,163	69,075
South West Oxfordshire	139,950	152,859	166,890
Vale of Aylesbury	143,593	157,179	171,899
Windsor, Ascot and Maidenhead	129,700	141,407	153,916
Wokingham	100,104	109,406	119,512
Wycombe	107,852	117,956	128,925
Thames Valley Strategic Health Authority total	1,659,291	1,814,281	1,981,395

Salt

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he is taking to reduce the level of salt in the diet; [95649]

(2) if he will introduce a programme informing the British public of the dangers of excessive consumption of salt. [95651]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 7 February 2003]*: The NHS Plan committed action by 2004 to "initiatives to work with the food industry—including manufacturers and caterers—to improve the overall balance of diet including salt, fat and sugar in food, working with the Food Standards Agency". 75 per cent. of salt in the diet is from processed foods. The Department and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) have been in discussions with industry to gradually reduce the level of salt in manufactured foods, where it is present beyond technical, safety and palatability needs. Sectors of industry have taken some action during the last few years to reduce the salt content of the food they sell. Scope for further reductions have been identified and the Department and the FSA are working with key industry bodies to progress action.

The Department and the FSA also plan to hold a meeting with wider stakeholders later this year to raise the profile of the issue and highlight the role of all stakeholders in addressing dietary salt intakes—including health, manufacturers, retailers, caterers and voluntary organisations. The stakeholders meeting will be held following publication of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition Sub-group report on salt and health.

Following the publication of this report, the Department and the FSA also plan to more widely publicise the impact of salt and health to consumers and the action they can take to reduce their intakes. At present, the issue of salt reduction is covered in FSA leaflets and on it's website. It is also highlighted on the NHS Direct website.

The five a day communications programme highlights that, although the fruit and vegetables in processed food count towards the five a day target, processed foods high in salt, fat or added sugars should only be eaten in moderation and that it is important to always read the label.

Special Advisers and Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92452]

Mr. Lammy: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 31 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 1056W, regarding special advisers across all Departments.

The table shows information on the number of press officers in the Department.

£

	Numbers	*Cost*
1994–95	12	[1]—
1995–96	9	[1]—
1996–97	15	[1]—
1997–98	16	[2]1,062
1998–99	18	[2]1,122
1999–2000	21	[2]1,253
2000–01	22	[2]1,233
2001–02	22	[2]1,279
2002–03	[3]—	[3]—

[1] The Department's staffing cost information for Press and Publicity Division for 1994–97 does not separately identify the cost of the press office or individual press officers. This level of detail has only been available since 1997–98.

[2] A direct comparison between the number of press officers and cost, cannot be made. The budget for the Department's media centre includes support staff and other administrative costs as well as press officers.

[3] For the financial year 2002–03 the final figures are not yet available.

Note:

The increased costs reflect increased/new activity.

St. George's Hospital

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many delayed discharges from St. George's Hospital, Tooting, there were in 2002. [94323]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not collected centrally by the Department.

Surgical Instruments (Sterilisation)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the policy to establish automated decontamination services for sterilising surgical instruments in NHS hospitals; [96053]

(2) how many NHS hospitals in England operate automated decontamination services for sterilising surgical instruments. [96054]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 5 February 2003]*: There are 182 national health service trusts in England, covering 240 central sterile departments. All these departments carry out decontamination using automated processes. Some instruments are not compatible with automated processes, however and therefore require to be cleaned manually. NHS Estates has issued guidance on how this should be done.

Waiting Times (Hull and East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people are waiting for examinations for *(a)* cancer and *(b)* heart defects in Hull and the East Riding; and what the waiting times were in the past 12 months; [92844]

(2) what the average waiting times and the number of people waiting were for referral to *(a)* cancer and *(b)* heart specialists in the Hull and East Riding in the last 12 months. [92845]

Jacqui Smith: Speciality based waiting time data for inpatients and outpatients, broken down by national health service trust, are available at www.doh.gov.uk/waitinq times.

Cancer waiting time data are available at www.doh.gov.uk/cancerwaits.

Source:

Department of Health website.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients waited longer than eight weeks after being referred to a *(a)* cancer and *(b)* heart specialist by their GP in Hull and the East Riding in the past 12 months. [92846]

Jacqui Smith: One patient waited longer than eight weeks in the period January to December 2002 after being referred to a cancer specialist.

There were 1,342 patients who waited more than eight weeks in the period January to December 2002. Currently the average wait to be seen is just over eight weeks.

Source of Information:

Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust.

TREASURY

Bowel Cancer

Tim Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have died from bowel cancer in the UK in each of the last 10 years. [95991]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tim Loughton, dated 10 February 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the number of people who have died from bowel cancer in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years. (95991)

The most recent available mortality data are for the calendar year 2001. Figures for each year from 1992 to 2001 are given in the table below.

Number of deaths from bowel cancer[1], United Kingdom, 1992 to 2001[2]

Calendar year	*Number of deaths*
1992	19,945
1993	18,667
1994	18,332
1995	18,174
1996	17,858
1997	17,564
1998	17,373
1999	17,001
2000	16,568
2001	16,491

[1] Bowel cancer was defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9) codes 152 to 154, and the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) code C17 to C21. In England and Wales, and Northern Ireland, ICD9 was used until 2000 and ICDl0 from 2001. In Scotland, ICD9 was used until 1999 and ICD10 from 2000.

[2] Figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland are for deaths registered in each calendar year. Figures for England and Wales for 1992 are based on deaths registered in that calendar year and for 1993 to 2001 on deaths occurring in each calendar year.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the projected five year survival rates were for people diagnosed with bowel cancer in each of the last 10 years. [95992]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tim Loughton, dated 10 February 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the projected five year survival rates for people diagnosed with bowel cancer in each of the last 10 years. (95992)

The most recent ten year period for which five year survival rates are available relates to cases diagnosed in England in 1986 to 1995. No figures are available for bowel cancer as a whole. However, around 95% of bowel cancers occur in the colon and rectum. The available figures for adult patients (ages 15–99 years) are given in the table below.

Five year relative survival rates (%) for patients diagnosed with cancers of the colon and rectum, England*

Year of diagnosis		*Men*	*Women*
1986–90[1]	Colon	39	39
	Rectum	37	39
1993–95[2]	Colon	44	43

* Cancers of the colon and rectum are coded 153 and 154, respectively, in the International Classification of Diseases Ninth Revision; and CIS and C19–20, respectively, in the Tenth Revision.

[1] Coleman MP, Babb P, Damiecki P, Grosclaude P, Honjo S, Jones J, Knerer G, Pitard A, Quinn MJ, Sloggett A, De Stavola B. Cancer Survival Trends in England and Wales, 1971–1995: deprivation and NHS Region. Studies in Medical and Population Subjects No.61. London: The Stationery Office, 1999.

[2] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Expodata/Spreadsheets/D4924.xls The methodology used to calculate the survival rates for patients diagnosed in 1993–95 is closely based on that used to analyse cancer survival trends over the period 1971 to 1990[1]. Figures for cancers of the rectum are not available.

Children at Risk

Tim Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he proposes to produce the Children's Green Paper; [96034]

(2) if he will ensure that in any new identification, referral and tracking system created by the Green Paper on Children at Risk, the same assessment tool is used for all young people at complex risk, whether the risk identified is of crime, exclusion from school, mental health problems, or other risk; [96000]

(3) when he plans to publish the Green Paper on Children at Risk; [96004]

(4) what action he is taking to ensure that services for adults in difficulty consider the needs of the adult's family as well as the individual needs, through *(a)* the changes proposed in the Children at Risk Green Paper and *(b)* the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy; [96002]

(5) if he will propose a statutory obligation that there be a key worker for any child at complex risk, and that the key worker *(a)* co-ordinate (i) a multi-professional

assessment and (ii) the design of a care package and *(b)* ensure that the assessment and care package are *(i)* delivered and (ii) monitored. [96001]

Mr. Boateng: The Government recognise that professionals working with adults in difficulties need to consider carefully the interests of the children involved. The National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, which is being prepared by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit for publication this summer, is considering the impact of alcohol misuse upon families.

The Green Paper on Children at Risk, to be published this spring, is examining the range of services available to children and young people who are at risk of educational failure, offending, victimisation and abuse, and poor health. The Green Paper will look more broadly at how families can be best supported, including considering how the adverse impact on children of parental health issues, such as substance misuse, can be minimised.

Food (VAT)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether proposed European legislation will change the unilateral ability of the UK to maintain British exemption of food from VAT; and whether the British endorsement of the EU agreement with Malta regarding the exemption of food from VAT in Malta changes the existing arrangements between the UK and the EU on the exemption of food from VAT. [96578]

John Healey: No. The UK's right to maintain its zero rates of VAT is entirely unaffected by any proposed European legislation or by the agreement with Malta.

Independent Financial Advisers

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the number of independent financial advisers who have recommended split capital trusts. [96630]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority tell me that information of this kind is not collected by them.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the availability of professional indemnity insurance to independent financial advisers who have recommended split capital trusts. [96631]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority does not separately identify independent financial advisers who have recommended split capital investment trusts. Accordingly, we are unable to make a separate assessment of the availability of professional indemnity insurance to them.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with the Financial Services Authority concerning the professional indemnity insurance requirements of independent financial advisers beyond June 2003. [96866]

Ruth Kelly: Treasury officials hold frequent discussions with the Financial Services Authority about a wide range of issues.

Liver Disease

Tim Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have died in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years from causes linked to liver disease; and how many of these were connected with *(a)* cancer and *(b)* alcohol damage. [96174]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tim Loughton, dated 10 February 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the number of people who have died in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years from causes linked to liver disease; and how many of these were connected with *(a)* cancer and *(b)* alcohol damage. (96174)

The table below shows the number of deaths where the underlying cause of death was due to *(a)* primary liver cancer, *(b)* alcoholic liver disease, other forms of chronic liver disease, viral hepatitis and other diseases of the liver. The most recent available mortality data are for the calendar year 2001.

Number of deaths from liver cancer, diseases of the liver and viral hepatitis[1], United Kingdom, 1992 to 2001[2]

Calendar year	*(a) Liver cancer*	*(b) Alcoholic liver disease*	*Other forms of chronic liver disease*	*Viral hepatitis*	*Other diseases of the liver*
1992	1,850	1,777	1,794	167	341
1993	1,977	1,732	1,807	82	461
1994	2,031	1,941	1,924	72	434
1995	2,038	2,312	1,978	169	438
1996	2,120	2,572	2,027	165	474
1997	2,281	2,880	2,062	182	461
1998	2,248	3,197	2,207	196	471
1999	2,271	3,525	2,181	198	462
2000	2,432	3,789	2,038	219	529
2001	2,377	4,429	1,999	202	1,088

[1] The causes of death were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9) codes for the years 1992 to 1999 for Scotland, 1992 to 2000 for England and Wales, and Northern Ireland, and the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes for 2000 and 2001 for Scotland, and 2001 for England and Wales, and Northern Ireland. The codes used were as follows:

primary liver cancer—ICD9 155; ICD10 C22;
alcoholic liver disease—ICD9 571.0–571.3; ICD10 K70;
other forms of chronic liver disease—ICD9 571.4–571.9; ICD10 K73-K74;
viral hepatitis—ICD9 070; ICD1O B15-B19;
other diseases of the liver—ICD9 572–573; ICD1O K71-K72, K75-K76.

[2] Figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland are for deaths registered in each calendar year. Figures for England and Wales for 1992 are based on deaths registered in that calendar year and for 1993 to 2001 on deaths occurring in each calendar year.

Biodiesel Fuel

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding changes to the level of duty on biodiesel fuel. [97394]

John Healey: The Government have received a number of representations about the level of duty on biodiesel.

Cancer Care

Sir Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that teenagers recovering from cancer do not experience discrimination when applying for financial services and related products. [96944]

Ruth Kelly: The terms and conditions which apply to financial services products can vary from firm to firm and are a matter for the product providers.

Census Forms

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many census forms were returned before the deadline in 1991; and if he will make a statement. [96201]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 10 February 2003:

As National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your recent question on how many census forms were returned before the deadline in 1991. (96201)

The collection stage of the enumeration for the 1991 Census was planned to take place between 22 and 25 April 1991, extending to 29 April for certain city areas. Completed forms were checked briefly on the doorstep for omissions; further forms were issued in cases where contact had not yet been established or where there was some uncertainty about the occupation of the accommodation. Due to the large number of uncollected forms, mainly from non-contacts and in inner city areas, the collection period was extended to May in some parts of the country. Special postal arrangements were introduced in the very worst areas to allow the public to return forms direct.

In total 20.8 million forms were processed, including over 120,000 forms which were received through the post.

Child Poverty

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the reasons for the changes in the level of child poverty between 1979 and 1997; and if he will make a statement. [95723]

Dawn Primarolo: When this Government came to office in 1997, one third of children were living in households with income below 60 per cent. of the national median: more than double the number in relative poverty in 1979. The increase in the number of children in low-income households between 1979 and 1997 can probably be attributed to an increase in the number of households with no-one in work, restrictions on out-of-work benefits and real increases in earnings of the employed population.

Child Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what means the wives and partners of men receiving children's tax credit have been alerted to their need to claim child tax credit. [94022]

Dawn Primarolo: To receive their entitlement to tax credits, people need to make a claim. Couples must claim the new Child Tax Credit jointly. The Inland Revenue has written to claimants of the existing Children's Tax Credit, inviting claims for the new tax credits. A reminder was sent in the autumn to people who had not responded to the invitation, and a further reminder is being issued in February. Employees receiving Children's Tax Credit through their PAYE codes have received a special insert with their 2003–04 coding notices, reminding them that Children's Tax Credit is replaced in April by Child Tax Credit and encouraging those who have not yet claimed the new tax credits to do so without delay. There is also a prominent reference to the new tax credits in the uprating letter going to all seven million Child Benefit recipients in the run-up to April.

These direct contacts are being supported by a high-profile publicity campaign on television, in the press, on radio and online.

Child Trust Fund

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 28 January, *Official Report*, column 746W, on the Child Trust Fund, if his Department has decided upon the set of conditions referred to; and if he will make a statement. [96211]

Ruth Kelly: The Government are consulting stakeholders on the detailed design and implementation of the Child Trust Fund (CTF). As part of the consultation on the product specifications for the 'stakeholder' products recommended by the Sandler review, the Government are seeking views on whether explicitly to link the CTF to the other products in the Sandler suite.

Computer Misuse

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many employees of the Inland Revenue have been *(a)* subject to disciplinary action for computer misuse and *(b)* prosecuted for computer misuse in 2002. [92946]

Dawn Primarolo: 205 employees were subject to disciplinary action for computer misuse in 2002. None of the cases warranted prosecution; the vast majority resulting in a reprimand.

Disciplinary action	*Number*
Prosecution	0
Dismissal	3
Downgrading	1
Financial penalty	2
Reprimand	199
Total	205

Cross-Border Pensions Directive

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with *(a)* representatives of the European Union, including the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee and *(b)* representatives of the British pensions industry concerning reform of the cross-border pensions directive. [94848]

Ruth Kelly: Treasury officials have been in regular contact with UK MEPs on the European Parliament's Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee to discuss developments on the Supplementary Pensions Directive ("Directive on the activities and supervision of institutions for occupational retirement provision") and to brief them on their likely impact on UK occupational pensions. Treasury officials have also been in contact with associations that represent the interests of the British pension industry to update them on the Directive's progress through the European Parliament.

Departmental Budgets

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the principal components of the changes in the budget of *(a)* HM Customs and Excise and *(b)* the Inland Revenue between 2002–03 and 2003–04; what internal administrative unit each change is attributed to; and if he will make a statement. [96523]

Dawn Primarolo: Aggregate budget figures for 2002–03 to 2005–06 were published in the 2002 Spending Review White paper (Cm 5570) on page 126. More up to date and detailed information will appear in the Departmental Spring Reports 2003 due to be published by the revenue departments by the end of April.

Euro

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he plans to announce a decision on whether Britain meets his Department's five tests for entry to the euro before 7 June. [96395]

Ruth Kelly: The Government have made clear that they will complete the assessment of the Five Economic Tests within two years of the start of this Parliament.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions officials from his Department have had with officials from the European Commission on the British economy's convergence with the eurozone; and if he will make a statement. [96426]

Ruth Kelly: Government officials regularly travel to Brussels to discuss EU business.

The Government will only recommend UK membership of EMU if it is in the national economic interest and the economic case for joining is clear and unambiguous.

A comprehensive and rigorous assessment of the Five Economic Tests will be completed within two years of the start of this Parliament.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) pursuant to his answer of 30 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 991W, on the euro, if he will make a statement on the preparedness of business for euro entry; [96537]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 30 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 992W, on the euro, what assessment of the proportion of businesses prepared for membership of the euro he will make before June 2003. [96538]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 29W.

Keith Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the extent to which the British economy satisfies the five economic tests for entry to the euro; and if he will make a statement. [96880]

Ruth Kelly: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk) on 9 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 88W.

Friendly Societies

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he will take to assist friendly societies; and if he will make a statement. [96498]

Ruth Kelly: The Government welcomes the contribution of friendly societies, in competition with other service providers, to increasing choice in savings products.

Following the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, the Financial Services Authority has assumed responsibility for the regulation of friendly societies. The Act also introduced an independent ombudsman scheme and single financial services compensation scheme. These measures should increase confidence in those considering membership of friendly societies.

Measures such as the introduction of the Saving Gateway and the Child Trust Fund are intended to encourage saving by low-income groups, which should be of benefit to friendly societies.

FTSE 100

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what meetings between officials from his Department and representatives of the business and financial sectors are planned for the next two months to discuss the value of the FTSE 100 share index. [96836]

Ruth Kelly: Treasury Ministers and officials meet representatives of the business and financial sector on a regular basis and will continue to do so. A wide range of topics are discussed, including current economic and financial developments.

Gross Domestic Product

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate he has made of the level of tax revenue in the UK this financial year if the rate of GDP grows by *(a)* 2 per cent., *(b)* 2.5 per cent. and *(c)* 3 per cent.; [96209]

(2) what estimates his Department has made of the level of tax revenue this year if the rate of growth of GDP is *(a)* 1.8 per cent., *(b)* 2 per cent., *(c)* 2.2 per cent., *(d)* 2.4 per cent., *(e)* 2.6 per cent., *(f)* 2.8 per cent., *(g)* 3 per cent., *(h)* 3.2 per cent., *(i)* 3.4 per cent., and *(j)* 3.6 per cent.; [96215]

(3) what estimates his Department has made of *(a)* total income tax revenue and *(b)* total corporation tax revenue for this year if the rate of growth in GDP growth is (i) 1.8 per cent., (ii) 2 per cent., (iii) 2.2 per cent., (iv) 2.4 per cent., (v) 2.6 per cent., (vi) 2.8 per cent., (vii) 3 per cent., (viii) 3.2 per cent., (ix) 3.4 per cent., and (x) 3.6 per cent.; [96216]

(4) what estimate his Department has made of the level of UK tax revenue for *(a)* this year and *(b)* next year if growth rates were 2.2 per cent. this year and 2.4 per cent. next year; [96214]

(5) what estimates he has made of total UK tax revenues for *(a)* this year and *(b)* next year if growth meets the Treasury's (i) lower and (ii) upper boundaries for growth in this year and the next. [96213]

Ruth Kelly: Latest available projections of tax revenues for 2002–03 and 2003–04 are available in the 2002 pre-Budget report. They are based on a deliberately prudent and cautious assumption that trend output growth is $\frac{1}{4}$ percentage point lower than the Government's neutral view. This corresponds to GDP growth of 2 per cent. in 2002–03 and $2\frac{3}{4}$ per cent. in 2003–04, the lower boundaries of HM Treasury's economic forecasts for these financial years. Tax forecasts based on alternative forecasts of GDP growth are not available.

Home Insurance

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 514W, on home insurance, when the FSA will be consulting on the disclosure of fees charged by mortgage providers for switching insurance taken out as a condition of the mortgage; and if he will ask the FSA to consult additionally on whether these fees should be abolished. [96826]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority (FSA) consulted on its proposals for the disclosure of fees charged for switching insurance in its consultation paper, CP 146. There will be a further consultation on this as part of its draft rules, and this paper will issue at the end of April 2003. This will provide a further opportunity for those interested to air their concerns on the matter. It is not for the Government to direct the FSA on the content of their consultation on mortgages.

Income Tax

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people paid the top rate of income tax in each year since 1994–95; and what revenue was gained from this tax bracket in each case. [93477]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* The information is given in the table.

Tax Year	*Higher Rate Taxpayers[1] (000s)*	*Higher Rate Tax Yield[1] (£million)*
1994–95	2,000	27,360
1995–96	2,130	30,370
1996–97	2,080	33,160
1997–98	2,120	35,170
1998–99	2,350	41,530
1999–2000	2,480	44,874
2000–01	2,880	54,040

[1] Taxpayers with a taxable income above the higher rate threshold.

Note:

These estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes

While it is too early to comment on the detail of the Green Paper, the Government fully recognise the importance of information sharing among different agencies and of ensuring children and families receive coherent services based on their needs. The Green Paper is looking at the issues of key workers and single assessments, and will be informed by the work of the ten information, referral and tracking trailblazers managed by the Children and Young People's Unit.

Income Tax Evasion

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 614W, on fraudulent income tax evasion, how many prosecutions are under way; how many prosecutions have been undertaken but not completed since 1 January 2002; and if he will make a statement. [95253]

Dawn Primarolo: As at 31 January 2003, 23 cases, of which 21 have been registered since 1 January 2002, are under investigation working towards prosecution using the new offence of fraudulent evasion of income tax.

Inheritance Tax

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what he estimates the percentage of estates liable to inheritance tax would be if the threshold were raised to *(a)* £500,000 and *(b)* £1 million; [95013]

(2) what he estimates the annual cost to the Exchequer would be of raising the inheritance tax threshold to *(a)* £500,000 and *(b)* £1 million. [95017]

Dawn Primarolo: The PBR estimate of inheritance tax yield is £2.6 billion for 2003–04. The full year cost of raising the inheritance tax threshold in 2003–04 to *(a)* £500,000 and *(b)* £1 million would be £1.6 billion and £2.3 billion respectively. The UK percentage of estates liable to inheritance tax would be about 1 per cent. and less than 0.5 per cent. respectively.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional annual revenue from inheritance tax as a result of abolishing the ability to make gifts free of inheritance tax after *(a)* one year, *(b)* five years and *(c)* 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [96524]

Dawn Primarolo: Insufficient data is available on which to base yield estimates.

Inland Revenue Qualifying Regimes

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding the abolition of the Inland Revenue qualifying regimes; and if he will make a statement. [96195]

Ruth Kelly: The Sandler review of the market for medium and long-term retail savings, which was published last July, recommended two changes to the regime for taxing life insurance products. These changes are the abolition of the qualifying policy regime and the replacement of the so-called 5 per cent. tax-deferral rule which applies to withdrawals.

As we announced in the pre-Budget report, the Government are considering these proposals as part of the Budget process and are consulting the industry about their implications. They have received representations from the insurance industry and friendly society movement. The Association of Friendly Societies and the Association of British Insurers have been in frequent contact with Treasury and Inland Revenue officials. Their discussions include considering how the Sandler recommendation to abolish the qualifying policy regime for new life insurance policies would affect savings through qualifying policies, particularly by those on low incomes.

Large Companies Office

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of the Large Companies Office of the Inland Revenue in collecting tax over the period 1997 to 2002. [94922]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue's Large Business Office (LBO), formed on 1 April 1997, is responsible for dealing with the tax affairs of most of the largest companies and employers operating in the United Kingdom. It ensures such companies' tax affairs are handled by highly knowledgeable and experienced tax officials. The office explains the Inland Revenue's view of how tax law applies in particular circumstances and oversees the process by which large businesses account for the tax they are due to pay.

As part of that process LBO staff make inquiries into companies' tax returns on the basis of an assessment of the risk to the Exchequer. This can result in large adjustments to profits returned for tax, which sometimes require litigation. The additional tax recovered as a result of such LBO action may therefore fluctuate from year to year. The annual yield has been 1998–99—£1.9 billion; 1999–2000—£1.9 billion; 2000–01—£2.2 billion; and 2001–02—£1.6 billion. The office has met the overwhelming majority of its operational targets and has been highly effective, a view confirmed in the Government's 2001 Review of Links with Business and more recent taxpayer research.

Lisbon and Stockholm Objectives

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on progress towards the Lisbon and Stockholm objectives of *(a)* speeding up liberalisation in areas such as gas, electricity and transport, *(b)* speeding up liberalisation in postal services, *(c)* concluding work on proposals to update public procurement rules, *(d)* ensuring that Community and Government procurement can take place online, *(e)* setting out a strategy for further co-ordinated action to simplify the regulatory environment, *(f)* implementing the financial services action plan, *(g)* ensuring full implementation of the Risk Capital Action Plan, *(h)* making progress on proposals on takeover bids and *(i)* concluding the pending tax package on efficient and implemented markets; [96840]

(2) if he will make a statement on progess towards the Lisbon and Stockholm objectives on *(a)* developing priority actions addressed to specific target groups within member states choosing amongst those actions according to their particular situations and reporting subsequently on their implementation, *(b)* producing a detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems, *(c)* achieving interim transposition target of 98.5 per cent., *(d)* presenting a proposal to tackle the barriers identifed in the internal market for services, *(e)* presenting a strategy for regulatory simplification and quality before the end of 2001, *(f)* implementing the Financial Services Action Plan, *(g)* integrating securities market, *(h)* implementing the Risk Capital Plan and achieving a well-functioning capital market, *(i)* demonstrating a downward trend in state aid in relation to GDP and *(j)* agreeing on the tax package as a whole; [96842]

(3) if he will make a statement on progress towards the Lisbon and Stockholm objectives on *(a)* defining common approaches to maintaining and improving the quality of work, *(b)* updating existing legislation on implementing the principle of equal treatment of men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion and working conditions, *(c)* agreement on a regulatory framework for radio spectrum policy and broadband networks, *(d)* adopting in co-decision with the European Parliament on the sixth Community Research Framework Programme, *(e)* examining a specific strategy for mobility within the European Research Area, *(f)* presenting proposals to promote a more interactive dialogue with the public on issues of science and technology, *(g)* examining measures required to utilise the full potential of biotechnology, *(h)* reviewing progress in integrating the sustainable development aims into the Lisbon strategy, *(i)* evaluating the Luxembourg process and *(j)* facilitating a successful outcome of COP-6; [96843]

(4) if he will make a statement on progess towards the Lisbon and Stockholm objectives on *(a)* alleviating the tax pressure on labour and improving the employment and training incentives of tax and benefits systems, *(b)* redirecting public expenditure towards increasing the relative importance of capital accumulating and supporting research and development, innovation and information technologies, *(c)* ensuring the long-term sustainability of public finances, *(d)* facilitating a substantial annual increase in per capital investment in human resources, *(e)* cutting the number of 18 to 24-year-olds with only lower-secondary level education, *(f)* developing schools and training centres into multi-purpose local learning centres, *(g)* creating a European framework to define the basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning, *(h)* establishing a European diploma for basic IT skills, *(i)* taking steps to remove obstacles to teachers' mobility, *(j)* developing

a common European format for curricula vitae, *(k)* giving priority lifelong learning, *(l)* increasing employment services, *(m)* furthering all aspects of equal opportunities and making it easier to reconcile working and family life, *(n)* setting a new benchmark for improved child care provision, *(o)* raising the total EU employment rate to 70 per cent. and *(p)* increasing the number of women in employment to 60 per cent.; [96841]

(5) if he will make a statement on progress towards Lisbon and Stockholm objectives on *(a)* ensuring all schools have access to the internet, *(b)* all the teachers needed are skilled in the use of computers, *(c)* mapping of research and development excellence in all member states, *(d)* improving the environment for private research investment, R&D partnerships and high technology start-ups, *(e)* taking steps to remove obstacles to the mobility of researchers in Europe and attracting and retaining high-quality researchers in Europe and *(f)* ensuring a Community patent is available. [96839]

Ruth Kelly: As stated in the 2002 pre-Budget report, the Government will publish a progress report in early 2003 on developments in European economic reform since the February 2002 White Paper "Realising Europe's Potential".

Listing Rules

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions officials from his Department have had with representatives of *(a)* the business community and *(b)* the Financial Services Authority concerning reforms of listing rules. [96190]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority (FSA) is responsible for setting the listing rules (under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000). The FSA are currently conducting a review of the listings rules and consulting widely with the business community. Officials from the Treasury regularly talk to the FSA and business about issues relating to the Rules, including in the context of the review.

Moray Floods (Tax Deferral)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce tax deferral for businesses in Moray affected by flooding; and if he will make a statement. [95272]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* Tax deferral measures were introduced in 2001 specifically to help viable businesses and individuals adversely affected by the foot and mouth disease outbreak.

There are no plans to introduce similar or specific measures for businesses in Moray that have been affected by flooding. However, the Revenue will provide help and support to viable businesses affected by flooding within the limits of its discretion.

National Insurance

Adam Price: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what spending plans he has for the £18 billion from the surpluses of the National Insurance Fund. [96272]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) on 7 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 468W.

National Insurance/Income Tax

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to align further the income tax and national insurance systems; and if he will make a statement. [95726]

Dawn Primarolo: There are no plans for the structural alignment of Tax and National Insurance. The Revenue, however, continues to work with employer representatives and others to look for opportunities to align the tax and National Insurance rules at a practical level while having regard to the need to protect the individuals' benefit entitlement.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to equalise the upper earnings limit of national insurance contributions with the higher rate threshold of income tax; and if he will make a statement. [95727]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government has no such plans.

Non-compliance Investigations

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many non-compliance investigations have been carried out by the large business division of the Inland Revenue in each year since 1990–91; what the average amount of extra tax secured for such non-compliance operations was in each year; and if he will make a statement. [95828]

Dawn Primarolo: The available information about the Inland Revenue's work tackling non-compliance is set out each year in the Inland Revenue Annual Report, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

Official Meetings

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what meetings officials from his Department have had with representatives of the business and financial sectors over the last two months; and if he will make a statement on concerns raised at these meetings regarding the level of the FTSE 100 share index. [96835]

Ruth Kelly: Officials regularly meet representatives from business and the financial sector and discuss a range of issues.

Pensions Tax Relief

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much tax relief on pensions was claimed successfully in the last year for which figures are available, broken down by *(a)* gender and *(b)* ten-year age bands. [96598]

Ruth Kelly: Available estimates of the cost of tax relief on private pension contributions are contained in table T7.9 of Inland Revenue Statistics. The latest

version is on the Inland Revenue website; http://www.inlandrevenue.gov.Uk/stats/pensions/p t09 1.htm It is not possible to break these estimates down by either gender or age.

Post-60 Employment

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what incentives he is putting in place to encourage employers to take on employees of 60 years and older; and if he will make a statement. [94251]

Dawn Primarolo: Since 1997, this Government have consistently shown their commitment to employment opportunities for all regardless of age.

We are vigorously promoting the benefits of recruiting, training and retaining older workers as part of our Age Positive campaign. We have already spoken to employers, employer organisations, employees and voluntary sector organisations about ways in which the message can be spread further. The Age Positive campaign is going from strength to strength, working to challenge ageist employment practices between now and the implementation of age legislation in 2006. The newest feature of the campaign is the Age Positive website (www.agepositive.gov.uk). It features guidance and good practice case studies for employers including our recent publication "Good Practice in the Recruitment and Retention of Older Workers".

For small and medium sized employers, we have developed a model programme on the business benefits of age diversity and recruitment of the over 50s. To date workshops have been delivered across England and they will be extended to Scotland and Wales from the spring.

'Simplicity security and choice: Working and saving for retirement', published in December 2002, sets out a number of measures that will make the retention of older workers easier. These include encouraging companies to adopt a more flexible approach to retirement, and changes to Inland Revenue rules that will make it possible for older workers to continue to work for the sponsoring employer while drawing their occupational pension.

The Government have also taken steps to improve the financial returns for older people returning to work.

The new Working Tax Credit, which will be introduced in April, includes a return to work element for people aged 50 or over. This is paid for one year following the return to work if a qualifying benefit had been claimed for six months or more. A single person working 16 hours per week will be eligible for Working Tax Credit worth up to £49 per week in their first year following a return to work. Someone over 50 returning to work of 30 hours a week would be eligible for Working Tax Credit of up to £59 per week.

Public Service Pension Schemes

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the reply to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) on 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 431W, on public service pension schemes, whether statutory change is required to implement proposals for raising the pension age in public service schemes; and whether such a proposal has been put to staff representatives. [95682]

Mr. Boateng: The Government envisage that the higher normal pension age might be introduced in most public service schemes as part of a package of pension changes. These proposals would be subject to consultation with staff representatives and employers. Most of the main public service schemes' rules are set out in Statutory Instruments and there would be consultation with staff representatives before Instruments were laid before Parliament.

Small Business Investment

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the level of investment by small businesses with fewer than 50 employees was in each quarter of each year since 1997. [94850]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Mark Prisk, dated 10 February 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the level of investment by small businesses with less than 50 employees in each quarter of each year since 1997. (94850)

The level of investment by small businesses with less than 50 employees in each quarter is not available. The closest available information relates to annual data since 1998 from the Annual Business Inquiry (ABI). The table below shows Net Capital Expenditure (excluding VAT) for businesses with less than 50 employees. The estimate for 2001 is provisional.

Level of net capital expenditure (excluding VAT) for businesses with less than 50 employees. Current prices.

Year	*£ million*
1998	18,335
1999	18,551
2000	19,664
2001	22,165

Note:
The ABI covers all businesses, excluding agriculture, hunting and forestry; fishing; mining and quarrying; electricity, gas and water; financial intermediation; public administration and defence; and parts of education and health of the Standard Industrial Classification Revised 1992 (SIC(92)

Special Advisers and Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92436]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 31 January 2003 by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

The number of press officers employed by HM Treasury has remained broadly constant since 1994–95. There are currently seven, in addition to the Head of Communications.

As to cost the total basic salaries for 2000–01 were £196,990 and for 2001–02 were £201,502. Figures for other years are unavailable.

Sustainable Investment

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library communications between the Treasury and the International Monetary Fund regarding the interpretation of the sustainable investment rule, following the request for clarification contained in the concluding statement of the IMF Article IV consultation, published on 9 December 2002. [96239]

Ruth Kelly: The Government have published the IMF's concluding statement. The final IMF report will be discussed at the IMF Board towards the end of February and will be published shortly afterwards.

The sustainable investment rule has been fully described in successive Budget and PBR documents and the HM Treasury book, "Reforming Britain's Economic and Financial Policy" edited by E. Balls and G. O'Donnell.

Tax Compliance Work

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the yield/cost ratio for tax compliance work by the *(a)* International Business Tax Group and *(b)* Large Business Office, at the Inland Revenue in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [96610]

Dawn Primarolo: The available information about the Inland Revenue's work tackling non-compliance is set out each year in the Inland Revenue Annual Report, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

Tax Credit Helpline

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people are employed by the tax credit helpline; and of that number, how many are employed as claim line operators. [94236]

Dawn Primarolo: A helpline was set up in August 2002 to handle detailed inquiries about the two new tax credits—Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit. The number of people employed at the helpline in Great Britain is set out in the table.

Site	*Advisers*	*Team Leaders*	*Managers/ Support Staff*	*Total*
Peterlee	473	43	20	536
Livingston	256	24	17	297
Merry Hill	270	25	17	312
Dundee	483	46	23	552
Liverpool	170	14	10	194
Total	1,652	152	87	1,891

Notes

1. All figures are for staff in post, whether they work full-time or part-time. The equivalent number of full time staff will be lower.
2. All advisers and team leaders handle calls.
3. Telephone advisers are available to help process claims too, and some use has been made of that flexibility

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many cases have been dealt with by the tax credits helpline in each month since it was established. [94239]

Dawn Primarolo: A helpline was set up in August 2002 to handle detailed inquiries about the two new tax credits—Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit. The number of calls handled by the helpline in Great Britain in each month since then is set out in the table.

	Calls handled
August 2002	28,225
September 2002	177,347
October 2002	320,400
November 2002	374,553
December 2002	264,671
January 2003	633,717

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many calls have been received by the tax credit helpline in each month since it was established. [94243]

Dawn Primarolo: A helpline was set up in August 2002 to handle detailed enquiries about the two new tax credits—Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit. The number of calls received at the helpline in Great Britain in each month since then is set out in the table.

	Calls received
August 2002	28,453
September 2002	179,484
October 2002	324,381
November 2002	394,205
December 2002	267,757
January 2003	673,036

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which days of the week, and for how many hours on each of those days, the tax credit hotline is operational. [94244]

Dawn Primarolo: A helpline was set up in August 2002 to handle detailed enquiries about the two new tax credits—Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit. The helpline in Great Britain is open from 8 am until 8 pm seven days a week (except Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Year's Day and Easter Sunday). The freephone response line, set up to take calls generated by the publicity for the new tax credits, is open from 7 am until 11 pm seven days a week.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much the tax credits helpline has cost to operate since it was established. [94240]

Dawn Primarolo: A helpline was set up in August 2002 to handle detailed enquiries about the two new tax credits—Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit. Since it was set up until 31 December 2002, operating costs for the helpline in Great Britain are estimated to have been as follows:

Operating cost for tax credits helpline	*£ million*
Pay	9.46
Other costs	4.6

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what specialist training is given to tax credit helpline operators on the *(a)* working tax credit and *(b)* child tax credit. [94242]

Dawn Primarolo: Helpline operators receive training covering all aspects of eligibility for and entitlement to Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit (including the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit), as well as the mechanics of claiming and paying the new tax credits.

Tax Evasion

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Inland Revenue in tackling tax evasion and avoidance from 1999 to 2002; and if he will make a statement. [95824]

Dawn Primarolo: Deterring and countering tax evasion and avoidance is a major part of the Inland Revenue's work to ensure that everyone understands and pays what is due. This work ensures that everyone contributes to the UK's needs. The National Audit Office has recently concluded an investigation into the Inland Revenue's effectiveness at countering fraud and will be publishing its report in due course.

Tax Rates (Dividends)

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue on an accruals basis from increasing the basic rate of tax applicable to dividends by 1 per cent. [96306]

Dawn Primarolo: An increase of 1p in the ordinary rate of tax on dividends that was not matched by a corresponding increase in the dividend tax credit, would result in additional accruals yield of £140 million in 2003–04.

This estimate is based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and is consistent with the November 2002 pre-Budget report. This excludes any behavioural response to the tax change.

Tax Returns

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many self-assessment tax returns were *(a)* issued, *(b)* received, *(c)* waiting to be processed and *(d)* processed in each month since 3 February 2002; and if he will make a statement. [95005]

Dawn Primarolo: The statistical data requested are set out as follows.

Tax year/date	*SA ITRs issued*	*SA ITRs received*	*SA ITRs processed*	*SA ITRs waiting to be processed*
2000–01				
3 February 2002	9,552,433	8,362,361	5,848,319	2,514,042
3 March 2002	9,610,787	8,732,139	6,892,084	1,840,055
31 March 2002	9,644,313	8,805,949	8,009,457	796,492
2001–02				
5 May 2002	8,984,089	287,223	74,244	212,979
2 June 2002	9,081,002	751,541	323,265	428,276
7 July 2002	9,167,807	1,397,759	709,556	688,203
4 August 2002	9,232,637	2,020,483	1,135,313	885,170
1 September 2002	9,300,825	2,717,767	1,591,565	1,126,202
6 October 2002	9,394,724	4,475,890	2,438,405	2,037,485
3 November 2002	9,463,002	4,948,989	3,300,392	1,648,597
24 November 2002	9,511,670	5,280,197	4,008,768	1,271,429
1 December 2002	9,527,269	5,395,919	4,265,782	1,130,137
5 January 2003	9,587,431	5,955,224	4,979,671	975,553
26 January 2003	9,658,087	7,104,965	5,757,379	1,347,586

Tax Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much extra tax revenue was secured by the large business division of the Inland Revenue from its non-compliance operations in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01, *(d)* 2001–02 and *(e)* 2002–03 to date; and if he will make a statement. [95825]

Dawn Primarolo: The total additional liability arising from work tackling non-compliance in the Large Business Office is set out each year in the Inland Revenue Annual Report, copies of which are in the House of Commons Library. Audited and accurate figures for 2002–03 are not yet available.

Tax-exempt Savings

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding the future of tax exempt saving products; and if he will make a statement. [96196]

Ruth Kelly: The Sandler review of the market for medium and long-term retail savings, which was published last July, recommended two changes to the regime for taxing life insurance products. These changes are the abolition of the qualifying policy regime and the replacement of the so-called 5 per cent. tax-deferral rule which applies to withdrawals.

As we announced in the pre-Budget report, the Government are considering these proposals as part of the Budget process and are consulting the industry about their implications. They have has received representations from the insurance industry and friendly society movement. The Association of Friendly Societies and the Association of British Insurers have been in frequent contact with Treasury and Inland Revenue officials. Their discussions include considering how the Sandler recommendation to abolish the qualifying policy regime for new life insurance policies would affect the future of tax exempt saving products.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to allow tax exempt savings products a special exemption to the proposed abolition of qualifying policies; and if he will make a statement. [96197]

Ruth Kelly: The Sandler review of the market for medium and long-term retail savings, which was published last July, recommended two changes to the regime for taxing life insurance products. These changes are the abolition of the qualifying policy regime and the replacement of the so-called 5 per cent. tax-deferral rule which applies to withdrawals.

As we announced in the Pre-Budget Report, the Government is considering these proposals as part of the Budget process and is consulting the industry about their implications, including in relation to tax exempt savings products. We are continuing that consideration and consultation.

Working Families Tax Credit

Caroline Flint: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether it will be possible for parents to claim for child care costs under the new working families tax credit. [95937]

Dawn Primarolo: Parents will be able to claim for eligible child care costs under the new Working Tax Credit which will be introduced in April this year.

Ian Lucas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families were *(a)* in receipt of and *(b)* eligible for working families tax credit in each local authority in Wales in the most recent year for which figures are available. [94788]

Dawn Primarolo: For the numbers in receipt of working families tax credit (WFTC), I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 412W. Estimates of the take-up rates of WFTC in 2000–01 in the UK are available on the Inland Revenue website. Such estimates, and estimates of the numbers eligible for WFTC, are not available below the UK level.

World Oil Prices

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what assessment his Department has made of the effects of a conflict with Iraq on world oil prices; [96421]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the effect of problems in the Venezuelan economy on world oil prices. [96422]

Ruth Kelly: Tensions in the Middle East and the export disruption from strike action in Venezuela are both currently increasing uncertainty in the oil market, thus acting to raise oil prices above the level that would be suggested by the underlying supply and demand situation.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 11 February 2003

TRANSPORT

Aeroplane Pilots (Drug Testing)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the system of drug and alcohol testing in relation to persons in charge of an aeroplane; and if he will make a statement. [96900]

Mr. Jamieson: There is at present no statutory system of drug and alcohol testing for flight crew.

It is an offence under the Air Navigation Order 2000 for flight crew to carry out their duties while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. As part of the process for obtaining an Air Operator Certificate from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), airlines are required to establish policies on alcohol and drugs to ensure compliance with this provision. The detailed implementation of such policies is a matter for the airlines but may include testing programmes. In addition, the Air Navigation Order requires pilots to hold a valid medical certificate issued by a person approved by the CAA. Pilots undergo regular medical examinations, which will pay attention to any evidence of excess alcohol intake or substance abuse. There is currently no evidence of a widespread drink or drug problem in the aviation sector.

The Railways and Transport Safety Bill currently before Parliament includes provisions setting a blood/alcohol limit for flight crew and other specified aviation personnel and will give the police power to test suspected offenders.

British Airports Authority (Cross-subsidisation)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on his Department's policy towards BAA's cross-subsidisation of Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted. [97229]

Mr. Jamieson: Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted are subject to economic regulation by the Civil Aviation Authority which has sole responsibility for setting their airport price caps. The CAA's decision will determine BAA's ability to cross-subsidise between airports.

Bus Services (Leeds)

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what funding will be provided by his Department for improving bus services in the city of Leeds in each of the next five years. [96820]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department allocates capital funding for integrated transport to the west Yorkshire passenger transport authority (WYPTA) and the five west Yorkshire local authorities in the annual local transport capital expenditure settlement each December, following bids made to central Government through the five-year joint west Yorkshire local transport plan (LTP) the previous July. We also make revenue funding available through the standard spending assessment system. It is then up to WYPTA and the five West Yorkshire local authorities, including Leeds city council, how this funding is distributed and prioritised.

For the 2003–04 financial year, WYPTA and the five local authorities have been awarded £25.8 million for integrated transport. Indicative allocations for 2004–05 and 2005–06 are £26 million and £27.5 million respectively. The 2006–07 and 2007–08 financial years will be covered by the second joint west Yorkshire LTP, which runs from 2006 to 2011, and no indicative allocations are yet available.

In addition, and subject to completion of the statutory processes, £20.9 million has been set aside for improvements to bus services on the A65 Kirkstall road corridor. These improvements include the construction of bus lanes and new bus stops and shelters.

Driving Licences

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what percentage of, and how many, reminders sent by the DVLA for drivers to renew their road fund licence, were returned to DVLA as *(a)* addressee moved and *(b)* addressee not known at this address since 2000. [94774]

Mr. Jamieson: DVLA issued some 36.9 million vehicle excise licence reminders in 2001–02. They are despatched in envelopes bearing a specific message asking for them not to be returned to DVLA if undeliverable. If the addressee has moved, DVLA will normally pick up the new address as soon as the vehicle is relicenced, or a statutory off-road declaration made.

East London Line

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the proposals made in the Strategic Rail Authority's Strategic Plan 2003 Route Descriptions on the East London Line project. [96614]

Mr. Jamieson: The SRA is continuing to take forward development of this project pending resolution of outstanding planning and funding issues.

Energy Savings Trust

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what Government grant has been given to the Energy Savings Trust in each of the last three years; and what proportion of that grant *(a)* was allocated on an annual basis to TransportAction and *(b)* is allocated to TransportEnergy. [96442]

Mr. Jamieson: The funding from my Department to the Energy Saving Trust for cleaner vehicle initiatives for the last three years is:

	£ million
2001–02	29.11
2000–01	15.91
1999–2000	3.6

All of this funding was allocated to TransportAction. TransportAction was re-branded as TransportEnergy in September 2002.

DEFRA also supports various domestic and industrial energy efficiency programmes which are managed by the Energy Saving Trust.

Honiton/Ilminster Road Inquiry

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the determinations of environmental issues considered by the public inquiry into the Honiton/Ilminster road improvement, with which he disagrees. [95985]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The views of the then Secretaries of State for the Environment and Transport on the issues raised at the public inquiries into the A30/A303 Marsh to Honiton and Ilminster to Marsh improvements are contained in their decision letter of 27 January 1997. I am arranging for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of the House as soon as possible.

The Orders were not made. The scheme was remitted as part of the London to the south-west and south Wales multi-modal study, which looked at strategic routes from London to the south-west and Wales.

Following the study, the Secretary of State has asked the Highways Agency to carry out further technical work. It is not possible to comment further on the environmental issues until that work is complete.

Low Emission Vehicles

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his policy is on encouragement of the introduction of *(a)* compressed and *(b)* liquefied natural gas vehicles. [96437]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government are committed to encouraging the introduction and wider use of clean, low carbon vehicle technologies as set out in "the Powering Future Vehicles Strategy", published in July last year. Compared to conventional diesel vehicles, natural gas vehicles can offer useful air quality, noise and—in some cases—carbon benefits.

The Government are encouraging the wider use of both compressed and liquefied natural gas vehicles primarily through favourable fuel duty incentives and grants towards the cost of procuring natural gas vehicles and supporting the development of refuelling infrastructure through the Department's PowerShift programme.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proportion of government funding for the Energy Savings Trust is allocated as PowerShift grants for lower emission vehicles. [96439]

Mr. Jamieson: For 2001/02, 29% of the Government's total funding for the Energy Saving Trust's transport initiatives was allocated to the PowerShift programme. This amounted to 8.5million out of a total of 29.11 million.

The remaining funding supported the Trust's CleanUp initiative, and the marketing and operational costs of TransportAction.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proportion of total road vehicles in the UK received PowerShift grants in each of the last four years. [96440]

Mr. Jamieson: The proportion of PowerShift funded vehicles as a percentage of new vehicle registrations for the last four years is set out as follows.

	(a) New Vehicle Registrations	*(b) PowerShift Vehicles*	*(b) as percentage of (a)*
2001–02	3,013,126	4,403	0.15
2000–01	2,712,901	5,111	0.19
1999–2000	2,637,402	1,817	0.07
1998–99	2,627,299	748	0.03

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what financial assistance in the last four years his Department has given to encourage the promotion by local authorities of low emission zones; [96443]

(2) what financial measures in the last four years his Department has undertaken to encourage the promotion of low emission zones. [96435]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department has provided £51,000 towards the cost of a three-year research programme run by the National Society for Clean Air into Low Emission Zones. This project examined the potential of such zones for improving air quality and provided local authorities with practical guidance on how best to establish and enforce them. The results of the project to date are available at: www.nsca.org.uk. My Department has also provided £20,000 towards the cost of the London low emission zone study which is being undertaken on behalf of the Greater London Authority and the Association of London Government.

My Department has hosted a number of workshops to help local authorities tackle the problems of air pollution and the possible introduction of low emission zones.

In addition, DEFRA's guidance on air quality includes advice on low emission zones. However, as yet no local authorities have implemented low emission zones.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his policy is on encouragement of the introduction of *(a)* electric vehicles and *(b)* hybrid low emission vehicles. [96436]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government has introduced a number of incentives to encourage the wider use of cleaner vehicles and fuels, including battery electric and hybrid vehicles. The recently published Powering Future Vehicles strategy provides a framework for future fiscal and other incentives in the move towards a low carbon transport system.

(a) Electric vehicles currently benefit from the following incentives:

Zero rate of Vehicle Excise Duty (VED)

A lower rate of company car tax

Grants towards the premium cost of purchasing vehicles

No fuel duty on electricity used for recharging batteries

(b) Hybrid vehicles benefit from the these incentives

A lower rate of company car tax

Grants towards the premium cost of purchasing vehicles.

Hybrid vehicles may fall into a lower Vehicle Excise Duty band as a result of their lower CO2 emissions.

In addition, both hybrid and electric vehicle demonstration projects may be eligible for grant funding from the New Vehicle Technology Fund.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* vans and *(b)* other vehicles have received PowerShift grants over the last four years by (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel. [96441]

Mr. Jamieson: Over the last four financial years (1998—2002) PowerShift has funded: *(a)* 6337 vans and *(b)* 5742 other vehicles. These 12,079 vehicles can be categorised by these fuel or technology types:

	Vehicles
Liquefied petroleum gas	10,524
Natural gas	217
Battery electric	389
Hybrid	948
Fuel cell	1

Low-cost Airlines (Consumer Protection)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will take steps to increase existing levels of consumer protection for flight only customers of low-cost airlines; and if he will make a statement. [97258]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government has recently been involved in extensive discussions at a European level on a proposal for a regulation establishing common rules on compensation and assistance to air passengers in the event of denied boarding and of cancellation or long delays of flights. Political agreement was reached on this proposal at the European Transport Council in December 2002.

This regulation, which will apply to all airlines operating within the European Union, will ensure a higher level of protection for passengers in cases of denied boarding, cancellation and delay. A ministerial letter detailing the outcome of the Transport Council was sent to the Parliamentary Scrutiny Committee on 10 December 2002.

New Transport Infrastructure

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the availability of low interest loans from the European Investment Bank for *(a)* financing repair and renewal of London Underground, *(b)* the purchase of vehicle fleet by local authorities and *(c)* new transport infrastructure for the introduction of congestion zones and on emission zones. [96444]

Mr. Jamieson: The European Investment Bank is one of many lenders involved in the tube modernisation plans. The bank might potentially make financing facilities available for the procurement of a clean vehicle fleet or for new infrastructure related to congestion and emission zones. However, any project promoter would need to satisfy the bank that its initiative helped to achieve the objectives of the European Union. And the cost of the project would normally need to exceed €25 million.

Overweight Vehicles

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many accidents there were on UK roads where overweight vehicles were a factor in the accident in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000 and *(c)* 2001. [97073]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department does not collect data on whether a vehicle involved in an accident was overladen.

Rail Officials (Conduct Rules)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what rules govern the conduct of the *(a)* chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority, *(b)* Head of Planning of the Strategic Rail Authority and *(c)* Rail Regulator in regard to their dealings with their former employers. [94846]

Mr. Jamieson: All public servants are expected to act in good faith and in the best interests of their organisation.

Road Tax

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many vehicles were found to be overweight at weigh-bridges in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000 and *(c)* 2001; and how many prosecutions were pursued against individuals and companies relating to such vehicles in each of those years. [97071]

Mr. Jamieson: The Police, Local Authorities' Trading Standards and the Vehicle Inspectorate conduct vehicle weighings at weighbridges and other locations to enforce compliance with maximum legal weights in Great Britain. The Department only holds records of weighings conducted by the Vehicle Inspectorate.

The Inspectorate's policy is to weigh only suspect overloaded vehicles and prohibit them from further movement until the load is adjusted to conform to legalrequirements. Overloading is reported to the traffic

commissioners for action through the operator licensing system where appropriate. More serious cases and serial offenders are also prosecuted.

The table below shows the results of the Vehicle Inspectorate operations over the last four years:

	2001-02	*2000-01*	*1999-2000*	*1998-99*
HGVs				
Weighed	48,452	56,607	63,849	75,782
Reported for prosecution	2,793	2,933	2,694	3,547
Prohibited	3,693	3,627	3,322	4,589
PSVs				
Weighed	264	596	692	954
Reported for prosecution	2	3	2	6
	13	13	10	59
LGVs				
Weighed	6,357	6,446	6,807	7,398
Reported for prosecution	1,272	1,383	1,230	1,262
Prohibited	1,427	1,096	1,044	1,176

1. Figures include UK and foreign vehicles.

Ryanair (Compensation)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the Civil Aviation Authority's role will be in ensuring compensation for those affected by the cancellation of Buzz Flights by Ryanair; and if he will make a statement. [97257]

Mr. Jamieson: The CAA has no role in what is a commercial matter.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library copies of the letters of comfort issued in relation to the Strategic Rail Authority. [96528]

Mr. Jamieson: A copy of the proposed comfort letter to the Strategic Rail Authority was placed in the Libraries of the House on 3 February. It is subject to approval in the normal manner.

TransportEnergy

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the reason was for the re-branding of TransportAction as TransportEnergy; and what the total cost was to the Energy Savings Trust broken down into *(a)* consultancy fees, *(b)* publicity, *(c)* reprinting of stationery and *(d)* other material costs. [96438]

Mr. Jamieson: In September 2002 the Energy Saving Trust re-branded TransportAction as TransportEnergy as part of a wider exercise to rationalise all of the trust's environmental initiatives, enabling them to deliver their messages with improved effectiveness and cost-efficiency. The term TransportEnergy better reflects the trust's goal of supporting a move to a less energy intensive transport system and is more consistent with the trust's domestic energy efficiency programmes.

No Government funding was used in the re-branding exercise. All re-branding costs were met through the Energy Saving Trust's corporate funds.

Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many DVLA staff are employed in monitoring unlicensed vehicles on the public highway in the London borough of Harrow. [96796]

Mr. Jamieson: It is not possible to provide a breakdown of staff specifically for Harrow but the DVLA local office at Stanmore covers most of north London including Harrow. 29 staff at that office work on the enforcement of vehicle excise duty.

Most reports of unlicensed vehicles are submitted to DVLA by police officers and traffic wardens as part of their normal duties.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what action he is taking to speed up the process of impounding unlicensed vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [96797]

Mr. Jamieson: Regulations were amended in April 2002 to reduce the period impounded vehicles have to be kept before they can be disposed of from 35 days to seven or 14 days. The deciding factor is the value of the vehicle. The majority of impounded unlicensed vehicles are now disposed of within 14 days.

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has increased the number of wheelclamping teams operating in London from two to four. Plans further to increasethe level of wheelclamping across the UK are being considered as part of the proposals to modernise the vehicle registration and licensing system.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to grant the DVLA further powers to remove unlicensed vehicles from the road; and if he will make a statement. [96799]

Mr. Jamieson: DVLA plans to extend partnership working with local authorities to clamp and impound unlicensed vehicles following a successful trial scheme in the London Borough of Newham. Teams working for the boroughs of Wandsworth, Croydon and Lewisham, and Hastings and Southend-on-Sea councils have been trained by DVLA and now, together with Newham, clamp and impound untaxed cars in their areas. These teams complement the existing national contract for wheelclamping untaxed cars.

DVLA is currently in discussion with a further eleven local authorities who have expressed an interest in joining the scheme.

Wales and Borders Franchise

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what requirements his Department has made of companies bidding for the Wales and Borders franchise as to the minimum level of service provision required within the term of the franchise; and if he will make a statement; [96808]

(2) what advice his Department has received from the Strategic Rail Authority on the effects on the level of service provided, in terms of *(a)* frequency of service and *(b)* capital investment, of a cut in public support of (i) 10 per cent. and (ii) 20 per cent. to the successful bidder for the Wales and Borders franchise. [96807]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority has asked bidders for the Wales and Borders franchise to provide a baseline bid for maintaining services at or around the current level. Bidders are also being asked for options to increase the level of service and to show what can be provided for 10 per cent. and 20 per cent less subsidy. The bidding process is in progress and bids have yet to be submitted. The outcome will be announced in due course.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Boundary Commission

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission what work the Electoral Commission is undertaking to develop policy on the consistency of the rules governing the Boundary Commission with particular regard to the question of parity of size for parliamentary constituencies. [96548]

Mr. Beith: None. The Electoral Commission has no responsibility for this matter at present. Section 16 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 provides for the functions of the Boundary Commissions to be transferred to the Electoral Commission, but these provisions have not yet been implemented.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the international security assistance force in Afghanistan; what reports he has received on military confrontations between that force and Afghan rebels in the past six months; and if he will make a statement. [96295]

Mr. Ingram: I receive regular reports on the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul. While there have been some security incidents, under the excellent leadership of Turkey the ISAF has supported the Islamic Transitional Authority in improving the security and stability of the Afghan capital.

Armed Forces (Deployments)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what effects the use of military personnel for cover during the fire strike has had on the timing of deployments to the Gulf. [95187]

Mr. Ingram: The use of military personnel for cover during the fire strike has had no effect on the timing of deployments related to potential operations against Iraq.

Armilla Patrol

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Armilla Patrol vessel has been on station in the past year. [96936]

Mr. Ingram: A RN frigate or destroyer has provided a permanent presence in the Gulf as part of the Armilla Patrol throughout the past year, as it has done continually since 1980 when the Armilla Patrol commenced. This task is currently being met by HMS Cardiff, with support from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker RFA Bayleaf. HMS Richmond is scheduled to relieve HMS Cardiff in theatre on 9 March 2003.

Atlantic Patrol (North)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Atlantic Patrol (North) vessel has been on station in the Caribbean since September 2002. [96935]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Grafton was on-station in the Caribbean Area of Responsibility (AOR) between 8 August to 3 December 2002. HMS Grafton returned to the United Kingdom on 13 December, handing over Atlantic Patrol Task (North) duty to HMS Iron Duke on 19 December. HMS Iron Duke deployed for the Caribbean on 23 January 2003. When not on station, the ship allocated to APT(N) was held at a maximum 14 days notice. Throughout the period in question, the duty RFA APT(N) tanker has remained on station providing a permanent presence in the Caribbean AOR.

Biochemical Attack (Gulf)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what monitoring procedures will be available to UK troops in the Gulf in the event of *(a)* biological and *(b)* chemical attack. [95919]

Mr. Ingram: A wide range of detection and warning systems and testing and decontamination facilities will be available to United Kingdom troops deployed for potential operations in Iraq.

British Military Powerboat Trust

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the potential of the British Military Powerboat Trust for raising public awareness of the *(a)* role and *(b)* history of UK coastal forces. [95872]

Mr. Ingram: While no formal assessment has been made of the potential of the British Military Powerboat Trust, the Ministry of Defence is always looking for ways to raise public awareness of our military heritage.

We have good contacts with a number of charitable organisations and preservation societies who are dedicated to the preservation and restoration of historical military equipment, such as the British Military Powerboat Trust.

As an example of this, the 2001–02 edition of "Broadsheet"—the annual magazine of the Chief of the Naval Staff—included a two-page article highlighting the work of the British Military Powerboat Trust. Copies of the magazine are available from the Ministry of Defence.

Civilian Ships

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what security checks are made of crews of civilian ships chartered for military operations; [96510]

(2) what vetting has taken place of crews of vessels chartered by his Department in support of Operation Telic; and if he will make a statement. [96931]

Mr. Ingram: Security checks are carried out for the United Kingdom crews of the Joint Rapid Reaction Force Roll-On/Roll-Off ferries provided to the Ministry of Defence under the PFI arrangement. Such crews are required to be Royal Navy Sponsored Reserves. Special measures are taken when there are any security considerations and these can include the placing of a United Kingdom military escort party on-board chartered commercial vessels.

Congestion Charging

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the cost of reimbursement of the Registration Fee and Congestion Charges for Service Personnel at Wellington Barracks. [97374]

Dr. Moonie: The number of personnel accommodated at Wellington Barracks who have cars is assessed to be around 300. On this basis the estimated annual cost of the reimbursement of the Congestion Charge and the Registration Fee is approximately £42,000. Since most are basic rate tax payers this figure would attract Income Tax and National Insurance Contributions of some £15,000, paid centrally by the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether his Department will reimburse Service Personnel accommodated in publicly funded accommodation within the Congestion Charging Zone the tax payable on the benefits in kind; and if he will make a statement. [97375]

Dr. Moonie: Service Personnel who occupy publicly funded accommodation within the Congestion Charging Zone will be reimbursed Congestion Charge costs for one vehicle only. Income Tax and National Insurance Contributions will be met centrally by the Ministry of Defence.

Defence Spending

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of defence spending in each year from 1990–91 to 2004–05 in *(a)* cash terms and *(b)* real terms using 2001–02 prices. [95795]

Mr. Ingram: The figures from 1990–91 to 2001–02 are for outturn expenditure. From 2002–03, outturn expenditure is not yet available. These figures are therefore spending plans for the period. In year additions, such as the net additional cost of operations, are excluded from spending plans. Spending plans are therefore lower than actual outturn expenditure.

Total defence expenditure figures are published annually by the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA) in UK Defence Statistics, and prior to 1992, were reported in Volume 2 of the Statement on the Defence Estimates. Spending plans for 2003–06 are reported in the Defence Investment Strategy 2002.

£ million

	Outturn expenditure (2001–02 prices[1])		*Spending plans (2001–02 prices[1])*	
1990–91	22,298	(30,564)	—	—
1991–92	24,562	(31,731)	—	—
1992–93	23,762	(29,736)	—	—
1993–94	23,424	(28,606)	—	—
1994–95	22,519	(27,140)	—	—
1995–96	21,517	(25,214)	—	—
1996–97	22,077	(25,076)	—	—
1997–98	20,945	(23,078)	—	—
1998–99	22,482	(24,109)	—	—
1999–2000	22,572	(23,633)	—	—
2000–01	23,552	(24,109)	—	—
2001–02	[2]24,122	(24,122)	—	—
2002–03	—	—	24,196	(23,606)
2003–04	—	—	[3]30,921	(29,503)
2004–05	—	—	31,756	(29,561)

[1] Adjusted using HM Treasury GDP deflator at market prices as at 23 December 2002.

[2] Figures from 2001–02 onwards are on a Stage 1 Resource Accounting basis. The figures are not directly comparable to the cash based figures which precede them.

[3] From 2003–04, Departments will be controlled on a full Resource Accounting and Budgeting basis. The total figure is the sum of the separate resource and capital Departmental Expenditure Limits, net of depreciation.

Figures are not adjusted to take account of major definitional changes in defence spending and transfers of responsibility between Government Departments.

Field Hospitals

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many beds there are in each *(a)* regular and *(b)* reserve field hospital. [96932]

Dr. Moonie: The number of beds to be provided by a Regular or Reserve Field Hospital is operation specific. There is no set standard. The maximum usually provided by a single Field Hospital unit, whether Regular or Reserve, is 200 beds, with 566 medical and support staff required.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel in each reserve field hospital unit have been paid an efficiency bounty. [96933]

Dr. Moonie: The TA bounty is awarded as a result of an individual having been available for service for the past twelve months; having completed the appropriate training; and having received the Commanding Officer's Certificate of Efficiency. Decisions regarding the award of the bounty are only made at the end of the Training Year, in April of each year. The information provided, therefore, refers to the award of the TA bounty at the end of the last Training Year, 2001–02.

Details of the award of the TA bounty to members of each Reserve Field Hospital are as follows:

Field Hospital (V)	*Personnel*
201	228
202	219
203	136
205	150
205	178
207	160
208	177

Field Hospital (V)	Personnel
212	205
243	190
256	199
Specialist Units	376

Fire Dispute

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* officers and *(b)* other ranks are scheduled to remain on HM ships (i) Exeter, (ii) Glasgow, (iii) Newcastle, (iv) Lancaster, (v) St. Albans and (vi) Southampton during the current phase of the firefighters' strike. [95875]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is shown in the table:

	During strike		As of Monday 10 February	
Ship	Officers	Ratings	Officers	Ratings
Exeter	9	122	13	222
Glasgow	14	135	19	221
Newcastle	6	67	6	67
Lancaster	12	95	17	118
St. Albans	5	53	12	120
Southampton	9	40	17	175

During the last phase of the strike the crews of HMS Lancaster, HMS Southampton, HMS St. Albans, HMS Glasgow and HMS Newcastle, while carrying out watches onboard to monitor safety systems and safety and engineering rounds, they did not live onboard. This is known as a dormant routine. HMS Newcastle remains in this routine.

Friendly Fire Casualties

Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations he has had with United States officials concerning the prevention of friendly fire casualties in joint US/British military operations; and if he will make a statement. [96825]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* There have been frequent consultations between the Ministry of Defence and the United States Department of Defense on this topic.

Gas Masks

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what supplies of filter cannisters for gas masks are available; and whether there are sufficient stocks to replace all time-expired cannisters. [95984]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* For troops deployed on Operation TELIC, some 180,000 in-life filter canisters for gas masks have been issued. Further stocks are held in reserve and more will be ordered. The canisters were originally designed with a 10-year shelf life. Extensive testing (carried out in 1998) enabled us to extend the life to 15 years. Our oldest stocks were manufactured in 1991 and will not therefore expire until 2006. No soldier will commence operations with time-expired canisters.

Gulf Deployment (Equipment)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether *(a)* desert T-shirts, *(b)* shower bags and *(c)* mosquito nets are part of standard equipment issued to Royal Engineers on deployment to the Gulf. [97299]

Dr. Moonie: Warm weather T-shirts are part of the desert clothing ensemble being supplied to all service personnel deploying in support of Operation Telic. Shower bags are not part of the standard personal equipment issued to service personnel, but will be available as required. Mosquito nets will be issued as personal equipment when required.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether members of the Royal Engineers about to be deployed to the Gulf have been required to purchase *(a)* desert T-shirts, *(b)* shower bags and *(c)* mosquito nets. [97300]

Dr. Moonie: No service personnel about to be deployed in support of Operation Telic are required to purchase desert T-shirts, shower bags or mosquito nets.

Gulf War (Veterans Illnesses)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the budgetary provision for 2002–03 for expenditure on Gulf War veterans' illnesses research projects is, excluding current and planned MOD research into depleted uranium munitions; and what percentage of the departmental budget this represents; [96986]

(2) what the budgetary provision for the year 2004 for expenditure on Gulf War veterans' illnesses research projects is, excluding current and planned MOD research into depleted uranium munitions; and what percentage of the departmental budget this will represent. [96985]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* Budgetary provision for research into Gulf veterans' illnesses issues, excluding research into depleted uranium munitions, in the Ministry of Defence's Short Term Plan 2002–03 and 2003–04 is £1,010,000.

This figure represents approximately 0.004 per cent. of MOD's budget for 2002–03 and for 2003–04.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to set up a central database of illnesses suffered by Gulf veterans in the UK. [95920]

Dr. Moonie: Primary health care records for the 53,000 or so veterans of the 1990–91 Gulf conflict are held by their doctors and are not accessible centrally for reasons of patient confidentiality. However, the Ministry of Defence maintains some databases that contain health-related information about Gulf veterans. For example, separate databases exist to support pensions casework; processing potential claims for common law compensation and for recording information about patients who have attended the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme. In addition, data are held on cancer registrations and other cancer information. We have no plans to set up a central

database of all illnesses suffered by all Gulf veterans. To do so would be costly and would require individual informed consent from Gulf veterans, about 70 per cent. of whom have now left the armed forces and may therefore be difficult to contact.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the incidence is of *(a)* lymphoma, *(b)* motor neurone disease, *(c)* diabetes, *(d)* renal cancer and *(e)* lymphocytic leukaemia in Gulf War veterans. [95921]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has no centralised system for monitoring and recording the health status of Service and ex-Service personnel. Given the significance attached by veterans to cancer, at MOD's request researchers at the University of Manchester are carrying out a study of the incidence of cancers in Gulf veterans. The study is using data provided by the Office for National Statistics' NHS Central Register (NHSCR) on cancer registrations in England and Wales. The study is due to complete in spring 2003. It is expected that the results will then be submitted for publication in a peer reviewed scientific journal.

Of the 3,172 Gulf veterans seen at the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (GVMAP) as at 31 January 2003, 33 cases of diabetes mellitus, 11 cases of lymphoma (including Hodgkin's and Non-Hodgkin's), seven cases of renal cancer (including renal carcinoma, hypernephroma and cancer of the kidney) and two cases of chronic lymphocytic leukaemia had been diagnosed. No cases of acute lymphocytic leukaemia were seen. MOD does maintain central records of mortality data for Gulf veterans and a comparison group, known as the Era cohort. The most recent data were published on 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 27–29WS. This included four deaths from Motor Neurone Disease among Gulf veterans and three among the Era cohort. We are not aware of any further cases.

HMS Nottingham

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 747W, on HMS Nottingham, how the cost of transportation will be funded from existing funds; and what commitments are to be cut as a result. [96210]

Mr. Ingram: The cost of transporting HMS Nottingham back to the United Kingdom is expected to be funded from the Department's budget for defence-related maritime salvage and recovery activities. There are no plans to cut any commitments.

Iraq

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the strategic lift capability of the armed forces available in the event of a conflict with Iraq. [95882]

Mr. Ingram: The strategic lift capability available to the armed forces covers both air and surface transport. The RAF Air Transport Fleet comprises of VC10, Tristar and C-17 Globemaster aircraft. The surface capability currently comprises roll on/roll off vessels, available to meet the strategic sealift requirement.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people he estimates have been killed by UK and US forces enforcing the no-fly zone in Iraq. [96541]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* We are not aware of any civilian fatalities resulting from responses made in self-defence by coalition aircraft patrolling the No Fly Zones.

Coalition aircraft responding to attacks by Iraqi air defences attack only carefully selected military targets. Although we conduct extensive analysis after every attack we are not able to confirm numbers of military fatalities.

Naval Co-operation

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent co-operation there has been between former Eastern bloc countries and the *(a)* Royal Navy and *(b)* Royal Marines. [95881]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defence gave on 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 846W. We have undertaken ships' visits to several former Eastern bloc countries on an opportunity basis; taken former Eastern bloc naval officers on attachment to Royal Navy ships and vice versa; and conducted inward and outward visits by high ranking United Kingdom and former Eastern bloc country Navy and Marines officers. In addition, we have built information exchange links with Russian naval training establishments, and participated in trilateral naval staff talks with the Russians and the US.

Operation Resinate

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the rules of engagement for RAF units deployed to Operation Resinate. [97294]

Mr. Ingram: Appropriate rules of engagement have been authorised for RAF units deployed on Operation Resinate. Rules of engagement are routinely classified as their disclosure could give an enemy information about the permissions and restrictions imposed on our forces.

I am therefore withholding details in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Recalled Soldiers

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers discharged under QR 9.413 have been recalled for service in the contingency plans for the Gulf; and if he will make a statement. [96616]

Dr. Moonie: The call out in connection with current contingency preparations has not yet been concluded and so it is not possible to give a final figure at present. However, up to 0900 on Friday 7 February, eight soldiers previously discharged under Queens Regulations for the Army paragraph 9.413 had been identified for call out.

Retirement

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers took *(a)* premature voluntary retirement and *(b)* SNLR from the (i) Footguards, (ii) Scots Division, (iii) Queen's Division, (iv) King's Division, (v) Parachute Division, (vi) Light Division, (vii) R Irish (GS), (viii) R Irish (HS) and (ix) Parachute Regiment in 1998. [96615]

Dr. Moonie: The number of soldiers, who were discharged in 1998 following the approval of their applications for premature voluntary release, or under Queens Regulations for the Army paragraph 9.414 "Services No Longer Required", broken down by Division/Regiment as appropriate, is shown in the following table.

Division/Regiment	*Premature voluntary release (on payment)*	*Services no longer required*	Total
Guards Division	45	73	118
Scots Division	12	97	109
Queens Division	16	69	85
Kings Division	18	160	178
R Irish	12	13	25
Light Division	19	52	71
Paragraph	8	26	34
Totals	130	490	620

Separate figures for the Royal Irish (GS) and Royal Irish (HS) are not given because this could identify individuals and breach disclosure and confidentiality policy.

Russian Warship Deployment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what talks his Department has had with Russian officials about possible Russian warship deployments to the Persian Gulf. [95880]

Mr. Hoon: I am aware of no such discussions.

Security

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to improve security at his Department's facilities and bases; and if he will make a statement. [96939]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence takes the security of its people and assets very seriously. The threat to the Department's facilities and bases, along with the security measures in force at them, is kept under constant review. It is not Government policy to comment on specific security measures and I am therefore withholding that type of information under Exemption 1 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Service Pay

Hugh Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the armed forces are warned-off for deployment to the Gulf; and how many of these are in receipt of station specific pay, broken down by category. [96315]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* Including those forces currently in the region on routine deployments and permanent taskings, a total of around 45,000 servicemen and women have been deployed or are due to deploy to the Middle East region. Detailed planning continues however, and figures are liable to change. Approximately 10,400 of those deploying are in receipt of Local Overseas Allowance.

Tactical Trainer Simulator Centre

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which units have made use of the combined arms tactical trainer simulator centre at Warminster. [96941]

Mr. Ingram: Since its acceptance in May 2002, the following units have used the Combined Arms Tactical Trainer at Warminster (CATT UK); elements of Headquarters 3 (UK) Division, the Queen's Dragoon Guards, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers Recce Platoon, the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, the Household Cavalry Regiment, the King's Royal Hussars, the Army Air Corps and elements of the Royal School of Military Engineers.

Vaccine Schedule (Gulf Deployment)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the anthrax vaccine being administered to UK troops deploying to the Gulf is freshly manufactured. [95924]

Dr. Moonie: Yes. All anthrax vaccine currently being administered to United Kingdom Service personnel is licensed and will have been manufactured within the last two years.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops deploying to the Gulf have been vaccinated with smallpox vaccine. [95930]

Dr. Moonie: We have announced plans to vaccinate a cohort of specialist medical personnel and nuclear, biological and chemical specialists against smallpox. I refer my hon. Friend to the written statement I made on 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 60WS. This is not in response to any specific or immediate threat but a sensible precaution, against a potential global threat, which will enable our armed forces to mount an effective response in the event that smallpox is used as a biological weapon.

Vaccination against smallpox for this cohort has commenced. As of 7 February 2003, 38 Service personnel have been vaccinated against smallpox of which 24 have deployed or are deploying to the Gulf. We plan to vaccinate the cohort in phases, with the eventual aim of including all relevant specialist nuclear, biological and chemical personnel and all front-line medical personnel who could deploy on operations. A number of those personnel who will be included in the completed cohort have deployed, are deploying or could deploy on operations to the Gulf. We have sufficient

stocks of smallpox vaccine to put our contingency plans into action in the event of a confirmed, suspected or threatened release of smallpox.

Western Isles (Rents)

Mr. MacDonald: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the rents received by *(a)* the Ministry of Defence and *(b)* Defence Estates for the use of its properties in the Western Isles, broken down by (i) location, (ii) payee and (iii) amount paid. [96890]

Dr. Moonie: Defence Estates is an agency of the Ministry of Defence. The location of MOD properties in the Western Isles, together with payee and amount paid is shown in the following table:

Tenant/payee	*Location*	*Rent per annum (£)*
UIST Council of VOL Organisations	Balivanich, South UIST	3,600.00
Collins D. J.	Balivanich, South UIST	10.00
West Gerinish Township	Balivanich, South UIST	10.00
Bank of Scotland	Balivanich, South UIST	20.00
UIST Resource Unit	Balivanich, South UIST	50.00
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Balivanich, South UIST	23.45
BP Marketing Ltd.	Loch Carnan, South UIST	5,000.00
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Loch Carnan, South UIST	2.10
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Loch Carnan, South UIST	0.95
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Loch Carnan, South UIST	12.49
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Loch Carnan, South UIST	12.12
Maclennan Brothers	Loch Carnan, South UIST	1.00
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Loch Carnan, South UIST	3.05
Wicks A. J.	Loch Carnan, South UIST	5.00
MacGillivary G	Loch Carnan, South UIST	10.00
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Stornoway, Airport	29.26
McLeod M	Stornoway, Airport	30.00
Melbost and Branahuie Grazings	Stornoway, Airport	35.00
Scottish and Southern Energy Plc	Tigharry, South UIST	2.10
Northern Lighthouse Board	South Clettraval, South UIST	4,000.00
Service Officer	Benbecula	1,832.30
Service Other Ranks	Benbecula x 6	Ea(a 1,832.30
Qinetiq	Benbecula x 15	Total of 3,044.00

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Arsenic

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent air and land assessments have been made at United Mines in Cornwall to ascertain levels of arsenic. [96732]

Alun Michael: As part of the current licence conditions Cornwall Environmental Services monitor quantitative dust levels (PM_{10}) emitting from the United Mines site. This information is audited by the Environment Agency and confirmed through weekly site visits to ensure compliance and placed on the Public Register. In response to concerns from local residents, a limited number of samples were taken by the Environment Agency from stockpiles of naturally occurring subsoil at the landfill and from dried mud deposits along the highway adjacent to the site. Results of analysis of the samples showed arsenic in the 200 to 400 milligrams per kilogram range, which is comparable with levels to be found in mineworking areas.

This information and results of samples from adjacent sites is available on the Public Register (please contact Bodmin Area Customer Services on 01208 78301).

In addition, Carrick District Council commissioned short-term ambient air monitoring at a site close to United Mines in May and June 2001. Particulate matter (PM_{10}) was sampled over a number of days. Concentrations of PM_{10} at the monitoring site were influenced by the operations at the United Mines site but did not exceed Air Quality Strategy objective limits during the time of sampling. Arsenic was not analysed in the sampled particulate matter. Copies of the monitoring report are available from Carrick District Council.

Brazilian Meat Exports

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the quality of Brazilian *(a)* pigmeat and *(b)* poultry meat exported to the United Kingdom. [95055]

Margaret Beckett: Imports into the United Kingdom of animal products are governed by European Community legislation, which contains provisions to protect both animal and public health. Under these rules only third countries approved by the Commission on the advice of the Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health may export into the Community, and only from establishments which meet Community hygiene standards. The lists of countries and establishments allowed to export particular products into the Community which includes Brazil is available on the Commission's website at the following address: http://forum.europa.eu.int/irc/sanco/vets/info/data/listes/tableO.html.

EU Community rules do not currently permit the import of pigmeat from Brazil.

Imports of poultry meat from third countries must have been produced to the standards at least equivalent to those laid down in Community legislation. In addition, all consignments of fresh poultry meat imported from third countries are subject to veterinary

inspection on entering the EU to ensure that conditions of import have been complied with and to ensure that they have remained in a satisfactory condition during transport.

Responsibility for ensuring that third countries meet these requirements lies with the Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) of the European Commission. FVO reports are published on their website at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/inspections/vi/reports/index_en.html.

Recently, unauthorised veterinary medicines namely nitrofurans were found in poultry meat from Brazil. Nitrofurans are not permitted in the EU for use in food producing animals, due to public health concerns. Therefore their residues should not be present in food.

Community rules have been put in place that require all consignments of all poultry meat from Brazil to be tested for the presence of nitrofurans and their metabolites. The consignments must remain at Border Inspection Posts (BIPs) while testing takes place and are only allowed entry into the Community following favourable test results. If nitrofuran residues are detected, the consignment is destroyed.

Environmental Grants

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on *(a)* the take-up of environmental grants under the modulation arrangements and *(b)* the financial arrangements for retaining the amounts available but unclaimed. [95517]

Mr. Meacher: *(a)* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 76W.

(b) The modulated amounts are retained by the Rural Payments Agency, and held within their account with Paymaster. Accounts held with Paymaster are not subject to interest. Modulated funds have to be spent within three years of the end of the year in which they are raised.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the administrative procedures required to claim environmental grants under the modulation arrangements; and if she will make a statement. [95518]

Mr. Meacher: In England, modulation receipts are used to fund payments to farmers under agri-environment schemes. The administrative costs of the schemes are not paid for by modulation. This Department is currently reviewing the schemes and part of the review will be looking to simplify the administrative procedures and develop a new "entry-level" tier which has much lower overhead costs.

EU Minimum Air Quality Legislation

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the legislation from the EU on Minimum Air Quality is expected to take effect; and how DEFRA is preparing for this. [97035]

Alun Michael: The EU Air Quality Framework Directive (1996/62/EC) and subsequent daughter directives set limit values for various atmospheric pollutants in ambient air. The First (1999/30/EC) and Second Daughter Directives (2000/69/EC) are transposed into UK law. Limit values for sulphur dioxide, particulate matter, lead and carbon monoxide must be met by 1 January 2005. Limit values for benzene, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen must be met by 1 January 2010. The Third Daughter Directive (2002/3/EC), which sets target values for ozone, will be transposed later this year.

We expect the limit values to be met in a majority of locations within the allotted time scale through existing national measures already in place or planned to come into effect. Where further measures are required, these will be taken forward in partnership with local authorities and other relevant organisations through the National Air Quality Strategy.

Farm Incinerators

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on applications for on-farm incinerators to dispose of specified risk material. [95607]

Margaret Beckett: Defra only approves applications for incinerators which fully comply with the legislation. However, the UK is currently awaiting clarification from the European Commission on whether the legislation after 1 May 2003 will permit the incineration of specified risk material in incinerators operating at less than 50kg/hour.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many applications her Department received in *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03 to operate incinerators to dispose of specified risk material; how many applications in each year (i) were accepted, (ii) were refused and (iii) await determination; and if she will make a statement. [95611]

Margaret Beckett: Applications to operate incinerators to dispose of specified risk material are made at local level. The details requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, a central register of operators currently approved to operate specified risk material incinerators indicates that as at 31 January 2003 there were 306 approved incinerators in Great Britain.

Flood Insurance

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received from the insurance industry during the last six months about the flood defence and flood management policy. [89627]

Margaret Beckett: The Association of British Insurers met Ministers in September 2002 to discuss their concerns. Following that meeting the ABI

announced a Statement of Principles which sought Government commitment to action in seven areas:

actual expenditure on flood defences to meet or exceed that set out in the 2002 Spending Review;

implementation of the improvements in the system of flood defence planning set out in Defra's consultation "Flood and coastal defence funding review";

full implementation of PPG25 (Planning Policy Guidance on Development Planning and Flood Risk), with full reporting of the level of compliance by local authorities and consideration of administrative processes in the planned review of PPG25 in 2004;

the Environment Agency's flood asset database to be available to insurers by the beginning of 2003, and publicly available as soon as possible;

early improvements in the flood warning system, and implementation of the Cabinet Office's recent emergency planning review;

full and detailed consideration, including a benefit/cost analysis, to be given to integrated drainage management for England and Wales, similar to that in operation in Scotland;

implementation of realistic solutions to sewer flooding including increased investment in improvement programmes and adoption of water companies and sewerage undertakers as statutory consultees in the development planning process.

The Government said they are happy to work with the ABI towards meeting these principles; we are in regular contact with them and will review progress regularly.

Flood Protection

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make it her policy to give local authorities a power to require riparian owners to take reasonable measures to ensure adequate levels of flood protection. [89630]

Margaret Beckett: The flood and coastal defence operating authorities work under permissive powers meaning that they are under no obligation to undertake such works. In default of action being taken by these authorities, riparian owners are therefore responsible for taking what action they consider necessary (subject in certain cases to the consent of the relevant operating authority) to protect their own properties. I am not, however, persuaded that obligations should be placed on riparian owners in these circumstances.

There are already powers for the operating authorities, including local authorities, to require riparian owners to take remedial action where the proper flow of water is impeded across their land.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what assessment she has made of the lessons for policy in England and Wales of the Scottish arrangement for local authorities to have a statutory duty for flood protection; [89631]

(2) if she will make it her policy to place on local authorities a statutory duty for flood protection. [89632]

Margaret Beckett: I am aware that some advocate adoption of the Scottish approach for the provision of flood defence. However, flood risk issues in Scotland are different from those in England and Wales. We currently operate on the basis of permissive powers, which allows the Environment Agency and other operating authorities to take action where it is considered justifiable against a range of criteria. This allows taxpayers' money to be spent where it is most needed, an approach overwhelmingly supported by respondents to our recent consultation on the Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review. I expect to announce conclusions on the review as soon as possible.

Litter

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures her Department is looking at to tackle littering arising from the use of plastic and other non-biodegradable packaging. [86024]

Mr. Meacher: We have a number of initiatives under way at present, although none are specifically aimed at non-biodegradable packaging.

At the Urban Summit last October, My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Rural Affairs (Alun Michael) launched a consultation document called "Living Places—Powers, Rights, Responsibilities". The document sets out 27 options which, if adopted, would make a significant impact on the quality of the local environment. The options include measures to deal with graffiti, fly posting, litter in the aquatic environment, fly tipping and a range of other issues. The consultation closes on 14 February. We will then carefully assess consultees comments and consider, with other Government Departments as necessary, how best to take matters forward.

Defra has provided the environmental charity EnCams with £1 million to develop a Pathfinder program. This involves 27 local authorities in a major programme to draw up good practice guidelines over a wide range of local environmental quality issues. The program is almost completed and preliminary assessments indicate that it has been a success at ground level. Local authorities have been able to use the program to test innovative techniques for improving service delivery and communicating with customers. From over 30 projects, a number have emerged that are worthy of consideration for further development, including the district level Local Environmental Quality Survey which is being developed by EnCams on behalf of Defra.

We have been in discussions with fast food operators and other key stakeholders about the problems associated with fast food waste. We are considering options and will come forward with proposals shortly.

We strongly support the development of biodegradable plastics made from non-fossil sources, providing these will actually be composted and not sent to landfill. A substitute for plastic made from potato starch is now being developed, which is being used for some types of packaging by some retailers. Such material is entirely biodegradable and can be composted. A number of companies are marketing degradable plastics technology and products manufactured from these materials.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many times since 2001 she has taken flights on departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied her on each trip. [95386]

Margaret Beckett: Since June 2001, I have made three trips on departmental duties within the UK which have involved business class air travel. This included a return journey from London to Belfast, where I was accompanied by a private secretary and a press officer; a single journey from London to Newquay, where I was accompanied by my husband; and a single journey from London to Leeds, where I was accompanied by my husband, a private secretary, a special adviser and a press officer.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the "Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers", copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

National Parks and Marine Nature Reserves

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress the Government has made since 1997 in the creation of new national parks and marine nature reserves. [97133]

Alun Michael: The Countryside Agency submitted a Designation Order to the Secretary of State for a New Forest National Park in February 2002. A public inquiry into it started last October and is due to end in April. A Designation Order for a South Downs National Park was submitted in February 2003 and is currently subject to public consultation. If there are, as expected, objections to the Order by any of the local authorities, a public inquiry will be held.

No new Marine Nature Reserves have been created since 1997 but the Government are committed to a range of initiatives aimed at protecting the marine environment as outlined in the first Marine Stewardship Report—"Safeguarding Our Seas: A Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Development of our Marine Environment". This includes continuing to protect important marine species and habitats under the Habitats and Birds Directives, including extending the protection afforded by these Directives to offshore areas. We are also looking at ways to improve marine nature conservation through our Review of Marine Nature Conservation.

Nuclear Accident

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her Department's role is in the event of a nuclear accident. [93274]

Mr. Meacher: Defra has Lead Department responsibilities for co-ordinating the Government's response to a nuclear accident overseas. This will include issuing appropriate warning messages to official bodies and the public and co-ordinating decision-making on any actions necessary to safeguard public health and other necessary interests. In the event of accidents at UK civil nuclear sites, military sites or weapons accidents, accidents involving radioactive materials in transit, or accidents arising from a nuclear powered satellite falling to earth, the nominated Lead Department would be the Department of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Defence, Department for Transport and Home Office respectively. In these accident scenarios, Defra would act in a supporting capacity to the nominated Lead Department.

Detailed explanations as to the roles of Government Departments and Agencies in the event of a nuclear accident are set out in the Home Office booklet "Dealing with Disaster" and the HSE booklet "Arrangements for Responding to Nuclear Accidents". Both are HMSO publications and copies are held in the Library.

Radioactive Waste

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what she estimates the volume in cubic metres will be of *(a)* high level, *(b)* intermediate level and *(c)* low level stocks of radioactive waste in (i) 2010, (ii) 2020 and (iii) 2030, assuming projected closure of nuclear power stations occurs. [94971]

Mr. Meacher: Data contained in the 2001 UK Radioactive Waste Inventory, published jointly by my Department and Nirex, indicates that the stocks of high and intermediate level radioactive waste, expressed in cubic metres when in conditioned form, will be:

	(a) HLW	*(b) ILW*
2010	1,348	106,984
2020	1,510	127,817
2030	1,510	142,642

The volumes of low level waste (LLW) are less certain since LLW has a disposal route and the quantities in stock fluctuate markedly depending on the timing of transfers to Drigg. 15,000 cubic metres was the stock volume of LLW reported in the inventory for 1 April 2001.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether British Nuclear Fuels has provided her Department with a timetable of dates on which radioactive waste arising from the reprocessing of foreign spent nuclear fuel will be returned to country of origin. [95266]

Mr. Meacher: British Nuclear Fuels plc has not provided such a timetable to DEFRA.

Regional Agencies (Eastern Region)

Andrew Selous: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the locations of the offices of regional bodies and agencies in the Eastern region for which her Department is responsible, broken down by county. [95059]

Alun Michael: I list in the following table the regional bodies and Defra Agencies by County in the Eastern Region. Locations of NDPBs that have supra regional responsibilities but are located in Eastern Region have been excluded.

County	*Address*	*Occupier*
Bedford	Wrest Park, Silsoe, Beds, MK45 4HS	EMI
Cambridge	Government Buildings, Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge, Cambs, CB2 2DR	RPA, RDS, HMI, EMI, PHSI
	Chequers Court, St. Germaine Street, Huntingdon, Cambs, PE18 6LT	SVS
	Whitehouse Lane, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, Cambs, CBS OLF	PVS
	First Floor Unit, 2 Manor Grove Business Centre, Vicarage Farm Road, Peterborough, Cambs, PE15 5UH	Legal
Essex	Fish Laboratories, Remembrance Avenue, Burnham-on-Crouch, Essex, CMO 8HA	CEFAS
	Beeches Road Government Buildings, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 2RU	SVS, EMI, PHSI, RPA
	Office Suite 3 St. Andrews House, Opposite 22 Berth Tilbury Freeport, Essex, RM18 7HX	HMI
	Hamilton House, Parkeston Quay Rooms G8 & G9, Ground Floor, Harwich, Essex,	FI
	Unit 10, Springfield Nursery Industrial Estate, Burnham-on-Crouch, Essex, CMO 8DA	CEFAS
Hertfordshire	First Floor, Richmond House, Walkern Road, Stevenage Old Town, Herts, SG1 3QP	SVS, HMI
Norfolk	Vancouver House, County Court Road, Kings Lynn, Norfolk, PE30 5EH	PHSI, RDS, FI, HMI
	122A Thorpe Road, Norwich, Norfolk, NR1 1RN	EMI, PHSI, RDS, SVS, RPA
Suffolk	Fish Lab Stores Units, 7–12 Pinbush Drive, South Lowestoft Industrial Estate, Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR33NL	CEFAS
	Fisheries Laboratory, Pakefield Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR33 OHT	CEFAS
	North Quay, Lowestoft Docks, Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR321BN	CEFAS
	Portakabin, Fish Quay, Battery Green Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR33 OHT	CEFAS
	100 Southgate Street Government Buildings, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 2AQ	PHSI, SVS, RDS, RPA
	Baltic Chambers, 2 Waveney Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR32 1BN	FI
	Vic Rougham Hill, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 2RT	VLA
	St. Clare House, Princes Street, Greyriars, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP1 1LW	HMI, EMI
	Room 516 Trelawny House, The Dock, Felixtowe, Suffolk, IP1 8SB	PHSI

Notes:
EMI—Egg Marketing Inspectorate
RPA—Rural Payments Agency
RDS—Rural Development Service
HMI—Horticultural Marketing Inspectorate
PHSI—Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate
PVS—Plant Variety and Seeds Inspectorate
Legal—Defra Legal Department
SVS—State Veterinary Service
FI—Fisheries Inspectorate
VLA—Veterinary Laboratories Agency

Theft and Fraud

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 103W, if she will estimate the cost of theft and fraud to each of her Department's agencies for the financial year 2001–02. [95080]

Margaret Beckett: The Department's records for the financial year 2001–02 show that of its agencies the Rural Payments Agency reported theft with a cost of £226,000. The Department's other agencies each reported no cost for theft and fraud.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when all government suppliers will be issued with guidance regarding government requirements to procure timber from legal and sustainable sources. [95734]

Mr. Meacher: I wrote to Green Ministers in May 2002 enclosing a model specification clause that will help central departments draft their contracts for procuring timber and timber products. The model specification clause was also included in an Information Note that the Treasury's Office of Government Commerce issued in November to remind Departments of the Government's policy on the procurement of timber. It has provided both buyers and suppliers with some clarification of the Government's requirements for timber.

The current guidance does need improving. The Government intends tightening up the definition of acceptable standards for legal timber and forest management and will do more to determine how suppliers' claims for compliance can be assessed efficiently and effectively. The Government is in the process of tendering to set up a central point of expertise on timber to address these issues and other related matters. I cannot be precise about when the centre of expertise will be ready to issue improved guidance but as an indication I would expect it to be later this year.

Village Halls

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many village halls there are *(a)* in the UK, *(b)* in the north-west of

England and *(c)* Lancashire; and how many village halls were operating in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999, (iv) 2000, (v) 2001 and (vi) 2002. [96727]

Alun Michael: In 1998 Action with Communities in Rural England calculated that there were around 8,900 village halls and similar community buildings in rural England; no analysis of the actual number of village halls at regional or county level, and of the change from year to year, is available centrally.

The Countryside Agency's report "Rural Services in 2000" reveals that in 2000 84.3 per cent. of those parishes in the north-west who responded to their survey had either a village hall or other community meeting place compared with 85 per cent. for England.

Further detailed information about the north-west is available at: http://www.countryside.gov.uk/regional/pdfs/NWRSS.pdf.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many village halls have been in operation every year since 1997 in *(a)* the East of England, *(b)* Suffolk and *(c)* the constituency of Bury St Edmunds. [97388]

Alun Michael: In 1998 Action with Communities in Rural England calculated that there were around 8,900 village halls and similar community buildings in rural England; No analysis of the actual number of village halls at regional or county level, and of the change from year to year, is available centrally.

The Countryside Agency's report "Rural Services in 2000" reveals that in 2000 88.1 per cent. of those parishes in the East of England who responded to their survey had either a village hall or other community meeting place compared with 85 per cent. for England as a whole. The same survey revealed that 68.8 per cent. of settlements had a village or community hall compared with 52 per cent. for England.

Further detailed information about the East of England is available at: http://www.countryside.gov.uk/regional/pdfs/EofERSS.pdf

Waste Incinerator Directive

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many waste incinerators in the UK emit levels of dioxins and other pollutants above those permitted by the EU Waste Incinerator Directive; and if she will make a statement. [96411]

Mr. Meacher: Directive 2000/76/EC on the incineration of waste will apply from 28 December 2005 to incinerators existing before 28 December 2002. The directive's limits for pollutants cover emissions both to air and to water and will be relatively complex in their application, depending in part on the nature of the incinerator. A UK assessment carried out during the negotiation of the directive indicated that there was already a high level of compliance with the limits. In particular, the 11 municipal waste incinerators in England all now already comply with the directive's limit of 0.1 ng/m^3 for dioxins emissions.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Local Government Funding

Mr. Maude: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what proportion of total public spending consisted of spending by local authorities in each of the past five years. [96527]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Figures for local authority own spending and total managed expenditure for the past five years are available on the public spending pages on the Treasury public website, and are updated every time the Office for National Statistics revises these data. The website address is: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Documents/Public_Spending_and_Services/pss_index.cfm

Unfair Terms Regulations

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many *(a)* local authority and *(b)* housing association tenancy agreements have been received by the OFT for investigation under the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts regulations. [96565]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

This historic information is not available as records are not kept by OFT at this level of detail. But OFT believe the numbers involved to be small. OFT are currently considering three complaints about local authority tenancy agreements and another six complaints about housing association tenancy agreements.

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister *(a)* how many terms and *(b)* what type of terms were revised in the Blyth Valley Borough Council tenancy agreement, as reported in the Office of Fair Trading's Unfair Contract Terms bulletin number 18. [96569]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The published Bulletin shows that 10 terms were revised following action by the Director General of Fair Trading. The terms revised were those considered to have some potential for unfairness. They included clauses binding tenants to other hidden terms, a potential financial penalty, exclusions or limitations on the legal rights of the tenant, an unrestricted right to increase the rent, a term allowing the Council excessive discretion to decide whether the tenant was in breach of the agreement, a term unfairly transferring risk to the tenant and a term which did not meet the requirement that terms be written in plain language.

TREASURY

Independent Financial Advisers

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the number of independent financial advisers unable to secure professional indemnity insurance. [96629]

Ruth Kelly: The FSA tell me that as at 27 January 2003, 76 per cent. of Independent Financial Advisers (IFAs) (whose Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) expired between 1 September and 30 November 2002) have told the FSA that they have obtained cover.

An analysis of the information they provided shows that 88 per cent. of IFAs due to renew their cover in September have done so. The figure for October is 85 per cent. and November 66 per cent.

This does not necessarily mean that the other IFAs have not got cover. The FSA tell me that IFAs are reluctant to confirm that they have cover until they have received a cover note even though they may have agreed terms with their broker. This means that there is usually a gap between the expiry of an IFA's PII policy and the receipt of confirmation that the policy has been renewed by the IFA. The FSA are contacting the remaining firms to establish their position.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of capacity within the professional indemnity insurance market for independent financial advisers. [96773]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority (FSA) tell me that they speak to Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) providers and brokers regularly, and are keeping in close touch with the market.

The FSA have found that 21 insurers have provided cover between September and December 2002. 87 per cent. of policies have been through three main providers.

The FSA are monitoring the market and expect that that more capacity will be introduced soon. This should increase competition and drive down the price of cover. We are also hopeful that some of the proposals and explanations in the FSA's consultation paper 169 ("Professional Indemnity Insurance for Personal Investment Firms: Consultation on Rule Changes; and Discussion of Other Policy Options") will encourage providers to write more cover.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment his Department has made of the proportion of independent financial advisers unable to secure professional indemnity insurance who have been refused because they have recommended split capital trusts. [96774]

Ruth Kelly: Underwriters will take a range of factors into account when deciding whether to provide insurance cover. It is not possible to attribute individual underwriting decisions to a single cause.

Money Laundering

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from professional bodies relating to the use of solicitors' offices as centres for money laundering. [97000]

Ruth Kelly: We are currently consulting on the new money laundering regulations.

We have had discussions with the Law Society about the basis on which the UK will implement the EU 2nd money laundering directive which extends money laundering obligations to lawyers. The UK already has a robust system and requires lawyers to file suspicious transaction reports covering money laundering unless excepted by legal professional privilege. The new directive will, through the proposed money laundering regulations 2003, extend various other obligations such as appointment of a Money Laundering Reporting Officer, customer identification and reporting, to lawyers that will further strengthen the UK system.

Barnett Formula

Adam Price: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to *(a)* review, *(b)* revise and *(c)* replace the Barnett Formula for the allocation of public expenditure to (i) Wales, (ii) Scotland and (iii) Northern Ireland. [97247]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) on 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 27W.

Child Care Tax Credit

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to extend the child care tax credit to informal carers of children. [96533]

Dawn Primarolo: The child care tax credit in the working families' tax credit supports families who pay for approved child care regulated by the appropriate authorities who provide assurance of quality and safety. The eligibility criteria for the child care tax credit are kept under constant review. With the introduction of the working tax credit in April, support will also be available for approved child care provided in the child's own home.

Child Poverty

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which definition of poverty the Government will use to assess progress in meeting its targets to reduce child poverty. [96504]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have a PSA target to reduce the number of children in low-income households by a quarter by 2004–05 compared with 1998–99, as a contribution towards the broader target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. The technical note for this PSA, published on DWP and HMT websites, provides details. Low-income households are defined as those with less than 60 per cent. of contemporary median income. Progress is being measured on both a before housing costs and an after housing costs basis.

Low income is of course central to poverty. But poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional issue, affecting many other aspects of children's lives, including health, housing, the quality of their environment and opportunities to learn. In April 2002 the Government launched a consultation exercise to decide the best way to measure poverty in the long term, to help target policies and enable the Government to be held to account over its long-term targets. Results will be published by spring 2003.

Compulsory Pensions

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy on making individual pension schemes compulsory. [96452]

Mr. McCartney: I have been asked to reply.

We believe that the current voluntarist approach for occupational and personal pensions is the right way forward considering the UK's pension system. The UK has a long tradition of voluntary partnership between individuals, employers, financial services industry and the Government. The continued success of this partnership depends on all partners playing their part. Our Green Paper, "Simplicity, Security and Choice: Working and Saving for Retirement" (Cm5677), contained proposals to allow employers to make membership of their scheme a condition of employment for all new employees. The Green Paper also announced the setting up of an independent pensions commission, which will be chaired by Adair Turner, to monitor and assess trends in occupational and private pensions and long-term saving. On the basis of this assessment we will decide whether there is a case for moving beyond the current voluntarist approach.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what safeguards are in place to prevent misuse of the Inland Revenue computer database of individuals' tax records; [92772]

(2) what plans he has to investigate the misuse of the Inland Revenue computer database of individuals' tax records; [92820]

(3) what safeguards are in place to prevent breaches of the Data Protection Act 1998 by Inland Revenue staff. [92774]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue takes the misuse of any of its computer systems, and the confidentiality of the information it holds on its customers, extremely seriously. The Department can and does track computer use by its staff and takes a very hard line with anyone who misuses its computer systems, with sanctions up to and including dismissal and prosecution. Its procedures for monitoring access to its computer systems are kept constantly under review.

Disabled Children

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to make an economic analysis of the investment required to ensure that government programmes aimed at lifting children out of poverty reach disabled children. [96314]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's strategy for tackling child poverty-for all children-is set out in the 2001 Pre-Budget Report document "Tackling child poverty: giving every child the best possible start in life". This includes measures to guarantee a decent family income for families with disabled children, and initiatives to ensure these families have access to high-quality public services.

In recognition of the fact that families with disabled children need extra help, in April 2002 the disabled child premium was increased by £5 a week on top of the normal uprating, to £35.50. In April 2003, it will rise again by £5 above inflation, to more than £40 a week on top of basic Income Support or tax credits, benefiting around 80,000 children. In addition, the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance was extended to three and four-year-olds in April 2002, providing an extra £39.30 a week to those families.

The Government has also introduced a number of measures to improve the level of public service support available to families with disabled children. The Schools Access Initiative programme provides a programme of funding to help mainstream schools provide help to pupils with disabilities. Quality Protects, a five year initiative to improve services and outcomes for children in need, also takes forward projects to support disabled children and their families. And on its introduction by the end of this year the Children's National Service Framework will set general principles and standards for children's services, including services for children with disabilities and special needs.

Equitable Life

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what indications he has received from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration on when he can expect to receive his report into Equitable Life. [96588]

Ruth Kelly: The Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration is an Officer of the House and, as such, is independent of the Government. It is, therefore, entirely a matter for the Commissioner to determine the timetable for producing her report into Equitable Life.

The Commissioner wrote to all Members on 5 December 2002 with an update on the progress of her investigation into Equitable Life. In that letter she said that she did not expect to report before June 2003.

Euro

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 3 February 2003 *Official Report*, column 29W, on the euro, for what reason he was unable to state who is undertaking the background studies; and if he will make a statement. [97264]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Member to the comments I made to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) during the Adjournment Debate on 5 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 268.

Formal Economy

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people the Inland Revenue moved from the informal to the formal economy in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [96546]

Dawn Primarolo: In his report, "The Informal Economy" in March 2000, Lord Grabiner defined the informal economy as usually meaning any undeclared economic activity. There is no comprehensive information about the number of people who as a result

of the Inland Revenue's efforts, especially in deterring non-compliance, have declared economic activity that might have gone undeclared in the past.

Following Lord Grabiner's report, the Inland Revenue set out in their last two annual reports details of the number of people who had been working in the informal economy and whom they subsequently identified and registered as self assessment taxpayers. Copies of Inland Revenue annual reports are in the House of Commons Library.

Landfill

Norman Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what modelling his Department has carried out on the level of landfill tax necessary to meet the legal obligations of the landfill directive *(a)* to reduce the landfilling of biodegradable waste to 75 per cent. of that of 1995 levels by 2006, *(b)* to reduce the landfilling of biodegradable waste to 50 per cent. of that of 1995 levels by 2009 and *(c)* to reduce the landfilling of biodegradable waste to 33 per cent. of that of 1995 levels by 2016. [96401]

John Healey: Extensive modelling has been carried out which shows that a standard landfill tax rate of £35 per tonne is necessary in the medium to long term to achieve significant reductions in waste disposed at landfill, and the corresponding economic and environmental benefits. This is reflected in paragraph 7.51 of the 2002 pre-Budget report. The Government are developing a comprehensive package of policies, in response to those recommended in the recent Cabinet Office Strategy Unit report, to ensure that the targets set by the landfill directive are met. This will include the system of tradable landfill allowances provided for by the Waste and Emissions Trading Bill and the reforms of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme as well as the proposed increases in the landfill tax.

Non-compliance Action

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much additional revenue has been raised in each of the last 10 years as a consequence of non-compliance action taken by the Inland Revenue, broken down by *(a)* the large business office, *(b)* tax offices and *(c)* other specialist offices; and if he will make a statement. [96547]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is set out each year in the Inland Revenue annual report, copies of which are in the House of Commons Library.

Renewable Energy

Norman Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes in unit payments for electricity have resulted from the switch by *(a)* Customs and Excise and *(b)* the Office for National Statistics to purchasing renewable energy which is exempt from the climate change levy. [96481]

John Healey: The changes in unit payment at designated green sites are as follows:

(a) Customs and Excise—0.086 per cent. on average higher than in 2001.

(b) Office for National Statistics—0.089 per cent. higher than at April 2000.

These increases in unit prices are more than offset by reductions achieved by qualifying for CCL exemptions.

Stability and Growth Pact

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent assessment he has made of whether Britain's fiscal stance meets the Stability and Growth Pact. [96427]

Ruth Kelly: As set out in the 2002 Pre-Budget Report and the 2002 UK Convergence Programme—submitted in line with the Stability and Growth Pact, the UK's latest fiscal projections are consistent with a prudent interpretation of the Stability and Growth Pact, which takes into account the economic cycle, sustainability and the important role of public investment.

Stamp Duty

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment his Department has made of the likely effect of abolition of stamp duty on *(a)* share transactions and *(b)* the UK economy. [96424]

Ruth Kelly: The 2002 Pre-Budget forecast of revenue from duty on transactions in shares, and hence the direct yield cost of abolition, is £2.2 billion in 2003–04. This estimate makes no allowance for the effect on other taxes arising from the wider impact abolition may have on the economy.

We have been presented with various estimates of the impact on the economy, but in practice there is no convincing evidence that stamp duty on shares significantly affects either UK companies or the UK markets. As with all taxes, stamp duty on shares has to be understood in the context of the revenue raised, which would have to be found elsewhere if the tax were abolished.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Commonwealth Development Corporation Vehicle Fleet

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) at what annual rate the Commonwealth Development Corporation renews its vehicle fleet, broken down by volume and percentage for each category of vehicle, type of power unit, and type of fuel; [96977]

(2) what proportion of vehicles each NHS trust renewed in their vehicle fleets, broken down by volume and percentage for each trust and by category of vehicle, type of power unit, and type of fuel in each of the last five years. [96594]

Clare Short *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* CDC Group plc (formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation) own one saloon-car in the UK, which is renewed every four years. They do not maintain detailed central records of the vehicles operated by their overseas offices and it would incur disproportionate cost to collect this information.

EU Aid Budget

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures are in place to ensure that the annual aid budget of the European Union is spent properly. [96781]

Clare Short: In November 2000 we secured a commitment by the European Commission that poverty reduction should be the central objective of the EC's programmes in developing countries. We also worked with others to put in place a reform package which is designed to simplify the commission's aid instruments, reduce the number of budget lines and work through country strategies aligned to partner country poverty reduction strategy plans. The commission spent 43 per cent. of its overseas development assistance in 2001 in low income countries. This is a poor allocation of aid in terms of poverty reduction effectiveness. We are working to try to help ensure that aid is spent more effectively, mainly by trying to influence the annual budget setting process, where increasing the proportion of assistance to Asia, and to key international initiatives like the Global Health Fund are priorities.

My Department plays a full part in the scrutiny of strategies at the regional and country levels and responds to the commission's Annual Report on its operations and the opinions of the European Court of Auditors. We maintain a close dialogue with the institutions in Brussels and in-country to strengthen sector and programme priorities and implementation.

Renewable Energy

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what changes in unit payments for electricity have resulted from the switch by her Department to purchasing renewable energy which is exempt from the Climate Change Levy. [96487]

Clare Short: Since July 2002 the supply of DFID's electricity to our London headquarters has been under a new contract which provides that 100 per cent. of the electricity is generated from renewable sources. Because of the market at the time, this contract also resulted in a decrease in the unit cost over the previous arrangement from 4p KWH plus climate change levy 0.43p, total 4.43p KWH to 2.79p KWH plus 0.43p green levy for renewable, total 3.22p KWH, all plus VAT.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of reports from Zimbabwe that maize earmarked for starving Zimbabweans is unaccounted for; what representations she *(a)* has made and *(b)* plans to make to the World Food Programme on this matter; what assessment she has made of the impact this will have on the people of Zimbabwe; and if she will make a statement. [97078]

Clare Short: A recent report by the Zimbabwe National Vulnerability Assessment Committee notes an apparent discrepancy of around 200,000 tonnes of maize available from all sources for the period April to December 2002 and the actual distribution of food in the country. It is important to be clear that this discrepancy relates to government distributed food, there is no discrepancy in donor funded imports and food distributions made through non-governmental organisations.

The discrepancy may partly arise from ill judged official price controls that make maize more valuable to the producer if exported. We expect that a proportion of the domestic maize harvest will have been smuggled out of Zimbabwe. It is not possible to quantify this with any accuracy.

The Government of Zimbabwe reports that it has imported 650,000 tonnes of maize in the period and has distributed it through the national Grain Marketing Board. The UN has offered to assist in the validation of GMB figures, and has sought clarification of food kept for strategic purposes such as feeding the armed forces, or sold at port of entry to pay for transport and milling. The UN is seeking clarification on behalf of the international community and to help ensure that adequate levels of assistance reach vulnerable Zimbabweans.

PRIME MINISTER

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what the basis is of his assertion in his statement on Iraq on 3 February that the disarming of South Africa of its nuclear weapons, along with the verification of this action, took a matter of weeks. [96140]

The Prime Minister: The reference in my statement of 3 February was intended to illustrate that the process of disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction need not be a long drawn out one, provided Iraq gives full co-operation with the UN inspection teams, as required under UNSCR 1441. It need only be a matter of weeks for the UN inspectors to be able to report that Iraq is demonstrating a firm commitment to full and active co-operation with UN inspectors.

In March 1993 the South African Government invited the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to report on the status of their former nuclear weapons programme. An IAEA technical team visited South Africa for this purpose from 22 April to 4 May and its preliminary assessment was reported to the board that month. A final assessment was made to the board in September 1993.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Accountancy Foundation

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research she *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* plans to commission into the effectiveness of the Accountancy Foundation in regulating the accountancy profession; and if she will make a statement. [96428]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The review of the regulatory regime of the accountancy profession was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 24 July 2002. Its remit was to review the current arrangements for the regulation of the accountancy and audit professions; to consider whether revised arrangements

and structures are necessary to provide assurance to the public that these are effective; and, if so, to recommend what form they should take. The review, which was the subject of a wide public consultation, focused on the role of the Accountancy Foundation and its related bodies in overseeing the regulatory functions of the professional accountancy bodies.

In her statement to Parliament on 29 January my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that the Financial Reporting Council will assume the functions of the Accountancy Foundation. The Government has no further plans to commission research into the effectiveness of the Accountancy Foundation.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the investigation and discipline board of the Accountancy Foundation will be established; and what research she will be commissioning into its effectiveness. [96429]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Department of Trade and Industry is chairing a steering group to drive forward implementation of all the recommendations of the review of the regulatory regime of the accountancy profession, including transferring the functions of the existing Investigation and Discipline Board (IDB) within the new regulatory body. The new arrangements will be brought into operation as quickly and effectively as possible.

One of the recommendations of the review is that the Financial Reporting Council should make appropriate formal arrangements to account to stakeholders for delivery of its objectives. The Government currently has no plans to carry out its own research into the effectiveness of the IDB.

Intellectual Property Rights

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions she has had with the *(a)* Bar Council and *(b)* Law Society on the European Commission's proposal for a directive to harmonise national laws on the means of enforcing intellectual property rights and to establish a general framework for the exchange of information between the responsible national authorities; and if she will make a statement. [96577]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Commission adopted a proposal for a directive on measures and procedures to ensure the enforcement of intellectual property rights on 30 January (a provisional text can be found at http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/internal/market/en/intprop/news/index.htm). We will consult interested parties including the Bar Council and the Law Society when the Commission makes the final text available. In the absence of a finalised proposal my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has not had any recent discussions with the Bar Council or Law Society.

Arms Exports

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's financial support for arms exports in each year from 1992–93 to 2004–05; and if she will make a statement. [96642]

Alan Johnson: The Department does not offer financial support for arms exports. This is a matter for the Ministry of Defence and its Defence Exports Service Organisation.

Defence Research and Development

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's total expenditure on defence research and development in each year from 1992–93 to 2004–05 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [96641]

Alan Johnson: The Department does not fund defence related research. Expenditure on R&D to meet the UK's defence needs is a matter for the Ministry of Defence. I understand that the Ministry's Defence Analytical Services Agency, whose website is at http://www.dasa.mod.uk produces defence related statistics, including information on defence R&D expenditure.

Space Programmes Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's total spending on space programmes in each year from 1990–91 to 2004–05 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [95804]

Ms Hewitt: The figures below list the total spending on space programmes for the financial years 1990–91 to 2004–05 by the DTI and the Office of Science and Technology, which funds the space activities of the Natural Environment Research Council and the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (and funded the latter's predecessor, the Science and Engineering Research Council, until 1993). The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry assumed responsibility for the Office of Science and Technology in 1995.

Financial Year	*Civil Space Expenditure £million*	*Financial Year*	*Civil Space Expenditure £million*
1990–91	131	1998–99	138
1991–92	141	1999–2000	138
1992–93	149	2000–01	143
1993–94	147	2001–02	142
1994–95	158	2002–03	150
1995–96	163	2003–04	151
1996–97	167	2004–05	146
1997–98	159		

Notes: Expenditure 1990–01 to 1999–2000 on a cash basis
Expenditure for 2000–01 onwards on a full resource accounting and budgeting basis.

Manufacturing Advisory Service

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of the cost of the Manufacturing Advisory Service for each year from 1999–2000 to 2004–05 (planned). [95812]

Alan Johnson: The total financial liability for the Department (funded from the Innovation Budget) is £14.2 million (£800,000 within budget) as summarised by year in the following table.

	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	Total
RCME	0	0	561	4,745	4,351	3,319	12,976
National network	0	0	472	352	344	40	1,208
Overall total	0	0	1,033	5,097	4,695	3,359	14,184

Chemical Industry

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of her Department's spending on support for the chemical industry in each year from 2000–01 to 2004–05 (planned); what the major elements are of this expenditure; and if she will make a statement. [95815]

Alan Johnson: Total DTI support relevant to the chemicals industry (excluding the pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors) is set out in the table:

Financial year	Total (£ million)
2000–01 Actual	28.2
2001–02 Actual	37.7
2002–03 Budget	36.5
2003–04 Plans	21.5
2004–05 Plans	14.7

The major elements of this funding are:

(a) grants for research funded through the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). This includes collaborative research between universities and industry and fundamental research under its chemistry programme relevant to the chemicals sector;

(b) DTI's innovation programmes, including SMART awards, Faradays and the Process Industries Centre for Manufacturing Excellence;

(c) Regional selective assistance (RSA) to specific companies; and

(d) support for Laboratory of the Government Chemist.

The chemicals industry also benefits from support from the regional development agencies, and generic support through channels such as the Small Business Service and the Manufacturing Advisory Service. Information on this support is not available for specific sectors.

Notes:

1. Information on detailed annual spend by EPSRC is not available on a sectoral basis over this period. The figures provided include estimates of annual spending of £10.6 million on research and £2.1 million on training packages, based on the proportion spent on chemicals in 2000.
2. Support through RSA is related to applications for support by specific companies. Figures for this element are not therefore available for future years.
3. DTI support for the chemicals sector is being reviewed along with the rest of the Department's business support. A newly created Investment Committee will make recommendations for future business support activities in order to drive up productivity. Given these changes it is difficult to predict overall spending for 2003–04 and 2004–05.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of total spending by British Trade International in each year from 1990–91 to 2004–05 (planned). [95830]

Ms Hewitt: Funding of British Trade International since its establishment in May 1999 is as follows:

Budget £millions	1999–2000 Outturn	2000–01 Outturn	2001–02 Outturn	2002–03 Plans	2003–04 Plans	2004–05 Plans
Programme	72	93	76	92	96	97
Admin						
DTI	28	31	27	35	35	38
FCO	n/a	156	136	140	141	143
Capital DTI	0	0	5	3	0	0
FCO	n/a	0	1	1	0	0

FCO admin spend for 2001–02 represents the net operating costs as set out in the FCO Expenditure Allocation Report 2001–02. The FCO's budget for British Trade International for 2003–04 onwards has not yet been set; the above figures are estimates. There are no comparable FCO figures available for 1999–2000.

E-Commerce

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total volume was of UK e-commerce transactions in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002. [96754]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* The Office for National Statistics (ONS) e-commerce survey of UK businesses reports on the value of sales made over the internet by UK businesses (excluding the financial sector).

Figures for 2002 are not yet available; they are due to be published by ONS in October this year.

For 2001, the survey showed a total of £18.4 billion sales, accounting for 1 per cent. of the total value of sales for those sectors covered.

For 2000, the survey showed a total of £12 billion sales over the internet. However, the 2000 survey covered only businesses with 10 employees or more. The corresponding figure for 2001 for businesses with 10 employees or more was £17 billion.

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the aims of the 1999 DTI report to make Britain the best environment in the world for e-commerce by 2002, set out in "e-commerce @ its.best.uk" fig. 1.12, page 3, has been met. [97370]

Mr. Timms: The International Benchmarking Study 2000 prepared by Booz Alien Hamilton for the Office of the e-Envoy and the DTI ranks the UK as having the second best environment in the world for e-commerce, second only to the USA.

The study attributes this achievement to strong venture capital markets, competitive internet access costs on broadband and dial up, strong leadership of the e-agenda and a very supportive regulatory environment. UK broadband prices have reduced from among the most expensive in the G7 to amongst the cheapest.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many times since 2001 she has taken flights on departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied her on each trip. [95394]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much *(a)* low, *(b)* intermediate and *(c)* high level waste will be produced as a result of BNFL's continued reprocessing of spent fuel from British Energy's advanced gas-cooled reactors. [91923]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

There are contracts for the reprocessing of about 65 per cent. of the spent fuel from British Energy's advanced gas-cooled reactors. If all of the spent fuel was reprocessed, conditioned waste volumes are estimated to be a maximum of about 28,000 m^3 of low-level waste, 14,000 m^3 of intermediate-level waste and 470 m^3 of high-level waste.

Post Office Closures

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* rural and *(b)* urban post offices have closed in each of the last 12 months (i) in total and (ii) broken down by region. [97100]

Mr. Timms: I understand from Post Office Ltd. that the information requested is available only on a quarterly basis giving net closures/openings as follows:

Year: 2002	*January–March*		*April–June*		*July–September*		*October–December*	
Region/Country	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Urban*	*Rural*
North East	-	-	2	1	-	-	1	1
North West	1	1	3	[1]1	8	6	5	2
Yorkshire and Humber	2	[1]5	-	[2]2	1	12	7	[1]6
West Midlands	2	3	3	2	7	2	4	[1]3
South West	-	[1]7	1	7	3	3	3	2
South East	3	[2]36	7	6	2	2	3	[1]9
London	7	-	8	-	[1]1	1	21	-
East of England	-	-	3	5	2	10	2	[1]2
East Midlands	2	2	8	4	1	3	5	-
Northern Ireland	4	[1]1	[1]1	-	3	2	1	1
Scotland	4	6	1	4	-	[1]4	1	1
Wales	2	8	1	4	-	[1]2	-	-
Total	27	43	36	30	26	35	53	[1,3]13

[1] Net openings
[2] Includes 26 locations served by mobile office
[3] Includes 11 reopenings not recorded in data for the previous two quarters

Post Offices (Yorkshire)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the financial loss to post offices in *(a)* Haltemprice and Howden and *(b)* the East Riding of Yorkshire as a result of the change in the payment of benefits from over-the-counter to direct bank transfer. [96710]

Mr. Timms: No such assessment has been made. The migration of benefit payment to ACT begins this year and the Post Office's strategy is to respond to that challenge with a range of banking and other services. How the migration of benefit payments affects the revenue of post offices will depend on a number of factors, not least how benefit recipients and other post office customers respond to change. The income from the various contracts Post Office Ltd. has with the spending Departments and various financial institutions, and the remuneration of sub-postmasters for banking services, is a commercial matter between the parties.

Stop Now Orders

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many Stop Now Orders (EC Directive) Regulations injunctions have been sought against companies and individuals since March 2002, broken down by each UK public qualified entity. [96755]

Ms Hewitt: Since March 2002, six Stop Now Orders have been sought and obtained from the courts. Four of these were obtained by Trading Standards authorities and two by the Office of Fair Trading.

Vehicle Fleets

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what progress has been made, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel, on an annual basis, over each of the past three years, in renewal of the Post Office's vehicle fleet on a lower emission basis; [96446]

(2) what the annual rate is at which the Post Office has renewed its vehicle fleet, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each category of (i) vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel over the last three years. [96451]

Mr. Timms: These are matters that fall within the day-to-day responsibility of Royal Mail. I have therefore asked the Chairman to reply direct to my hon. Friend.

Waterloo Road Post Office

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what she estimates will be the effect on the Waterloo area of the closure of the Waterloo Road Post Office. [97333]

Mr. Timms: Decisions on post office closures are an operational matter for the company. Before closure of any post office is decided, Post Office Ltd. carries out a formal consultation process in accordance with the Code of Practice on branch closures, agreed with Postwatch.

HEALTH

Barnet Hospital

15. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on services at Barnet hospital. [96687]

Ms Blears: Services at Barnet Hospital are improving but there is much more that needs to be done. Inpatients and outpatients are waiting for shorter periods and recent improvements in practice in the accident and emergency department will also ensure shorter waits. Public and staff are being involved in the further development of services locally.

Foundation Hospitals

16. **Mr. Liddell-Grainger**: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, whether he plans to extend foundation status to all hospitals in England and Wales; [96688]

18. **Mr. Goodman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the number of proposed foundation hospitals. [96690]

Mr. Hutton: "A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts" sets out proposals for NHS Foundation Trusts and invites applications for the first phase from current acute and specialist NHS 3-star Trusts. Legislation will be placed before the House to establish NHS Foundation Trusts. The eligibility criteria for NHS Foundation Trusts will be kept under review.

Hospital Mergers

19. **Mr. Lilley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies he has undertaken on the effect of hospital mergers on clinical performance. [96692]

Mr. Hutton: Hospital mergers are changes of organisational structures rather than changes to services. Each case has to be considered on its merits, taking local circumstances into account. One study covering 25 trusts in London did consider the effect of mergers. It found that while there were risks in the process, given the diversion of managerial focus, there was also evidence of a number of benefits, including greater sharing of good practice.

NHS Administrators

20. **Mr. George Osborne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many administrators are employed in the NHS. [96693]

Mr. Hutton: There are 27,424 managers and senior managers employed in the NHS and 184,229 clerical and administrative staff. (Latest DH workforce census data as at 30 September 2001). Of the 184,229 clerical and administrative staff over half of these staff are providing direct support to health professionals in the delivery of care to patients, such as medical secretarial and radiography services.

Consultants Contracts

21. **Caroline Flint**: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on consultants contracts. [96694]

Mr. Hutton: We announced a new framework of incentives and rewards for NHS consultants to the House on Thursday 23 January. The new framework will enable trusts to ensure greater rewards for those consultants who do most for NHS patients. It will give flexibility to trusts locally in choosing how best to use extra resources to reward consultants, reform working practices and improve patient services.

We are now consulting on the framework, with a view to beginning implementation from this April.

Worcestershire Royal Acute Hospital

22. **Mr. Michael Foster**: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the bed capacity at Worcestershire Royal Acute hospital. [96695]

Mr. Lammy: Bed numbers have remained constant since the opening of the new Worcestershire Royal Hospital in Worcester. There are approximately 1,400 acute beds and community based beds available across the county of Worcestershire compared to 1,387 in 1998–99.

NHS Dentistry (Somerset)

23. **Mr. Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the provision of NHS dentistry in Somerset. [96696]

Ms Blears: The Government are committed to providing National Health Service dentistry for all who need and seek it. We recognise, however, that there are some areas of the country, including parts of Somerset, where it is difficult to get access to an NHS dentist. For this reason more than £3.5 million additional investment is being made over two years in Somerset (2001/02 and 2002/03) to establish a ental access centre to treat non-registered patients.

I can report that Somerset Coast Primary Care Trust is reaching dental access levels of 75 per cent. and this is expected to improve with the opening of a new practice. Taunton Deane Primary Care Trust is achieving 100 per cent. access levels for routine dental care; and South Somerset PCT has recently recruited an additional general dental practitioner.

Bowel Cancer

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce screening for bowel cancer; and what assessment he has made of its effectiveness. [96074]

Ms Blears: The Government's commitment to a national screening programme for bowel cancer will be taken forward by a new national health service bowel cancer programme, launched on 4 February 2002 in London at a conference of experts from a wide variety of backgrounds, including the voluntary sector. The programme will be led by the national cancer director, and will concentrate on developing a national screening programme for bowel cancer, streamlining care for symptomatic patients expansion and development, and a communications strategy for the public and professionals.

Government-funded pilots into faecal occult blood (FOB) testing for bowel cancer screening will report in the spring. However, the choice of screening methodology for bowel cancer screening is not clear cut between FOB testing and flexible sigmoidoscopy. The NHS bowel cancer programme will consider which method, or a combination of methods is the most appropriate for a bowel cancer screening programme in England.

Children (Sport)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of children undertook at least one hour's sporting activity each week on average each year since 1997. [92064]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

Annual information in this form is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, Sport England carried out a survey of young people (aged 6 to 16) in 1994,1999 and 2002. The 1999 survey found that, overall, 82 per cent. of children spent at least one hour a week in PE lessons. Results from the 2002 survey will be published by Sport England in March.

Clinical Negligence Claims

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reason is for the delay in implementing the reform proposals outlined in the Government's response to the Committee of Public Accounts 37th report of 2001–02, "Handling Clinical Negligence Claims in England"; and when the proposed White Paper will be published. [96691]

Mr. Lammy: Clinical negligence is a complex issue needing extensive consultation, and review of published literature and reports. The Chief Medical Officer is working up a comprehensive report outlining proposals to make arrangements fairer for those suffering injury through negligent national health service treatment.

Community Care

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on how he plans to distribute the £100 million to offset the impact of the fines on local authorities arising from the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc) Bill. [96994]

Jacqui Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the response given to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on 5 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 963W. An announcement on this will be made shortly.

Contractor Fraud

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for health pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 120W, on contractor fraud, how much money has been recovered in each of the last three years. [95092]

Mr. Lammy: The figures are shown in the table.

Year	*Value of Recovery (£)*
1999–2000	158,232
2000–2001	3,197,377
2001–2002	2,228,603

Erythropoietin

Mr. Havard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the use of erythropoietin will be referred to NICE for consideration. [95575]

Ms Blears: Erythropoietin for chemotherapy induced anaemia is being considered as part of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's ninth wave work programme, the contents of which will be announced later this year.

Ethics Committee Administrators

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many local research ethics committee administrators resigned between *(a)* 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002, and *(b)* 1 April and 30 November 2002. [94776]

Mr. Lammy: Administrators for local research ethics committees are employed locally, and personnel records are not held centrally. From 1 October 2002, however, the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees has monitored the resignation, appointment and training of administrators.

Ethics Committees Authority

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* membership and *(b)* purpose of the UK Ethics Committees Authority are; and if he will make a statement. [94747]

Mr. Lammy: There is at present no United Kingdom ethics committee authority. Directive 2001/20/EC required United Kingdom-wide opinions on the ethics of proposals for clinical trials involving medicinal products for human use from May 2004. After consultation in 2003, draft regulations implementing Directive 2001/20/EC will be laid before Parliament.

Food Supplements

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment has been made of the implications for *(a)* specialist manufacturers, *(b)* specialist retailers and *(c)* consumer choice of the requirement to remove from the market the nutrients and nutrient sources which are not listed as acceptable for such use under the schedules to the proposed Food Supplements (England) Regulations 2003. [96119]

Ms Blears: The regulations will not require the immediate removal from the market of food supplements containing nutrients and nutrient sources excluded from the lists in Schedules 2 and 3, which have been drawn directly from Annexes I and II in the directive. Therefore, in the short-term there is likely to be little, if any, impact upon specialist manufacturers, specialist retailers or consumer choice.

The longer-term impact will depend upon progress in adding vitamin and minerals and their sources to the lists of permitted nutrients in the directive.

In implementing the directive, the Government are able, for a limited period of time, to allow continued use of substances not on the permitted lists, and—with very few exceptions—they intend to do so.

Food Supplements/Herbal Remedies

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met representatives of the food supplements and herbal remedies industry; and when he next plans to do so. [96118]

Ms Blears: My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (the Lord Hunt of Kings Heath) and I last met formally with representatives of the food supplements industry in July 2002 to discuss concerns over the possible impact of the EU food supplements directive on the UK industry. At present, Ministers have no plans for further meetings about this, but are always willing to meet stakeholders when circumstances have changed or there are new issues to be raised.

My noble Friend and I have held discussions with a wide range of stakeholders in the herbal sector on a number of occasions over the last year to discuss the proposed directive on traditional herbal medicinal products. Latterly, my noble Friend attended a meeting of stakeholders at the Medicines Control Agency on 10 October 2002. He met a number of trade associations on 21 November 2002 and representatives of Consumers for Health Choice, Holland and Barrett and general nutrition centres on 28 November 2002. He also attended a Consumers for Health Choice Parliamentary Reception on 4 December 2002.

My noble Friend plans to meet herbal interest groups again when the European Commission has published updated proposals for the directive. A date for this meeting has not yet been fixed.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92453]

Mr. Lammy: The figures are shown in the table.

Amounts lost through fraud and theft

£

	Department	*Agencies*	*Non-departmental public bodies*
1996–97	45,360.89	6,561.00	57,936.87
1997–98	61,415.26	1,461.00	10,458.00
1998–99	66,897.29	Nil	6,903.00
1999–00	48,148.81	3,493.00	3,493.00
2000–01	56,831.99	Nil	6,582.00
2001–02	34,862.67	17,060.51	12,131.00

The Department has a counter fraud service, staffed by professionally trained and accredited counter fraud specialists.

Kava-kava

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what comparative risk assessment he has conducted of kava-kava. [91948]

Ms Blears: Decision making in medicines regulation is based on the comparative evaluation of the risks and the benefits of individual products. All available data in relation to the risk of hepatotoxicity associated with kava-kava was carefully considered, taking into account the evidence of benefits of treatment.

The risk assessment for kava-kava was considered by the Committee on Safety of Medicine (CSM), an expert subgroup of the CSM, which included independent experts in herbal medicine, clinical pharmacology and liver disease and the Medicines Commission. In total these committees have considered the safety of kava-kava in depth on five separate o ccasions since December 2001.

The CSM and the Medicines Commission considered a comparative assessment of the risks of kava-kava and benzodiazepines such as bromazepam, oxazepam and diazepam. Following consideration of all available data, these advisory committees considered the level of risk of hepatotoxicity associated with kava-kava to be unacceptable.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether massage oils containing extract of kava-kava plant applied to the scalp for relief of stress will be exempt from the terms of the Medicines for Human Use (Kava-Kava) Prohibition Order 2002. [96061]

Ms Blears: Massage oils are not normally regarded as medicinal products by the Medicines Control Agency, but this depends on their ingredients and the claims made for them. However, medicinal products for external use are excluded from the scope of the Medicines for Human Use (Kava-Kava) Prohibition Order 2002. Accordingly, the Order does not cover massage oils containing kava-kava which are medicinal products.

Modernisation Agency

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the budget of the Modernisation Agency is in *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* subsequent years which have been allocated. [95400]

Mr. Lammy: The delegated revenue budget for the Modernisation Agency for 2002–03 is £106.5 million.

Budgets for subsequent years have not yet been finalised. However, it is anticipated that additional resources will be made available during the three year period from 2003–04 to 2005–06 in order to fund specific initiatives to be taken forward by the Modernisation Agency.

National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultations he has received in response to the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy. [96075]

Ms Blears: The Cabinet Office strategy unit and the Department of Health conducted a joint consultation exercise on the national alcohol harm reduction strategy. This consultation exercise ran from 15 October 2002 to 15 January 2003. 319 responses were received.

NHS Operations

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of operations carried out by NHS hospital trusts in England in the last year which have resulted in retained instruments left inside the patients. [96093]

Ms Blears: At the present time, we do not know how many national health service patients are affected by this type of medical error.

However, retained instruments and in particular swabs, are a recognised patient safety issue, both nationally and internationally.

The Government have established the national patient safety agency to improve the safety of NHS patient care by promoting an open and fair culture and by introducing a national reporting and learning system for adverse events. It is planned for the system to be rolled out across the NHS from summer 2003. The reporting and learning system will, in time, enable us to understand the nature and extent of adverse events in the NHS, including material retained within patients, and take action to prevent them from being repeated.

NHS Productivity Growth

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether his Department routinely uses output data from the NHS to estimate overall trends in NHS productivity growth. [96689]

Mr. Milburn: We routinely compare increases in cost-weighted activity with increases in expenditure. However this does not accurately measure National Health Service productivity since it fails to capture activity undertaken in primary care or improvements in quality.

NHS Staff (Assaults)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 820W, on NHS staff assaults, what the levels of sickness absence resulting from work-related injuries or violence at work were in each hospital trust in West Sussex in the last three months. [96083]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not collected centrally.

NHS Staff (Disease Testing)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1)whether he proposes to extend testing for all new NHS staff for diseases other than HIV and hepatitis; [96068]

(2) when he proposes to introduce HIV and hepatitis tests for all new NHS staff. [96067]

Ms Blears: Our recent draft guidance published for consultation, "Health clearance for serious communicable diseases: new health care workers", proposes that new health care workers whose jobs or training will involve exposure prone procedures will have to test negative for HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C before taking up their posts. Such procedures occur mainly in surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, dentistry and midwifery, where there is a risk that injury to the health care worker could expose a patient to their blood.

The draft guidance does not require HIV and hepatitis tests for all new national health service staff because the clinical procedures carried out by the majority of health care workers carry no risk of transmission of these viruses, provided routine infection control measures are observed. New health care workers who will not carry out exposure prone procedures will be offered testing for HIV and hepatitis C. Testing for hepatitis B will be carried out if necessary in the context of checking response to immunisation.

Consultation is due to end on 30 April 2003. The final version of the guidance is due to be published in the second half of 2003, taking account of the comments received, with an estimated four months' lead time for implementation.

New health care workers already have health checks for tuberculosis and are offered immunisation, if necessary. We keep policy on health checks for other infectious diseases under on-going review.

Prescribing Costs

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, if he will make a statement on costs of prescribing. [96682]

Mr. Lammy: The National Health Service is continuing to expand investment in primary care prescribing to reflect the Government's priorities in areas such as coronary heart disease. Expenditure for England this year is forecast to be around £6.35 billion, an increase of around 11.5 per cent. over the previous year.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92237]

Mr. Lammy: The table shows the expenditure on major campaign publicity and advertising commissioned by the Department of Health's Communications Directorate for the financial years 1995–96 to 2002–03.

£ million

Financial year	*Publicity expenditure (excluding advertising)*	*Advertising expenditure*
1995–96	13.48	2.08
1996–97	12.63	2.50
1997–98	4.582	2.04
1998–99	14.43	8.53
1999–2000	20.797	15.166
2000–01	25.32	20.80
2001–02	16.823	20.405
2002–03 (to date)	18.04	22.916

Publicity and advertising expenditure for the Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies can be provided only at disproportionate cost. Expenditure for publicity other than that associated with campaigns can also be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Prior to 1999–2000 publicity and advertising on smoking was undertaken by the Health Education Authority (HEA). £54.53 million has been spent to date by the Department.

There have been a number of new campaigns since 1999–2000. These include:

Sexual Health (2001–02 to date);

Immunisation (2001–02 to date);

Social Worker Recruitment (2001–02 to date);

Tuberculosis awareness (2001–02 to date);

Walk-in Centres (2000–01 to date);

Mind Out for Mental Health (2001–02 to date).

2001–02 and 2002–03 include Health Promotion England Publicity and Advertising (HPE), which became part of the Department in 2001.

Research Ethics Committees

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees will make funds available to local research ethics committees for the training of their members. [94743]

Ms Blears: A letter from the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees, dated 26 September 2002, invited local research ethics committees to report their running costs for reimbursement. Within these costs, local research ethics committees were invited to identify training costs for both members and administrators.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who the members are of the independent group drawn from local research ethics committees, multi-centre research ethics committees, health authorities, research subjects, wider lay interests and the research community evaluating the MREC system; how often they have met; what the results were of their deliberations; and if he will make a statement. [94744]

Mr. Lammy: The Centre of Medical Law and Ethics at King's College London was commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the multi-centre research ethics committee system. The evaluation was undertaken via a customer based questionnaire survey. Questionnaires were issued to all applicants to multi-centre research ethics committees during the period 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998. Questionnaires were issued to principal researchers, sponsor companies, local researchers and local research ethics committees processing locality assessments. The evaluation was based on 1,303 completed questionnaires and on information from the multi-centre research ethics committees' annual reports.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how and where the posts of director of corporate affairs and director of operations of the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees were advertised; and how many applications were received for each post. [94746]

Mr. Lammy: The posts of director of corporate affairs and director of operations at the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) were advertised in the Health Services Journal and in the September 2002 edition of the research ethics committee administrators bulletin, issued by COREC. There were three applications for each of the posts.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees became responsible for research ethics committees in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* the United Kingdom. [94748]

Mr. Lammy: The Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) is not responsible for research ethics committees in England, Wales or the United Kingdom. Strategic health authorities (StHAs) have the responsibility that health authorities formerly had for research ethics committees in England.

In preparation for the implementation of Directive 2001/20/EC, my noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord Hunt), wrote to research ethics committee chairmen on 7 August 2002 to inform them that he had decided that COREC would

oversee the operation of research ethics committees in England and would establish a system of direct support for them, working closely with StHAs.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment was made of the need for regional offices for research ethics committees; what consultations were held; and what his estimate is of the annual costs of running these offices. [94749]

Mr. Lammy: The Department agreed to proposals to establish offices of research ethics committees, following an assessment by the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC). The main consideration was the support that the national health service and local research ethics committees are expected to require in complying with regulations implementing Directive 2001/20/EC.

COREC engaged in extensive informal consultation on proposals to establish offices of research ethics committees during meetings held in 2002. The plans were described in management information sheet number 1, issued by COREC in May 2002. This was sent to identified strategic health authority officers, research and development directors and chairmen of research ethics committees. The costs of running the offices of research ethics committees in England are estimated to be £900,000 a year.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the ability of local research ethics committees to improve their performance as set out in the recommendations of the pharmaceutical industry competitiveness task force; and what funding they have received to deliver this. [94750]

Mr. Lammy: The Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) continues to advise the Department on the ability of the research ethics system to meet the standards set out in the guidance for research ethics committees that the Department promised to uphold in its response to the pharmaceutical industry competitiveness task force (PICTF) report.

PICTF indicator number 22 shows that local research ethics committees are meeting the 60-day target for ethical consideration of protocols for clinical trials of medicines. Data on PICTF indicators can be found on the Department's website at: www.doh.gov.uk/pictf

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many local research ethics committees received *(a)* all or *(b)* part of their funding from health authorities prior to 1 April 2002; how many local research ethics committees have received funding from strategic health authorities since 1 April 2002; how many local research ethics committees have received funding from the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees since 1 April 2002; and what the total value of funding was. [94751]

Ms Blears: District health authorities became responsible for establishing local research ethics committees in 1991. District health authorities from then and health authorities from 1996 funded all local research ethics committees up to 30 September 2002, but information on the funding provided during this period is not held centrally.

From 1 October 2002, the Department, through the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) made central provision to reimburse the costs of local research ethics committees on behalf of strategic health authorities. COREC is working with all local research ethics committees to establish their budgets, some of which remain to be finalised. I shall write to the hon. Member with the details when they are available.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reasons are for the delay in the issuing of a common application form for researchers to use when applying to a research ethics committee; and by how long it has been delayed. [94772]

Mr. Lammy: The Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) originally planned to pilot a common application form for research ethics committees from October 2002. However, the European Commission have not finalised guidance on the minimum requirements for an application form for research ethics committees to comply with the provision of Directive EC2001/20/EC. Piloting with multi-centre research ethics committees will begin in February 2003.

The common application form is planned to be available on the COREC website: www.corec.org.uk on 14 February 2003. The form will be for optional use by local research ethics committees from April 2003, and all research ethics committees will be required to use the form from October 2003.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment COREC made of commercially available software options designed to provide administrative support to research ethics committees; and what the cost was in *(a)* time and *(b)* equipment of the software devised by his Department to provide administrative support to the research ethics committees. [94773]

Mr. Lammy: The Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) has begun work to develop a common information technology system to support the administration of research ethics committees. COREC has started a scoping exercise on their current information technology use and requirements. Options, including the use of commercially available software, to meet the needs identified, will be considered in May 2003.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many letters were received from local research ethics committees by the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees from *(a)* 1 January to 31 December 2001, *(b)* 1 January to 30 September 2002 and *(c)* 1 October to 31 October; how many of those letters were acknowledged within one month; and how many of those letters have neither been acknowledged nor received a reply. [94777]

Mr. Lammy: The Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) has now put in place a system for logging correspondence. However, to provide the historical data requested, individual files held at COREC need to be accessed. I shall write to the hon. Member with the information when this has been collated.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to what extent the training strategy for research ethics committee members developed by COREC matches that recommended in the report on the training needs of research ethics committee members commissioned by his Department. [94778]

Mr. Lammy: The training strategy for research ethics committee members was developed by the Central Office of Research Ethics Committees following a review of past work; following consultation with members of multi-centre and local research ethics committees, users and current providers of training; and taking into consideration the report on training needs commissioned by the Department. The training strategy was publicised at meetings throughout 2002, especially at Birmingham on 23 October 2002.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether COREC followed the guidelines for making public appointments when appointing *(a)* an adviser on training research ethics committees and *(b)* an adviser on accreditation of research ethics committees; and what relevant skills and experience each appointed adviser to COREC has. [94856]

Mr. Lammy: The two positions in question are not public appointments. The appointments were made by the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees with the knowledge of the Department taking into account the expertise and experience that those appointed offered.

The training adviser is Dr Hugh Davies. He is a former local research ethics committee and multi-centre research ethics committee chairman, and is a consultant paediatrician with a particular interest in professional education. He has a master's degree in higher and professional training and is a member of the institute of learning and teaching.

Dr. John Lamberty is the chairman of the working group on the accreditation of research ethics committees. He is a consultant anaesthetist. He is a former member of a multi-centre research ethics committee, former chairman of a local research ethics committee, current chairman of a multi-centre research ethics committee and current vice-chairman of the association of research ethics committees. He was a member of the steering groups that established multi-centre research ethics committees and the association of research ethics committees.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89901]

Mr. Lammy: The figures are shown in the table.

Department £	*Agencies £*	*Non-departmental public bodies £*
34,862,67	17,060.51	12,131.00

The Department has a counter fraud service staffed by professionally trained and accredited counter fraud specialists.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Broadcasting

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport pursuant to her answer of 3 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 780W, on broadcasting, if she will list the targets set for BBC commercial income, and the Corporation's progress against those targets to date. [88878]

Dr. Howells: As part of the licence fee settlement, announced in February 2000, the BBC was expected to raise an additional £490 million through efficiency savings and increased income. The BBC expects to have generated £75 million in extra cash from its commercial ventures by the end of this financial year.

Capita

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport pursuant to her answer of 9 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 51W, on Capita, if she will set out his reasons for having no further dealings with Capita since February 2002. [97331]

Dr. Howells: The DCMS have used Capita as one of five companies within a framework agreement when a need for their services have arisen. Since February 2002 there have been contracts for which the other framework agreement suppliers have been chosen as more suitable. At some point in the future the services offered by Capita could be chosen over the other companies and they will then be offered work by the Department.

Digital Television (Rural Areas)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what reports she has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* examined into the barriers the public in rural areas face in the take-up of digital television. [97230]

Dr. Howells: No such reports have been commissioned as yet. But the Digital Television Action Plan addresses the need to ensure the accessibility and affordability of digital television for consumers, including those in rural areas. The Action Plan, together with details of the work undertaken to date, are available on the website: www.digitaltelevision.gov.uk.

Ethnic Minority Cultural Events

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding *(a)* her Department and *(b)* its agencies provide to support ethnic minority cultural events. [96910]

Mr. Caborn: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Hyde Park (Public Meetings)

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions she has had with the *(a)* Metropolitan police, *(b)* Royal Parks police, *(c)* Stop the War Coalition and *(d)* the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament concerning the peace rally to be held on 15 February; and if she will make a statement; [95217]

(2) how many times, and for which events, in each of the last five years the use of Hyde Park for public meetings has been refused; [95219]

(3) how many public meetings have been held in Hyde Park in each month in each of the last five years. [95218]

Tessa Jowell: The Chief Executive of the Royal Parks is responsible for agreeing to rallies and assemblies in Hyde Park. His officials, including members of the Royal Parks Constabulary, met representatives from the Stop the War Coalition and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament on 8 January to discuss the request to hold a rally on 15 February. The Royal Parks and the Royal Parks Constabulary discussed the matter with representatives of Westminster City Council on 23 January and held a subsequent meeting with the Metropolitan police on 28 January. This last meeting was also attended by Westminster City Council, the Greater London Authority and the London Ambulance Service. A further meeting was held with the Metropolitan police, CND and the Stop the War Coalition on 3 February. I also received written correspondence on this matter from the Metropolitan police on 3 February.

The number of public meetings held in Hyde Park in each month in each of the last five years is set out in the following table:

Number of public meetings held in Hyde Park per month since 1998

	1998	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
January	1	2	0	0	0
February	2	2	1	0	1
March	3	0	0	1	2
April	0	4	0	0	1
May	2	0	0	2	1
June	2	3	0	5	3
July	1	4	2	0	2
August	0	2	1	1	0
September	1	1	2	3	2
October	3	2	2	0	0
November	1	0	2	0	0
December	0	1	1	0	2

The Royal Parks only turn down permission for rallies or assemblies either because the ground is unsuitable for the numbers involved or because they would clash with another event. In the latter case an alternative date is always offered and usually agreed. The Royal Parks does not hold records of requests turned down in previous years, but the following is a list of those turned down in 2002 and the reasons why:

The National Union of Students Rally on 4 December, the National Union of Teachers Rally on 26 November and the Stansted [Anti-] Expansion rally on 23 November were turned down because the ground was unsuitable and winter ground reinstatement work was in progress;

In November 2002 a request from the Countryside Alliance to congregate in the Park was turned down because it clashed with another event, but it was agreed that the march could 'disperse' into the Park.

A request to hold the 'Hizb ut-Tahrir' assembly on 20 July was turned down because a Route of Kings concert was scheduled for that day;

A request from the Jesus Fellowship Church to hold an assembly on 29 June was turned down because it would have clashed with a large scale concert scheduled for the same day;

A request from the British Equestrian Society to hold a demonstration on 3 June was turned down because it clashed with Jubilee events;

A request from the Grand Orange Lodge of England to hold a rally on 21 April (HM the Queen's birthday) was turned down because management and police resources were at full capacity facilitating Trooping the Colour.

Ministerial Meetings (Scottish Land Fund)

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions she has had with the Scottish Executive to determine the demands for future funding from the Scottish Land Fund after the passing of the Land Reform Act by the Scottish Parliament. [95508]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is corresponding with Scottish Ministers about the needs of the Scottish Land Fund. In addition I recently met my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North and representatives from the New Opportunities Fund and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to discuss the Scottish Land Fund.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Hansard

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission what the cost was of reprinting the daily Hansard of 4 February. [96628]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: Under the terms of the printing contract with The Stationery Office (TSO), the cost of reprinting and reissuing the daily Hansard of 3 February was borne by TSO. No additional expense will fall on the House of Commons.

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial Cars

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Ministers are entitled to the allocation of a car; and how many Ministers in each year from 1997 have chosen not to avail themselves of one. [89073]

Mr. Alexander *[pursuant to his answer, 8 January 2003, Official Report, c. 216W]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Government Car and Despatch Agency, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Member. A copy of his revised letter has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Airport Police

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions and to what extent the RUC and PSNI has trained and supervised constables of the Northern Ireland Airport Police in accordance with the undertaking given by the Government on 14 February 1994, *Official Report*, column 667; and how many officers have been trained in each case. [94465]

Jane Kennedy: The Training Officer of the then RUC reviewed training requirements of the Northern Ireland Airport Police and appropriate training has been carried out by PSNI for each new in-take of Airport Police Officers. Effectively, this means that Airport Police Constables are trained alongside PSNI Constables and Airport Auxiliary Constables are trained alongside PSNI part-time Constables.

In addition, the PSNI has provided the Airport Police with training in Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE), use of weapons and Human Rights legislation.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what joint consideration the Home Office, the Department for Transport and the Northern Ireland Office have given to the contents of Sir John Wheeler's Report into Policing at UK Airports 2002, with particular reference to policing at *(a)* Belfast International, *(b)* Belfast City and *(c)* Derry-Eglington airports; and if he will make a statement. [94453]

Jane Kennedy: Sir John Wheeler reviewed Aviation Security at the behest of the Home Secretary. Whilst the NIO was consulted during the fact finding process, it is a matter for the Home Office and the Department for Transport to take forward a detailed analysis of the recommendations in Sir John's report.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on which occasions the RUC and PSNI have been consulted by the management of the Belfast International Airport about reductions in policing levels at the airport, since the undertakings given by the Government on 14 February 1994, *Official Report*, column 691, that such prior consultation would take place; and if he will make a statement. [94464]

Jane Kennedy: Security arrangements at Belfast International Airport are kept under continual review. Officers from PSNI meet regularly with the Airport Authorities to discuss proposed changes in security measures.

In addition, the PSNI, both from Headquarters and the local District Command Unit in Antrim, are represented at meetings of the Belfast International Airport Security Committee (chaired by the Airport Authority) and also the Belfast International Airport Security Co-ordinating Committee meeting (chaired by NIO).

Airport Security

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the last occasion was on which the RUC and PSNI formally agreed the level of security at the Belfast international airport, in accordance with the undertakings given to Parliament by the Government on 14 February 1994, *Official Report*, column 692; and if he will make a statement. [94455]

Jane Kennedy: Proposed changes to the level of security at Belfast international airport were last discussed at the meeting of the Security Co-ordinating Committee on 30 January 2003. While it would be inappropriate to go into the details, I can advise that the committee, which includes officers from PSNI, considered the merits of the changes and endorsed what was being proposed.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he has made the owners of Belfast International Airport aware of their responsibility under the original sales prospectus to meet appropriate security charges determined by and after regular surveys made by the RUC and PSNI, as stated by the Government on 31 January 1994, *Official Report* (HL), column 165; and if he will make a statement. [94502]

Jane Kennedy: The Airport Authority is responsible for, and continues to fulfil, all its obligations in terms of physical and technical security measures at Belfast International Airport. Security at the Airport is taken very seriously and officers from PSNI meet regularly with the Airport Authority to ensure that appropriate security levels are maintained.

Airports

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to what extent and on which occasions, since the enactment of the Airports (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, the RUC and PSNI has monitored the performance of the Airport constabulary, in accordance with the undertaking given to parliament by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State on 14 February 1994, *Official Report*, column 667; and if he will make a statement. [94449]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave today to question reference 94464.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on which dates since the enactment of the Airports (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 the Northern Ireland Airport Police has been subject to an annual inspection. [94451]

Jane Kennedy: There has been no formal inspection of the Northern Ireland Airport Police since the enactment of the Airports (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 per se, however, individual and specific service levels are regularly monitored as part of the wider PSNI security reviews, the most recent of which was during week commencing 27 January 2003.

Belfast Airport (Policing)

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much per annum the PSNI charges Belfast City Airport for the cost of policing; and if he will make a statement. [94456]

Jane Kennedy: The PSNI do not levy a charge on Belfast City Airport for the current policing required at that location. The PSNI respond to reports of criminal activity at this location, as they would at every other

location throughout Northern Ireland. The annual cost of policing in Northern Ireland is met from within the Police Grant.

Belfast City Airport

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions in the past six months *(a)* customs officials, *(b)* airport management and *(c)* other airport officials have requested attendance and help from PSNI which was not immediately available within the curtilage of the Belfast city airport; and if he will make a statement. [94448]

Jane Kennedy: All the incidents were dealt with initially by Special Branch Portal Unit from within the airport, assisted where necessary by dedicated sector police or a response unit from Strandtown PSNI station.

There have been 43 reported incidents at Belfast city airport since June 2002. Thirty-five of these were luggage, lost or stolen in transit. The remainder were:

one arrest for drugs with customs and excise;

two persons arrests on warrant;

one alleged assault in flight;

three disruptive passengers; and

one drunk person.

The normal patrol pattern is for sector police motor cyclists to pay attention to the airport. However, at busy or times of identified or perceived threat, a patrol is dedicated to the area using the airport support 4 x 4 patrol vehicle.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if, prior to the sale of the Belfast city airport, he will arrange for the PSNI to review *(a)* policing requirements and *(b)* financial charges to the operators in order that this may be taken into account by prospective purchasers. [94457]

Jane Kennedy: The PSNI carried out a review of policing requirements at Belfast city airport during the latter months of last year. Management of financial charges pertaining to the administration of the airport, including security arrangements, are matters for the Airport Authority.

Belfast International Airport

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what safeguards and strict monitoring arrangements the Government put in place in order to ensure that the commercial interests of the management of the Belfast International Airport do not undermine the operational independence and professionalism of the police force or the security of the airport as promised on 31 January 1994, *Official Report*, (HL) column 1166. [94509]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today to question reference 94464. These mechanisms ensure that policing arrangements are not compromised by commercial interests, though the Airport Authority have always, and continue to act in a very responsible manner.

Security Committees

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the name of the security committee is, referred to on 14 February 1994, *Official Report*, column 692, by the Under-Secretary of State; what its constitution is; how frequently it has met in each year since the enactment of the Airports (Northern Ireland) Order 1994; and if he will make a statement. [94454]

Jane Kennedy: The Belfast International Airport Security Co-ordinating Committee is made up of representatives from the Northern Ireland Office, the Department for Regional Development, Department for Transport, PSNI, MOD Headquarters (NI), RAF Aldergrove and Airport Authority. The Committee has met with the following frequency:

	Frequency
1994	1
1995	2
1996	2
1997	2
1998	1
1999	2
2000	3
2001	2
2002	1
2003	1

WORK AND PENSIONS

Advertising Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92253]

Mr. McCartney: The Department for work and Pensions was formed in June 2001. Since that time, and up until March 2002, around £28,238,773 has been spent on publicity activity educate people or alert them to their rights and responsibilities.

A total publicity spend of around £14,059,468 is estimated for the 2002/03 financial year.

Due to the integrated, multi-media nature of DWP marketing activity, advertising costs are not recorded separately and could only be supplied at disproportionate cost.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the implementation of the new CSA IT system. [92090]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral statement I made on 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 567–68.

Having checked the *Official Report*, I have noticed that during the exchange that followed my statement, my answer pointing to the compliance rate for self-employed non-resident parents of 34 per cent. should have been non-compliance at 34 per cent. This reflects the fact that at November 2002 34 per cent. paid nothing. The figure for those non-resident parents who are fully and partially compliant for this group is at 66 per cent., but this is still significantly below the figure for all cases.

Deferred Annuities

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the current providers of deferred annuities, as referred to in paragraph 81, page 65 of the Green Paper Simplicity, security and choice; and if he will make a statement on the bad value of deferred annuities. [95276]

Mr. McCartney: The current providers of deferred annuities are 'Legal and General' and Prudential. In the Green Paper, "Simplicity, security and choice—Working and saving for retirement" (Cm 5677), we state our interest in considering the establishment central fund into which members could choose to pay the funds that they receive on wind-up. The fund could then—acting as a whole—negotiate the purchase of deferred annuities with providers. The Green Paper sets out the market context in which such a central fund would operate. The consultation period on the Green Paper ends on 28 March 2003.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in *(i)* 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90703]

Mr. McCartney: The figures are available in:

Appropriation Accounts 1997–98 Class XII Department of Social Security Vote 3 Account.

Appropriation Accounts 2000–01 Class XII Department of Social Security Vote 3 Account.

These are available in the Library.

E-Mail Addresses

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by what e-mail address members of the public may contact *(a)* him and *(b)* each of the Ministers in his Department; and for each e-mail address if he will state (i) the date it became active and (ii) the number of e-mails received in each month since activation. [97438]

Maria Eagle: Ministers can be contacted at ministers@dwp.gsi.gov.uk. The Department was formed on 8 June 2001 and the e-mail address was activated shortly afterwards. Separate records are not kept of the number of e-mail messages received.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the latest figures for housing benefit processing times are, broken down by local authority. [88209]

Malcolm Wicks: Under Best Value, we have set a range of performance indicators for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for English local authorities, three of which are concerned with processing times. There are similar indicators for local authorities inWales and Scotland.

The latest audited best value performance information for English local authorities is for 2001–02 and was published on 12 December on the Best Value Performance Indicators website at http://www.bvpi.gov.uk/home.asp. A copy is available in the Library.

The most recent corresponding data for local authorities in Wales are for 2000/01. These are published on the Audit Commission website at http://ww2.Audit-Commission.gov.uk/pis/pi_data_01.shtml. A copy of the relevant extract from this site has been placed in the Library. The Local Government Data Unit for Wales, the Audit Commission in Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government intend to jointly publish performance information for 2001/02 by the end of the current financial year.

The most recent corresponding data for local authorities in Scotland are also for 2000–01 and are in the Accounts Commission publication "Performance Indicators 2000/2001: Benefits, Finance and Corporate Issues", a copy of which is in the Library. Audit Scotland intends to publish performance information for 2001/02 on behalf of the Accounts Commission in mid January 2003.

The Department collects quarterly un-audited performance information from local authorities across Great Britain. We published this information on the Department's website at www.dwp.qsi.gov.uk/asd/otherstats.html on 29 January 2003. Copies are available in the Library.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many times since 2001 he has taken flights on departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied him on each trip. [95392]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Pension Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assumptions underlie the calculation that pensioners on £150 a week will gain £1,100 a year from the pension credit, as set out on 15 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 629W. [95234]

Mr. McCartney: The assumptions underlying this calculation are that it is a pensioner couple receiving full basic state pension, all additional income qualifies for the savings credit and they are not currently entitled to the minimum income guarantee.

Pension Schemes

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions *[pursuant to his answer 18 December 2002, Official Report, column 859]*, whether the data on the number of pension schemes that have completed winding-up and the members of those schemes in the financial years 2000–01 and 2001–02 is likely to be revised. [91585]

Mr. McCartney: As explained in the answer to the previous parliamentary question, the data used was derived from information collected by the Pension Schemes Registry (PSR), which is not designed or intended to provide a comprehensive or continuous statistical record of the number of schemes which wind-up. The PSR registers schemes for tracing purposes and collects the levy from pension schemes, including those in the process of winding-up. New scheme data is being reported to the PSR on a continuous basis. Therefore, the figures aresubject to continuous revision. The figures in the previous parliamentary question showing the number of schemes commencing and in the process of winding up and the number of members of those schemes shown were correct in terms of the information available to the PSR. As new information becomes available on an on-going basis, the figures change. That is because the figures are a snapshot. Since the previous parliamentary question, in the course of itspursuance of unpaid levy liabilities, the PSR has identified further schemeswhich had commenced wind up in previous years and were still in the wind upprocess. These schemes are added to the figures as they are identified. At the same time, the PSR will sometimes identify that some schemes had completedwind up in previous years. These schemes are removed from the columnshowing schemes still in the process of winding up and are added to thecolumn showing completed wind ups. Again, this occurs on an on-going basisas the PSR identifies the facts.

However, work to produce the latest available figures has indicated factualerrors in the presentation of the figures for the earlier parliamentary question of 18 December 2002 showing the number of completed wind ups and thenumbers of members of those schemes. These errors relate to technicalaspects of the PSR's database, but the most significant effect was to overstatethe numbers of members in schemes that had completed wind up.

The correct up-to-date figures are as follows:

Year	*Number of schemes notifying PSR that they are commencing wind up and are still in the process*	*Number of members in schemes notifying PSR that they are commencing wind up and still in the process*
1/4/1997–31/3/1998	94	9,485
1/4/1998–31/3/1999	154	5,732
1/4/1999–31/3/2000	4,623	107,397
1/4/2000—31/3/2001	1,771	76,156
1/4/2001—31/3/2002	2,263	77,642

Year	*Number of schemes that completed winding up*	*Number of members in schemes that completed winding up*
1/4/1997–31/3/1998	24,974	541,298
1/4/1998–31/3/1999	7,388	165,572
1/4/1999–31/3/2000	8,151	343,365
1/4/2000 31/3/2001	6,047	158,118
1/4/2001 31/3/2002	4,388	230,406

I regret that the figures provided previously in relation to schemes which had completed wind up were not fully accurate. The PSR has now put in place procedures to prevent a recurrence.

Notes:

The reason the figures for completed wind ups in 1997/98 are so much larger than for other years is that from 1997, the rules governing which schemes had a levy liability were changed—all schemes with two or more members became liable whereas previously, only schemes with two or more active members were liable. So, in 1997, the PSR issued levy requests to a large number of schemes, only to discover that a number of them had already wound up. All these schemes were recorded as having completed wind up in 1997/98 even if, in fact, they had wound up earlier. Therefore, we know these figures are inflated, but not by how much. As explained, that is because the figures were not collected for the purpose of recording the numbers of scheme wind ups.

Pensions

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people are estimated to be deferring claiming their state pension, broken down by *(a)* men and *(b)* women; and how many of each category are working. [96180]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is shown in the following table.

Number of people deferring state pension

	Great Britain
Male	8,000
Female	28,000
Total	35,000

Notes:

1. Numbers do not sum to totals due to rounding.
2. Numbers rounded to nearest 1,000.
3. Northern Ireland and Channel Island cases are not included in the table.
4. Due to data limitations a number of assumptions were required to produce these numbers. Therefore the numbers shown above should be considered to be approximate.

Source:

Department for Work and Pensions' calculations based upon administrative data from 31 March 2002.

Pensions Credit

Joyce Quin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has for additional ways of publicising the pensions credit. [94873]

Mr. McCartney: In addition to writing to everyone 60 and over about Pension Credit, we are planning a substantial marketing campaign to include TV and press advertising. We are also working closely with partners including pensions organisations on customer communications products.

Portsmouth, South

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people were awarded increments for deferring their state pension in the last year for which data are available, broken down by *(a)* male and *(b)* female and (i) United Kingdom resident and (ii) living abroad at the point of award. [96179]

Mr. McCartney: The information in the table shows the number of people who claimed their state pension between 31 March 2001 and 31 March 2002 and received increment.

	Great Britain	Overseas	All
Male	4,000	2,000	5,000
Female	13,000	3,000	16,000
All	16,000	5,000	21,000

Notes:

1. Numbers rounded to nearest 1,000.
2. Numbers may not sum to totals due to rounding.
3. Northern Ireland and Channel Island cases are not included in the table.

Source:

State pension administrative data from 31 March 2002.

Unemployment Benefit

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many unemployed people in Tamworth are claiming unemployment benefit; and what the change in the number of unemployed since 1997 is. [96531]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. Brian Jenkins, dated 11 February 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question regarding the number of unemployed people in Tamworth who are claiming unemployment benefit and what the change in the number of unemployed since 1997 is. (96531)

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) compiles statistics of unemployment from surveys following the international standard International Labour Organisation definition. However the survey sample size is too small to provide estimates for the Tamworth Parliamentary Constituency.

However, the number of people in the Tamworth Parliamentary Constituency claiming the Jobseeker's Allowance benefit fell by 458 from a figure of 1,541 in December 1997 to 1,083 in December 2002.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

A*-G Grades

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of pupils achieved five or more A*-G grades in each year from 1995 to 2001. [97155]

Mr. Miliband: The information requested is shown as follows:

Percentage of 15-year-old pupils achieving five or more A-G grades in all schools in England*

1994–95	43.5
1995–96	44.5
1996–97	45.1
1997–98	46.3
1998–99	47.9
1999–2000	49.2
2000–01	50.0

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of pupils achieved one A*-G grade in each year from 1995 to 2001. [97156]

Mr. Miliband: The information requested is shown as follows:

Percentage of 15-year-old pupils achieving one or more A-G grades in all schools in England*

	Percentage
1994–95	91.9
1995–96	92.2
1996–97	92.3
1997–98	93.4
1998–99	94.0
1999–2000	94.4
2000–01	94.6

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills which counties qualify for the education area cost adjustment; and how much they receive on average in 2002–03 per student in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools. [96506]

Mr. Miliband: The following table sets out, for those authorities who qualify for the area cost adjustment from April 2003, the primary and secondary SSA per pupil for 2002–03.

	SSA (£) per pupil	
LEA name	*Aged 5–10*	*Aged 11–15*
Bedfordshire	2,660	3,410
Buckinghamshire	2,660	3,410
East Sussex	2,710	3,500
Hampshire	2,580	3,320
Wiltshire[1]	2,510	3,220
Cambridgeshire[1]	2,530	3,230
Cheshire[1]	2,470	3,150
Essex	2,710	3,460
Kent	2,710	3,470
Gloucestershire[1]	2,500	3,190
Hertfordshire	2,750	3,500
Isle of Wight Council	2,790	3,600
Northamptonshire[1]	2,530	3,230
Oxfordshire	2,670	3,400
Surrey	2,720	3,470
Warwickshire[1]	2,490	3,170
West Sussex	2,640	3,360

[1] Authority qualifying for ACA for the first time from April 2003

Baccalaureat Technique

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the French *(a)* Baccalauréat Technique and *(b)* Baccalauréat Général systems. [97535]

Mr. Miliband: We considered a range of qualifications models from overseas, including those from France, in developing the proposals, including further work on a unified qualifications framework for 14 to 19-year-olds, set out in "14–19: Opportunity and Excellence", published on 21 January 2003.

Construction Industry Training Board

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his estimate is of the cost in 2003–04 to the construction equipment hire industry of the imposition of levies to the Construction Industry Training Board. [96307]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The amount of levy payable in 2003 by employers declaring their main activity to be Plant Hire or Repair (including Tool Hire) is forecast to be £3.5 million.

Departmental Expenditure

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on his Department's expenditure plans for 2003–04 and 2004–05. [96659]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My Statement to the House of 19 December, *Official Report*, column 67WS, sets out my Department's planned expenditure for 2003–04 and 2004–05. Plans for Higher Education expenditure were included in the White Paper, The Future of Higher Education' (Command Number, 5735) published on 22 January.

Deprivation (Funding)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what criteria he uses to define deprivation for the purposes of the education funding formula; and how they differ from the deprivation criteria used by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. [96998]

Mr. Miliband: Deprivation is measured in the new education funding formula through child based measures of poverty: the proportion of children in families on income support or in receipt of working families' tax credit. The other indicators used in the formula for distribution of grant to local authorities are set out in the Local Government finance report 2003–04, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. The formula are designed to measure the relative costs of service delivery, and individual service blocks use the most appropriate measures of need, including deprivation: there is no reason why these should be the same for all service blocks.

English-style Baccalaureat

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how the *(a)* content and *(b)* academic standard of his proposed English style Baccalaureate will compare with those of (i) the German Abilus and (ii) the French Baccalaureate. [97332]

Mr. Miliband: Following the publication of "14–19: Opportunity and Excellence" on 21 January this year, one of the key tasks for the 14–19 working group which Mike Tomlinson will chair will be to consider, and make recommendations about, the rationale and potential design of such a qualification.

Finance (Leeds)

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what SSA allocation the City of Leeds received in *(a)* 2001–02, *(b)* 2002–03, *(c)* 2003–04; and what was (i) the LEA spend and (ii) the size of the schools budget in (A) 2001–02 and (B) 2002–03. [96971]

Mr. Miliband: In 2001–02 the City of Leeds' Education SSA was £317.01 million; in 2002–03 it is £311.54 million. In 2003–04 its Education Formula Spending Share is £344.63 million.

The figure for 2003–04 is not fully comparable with the earlier figures. The figure for 2003–04 includes funding transferred into EFS from grant and to take account of the increase in contributions to the Teachers' Pension Scheme. The figures for 2002–03 and 2003–04 do not include Sixth Form funding: responsibility for that was transferred to the Learning and Skills Council in 2002–03.

In 2001–02 the City of Leeds' education budget was £311.54 million and in 2002–03 it was £306.18 million. We cannot split out the schools budget for 2001–02 but in 2002–03 it was £276.20 million.

The information requested on the LEA spend for 2001–02 is not yet available as the Department is in the process of collecting it. I will write to my hon. Friend when the information becomes available. The Department is not due to collect the data for 2002–03 until September 2003.

Government Offices for the Regions

Mr. Wills: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what responsibilities the Government offices for the regions have relating to education. [96280]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Government offices are responsible for supporting the delivery of the department's educational policies, programmes and initiatives in the regions and ensuring coherence and synergy with other Government policies, programmes and initiatives.

DfES issues Government offices with guidance at the start of the year, and Government offices identify the key issues and priorities in a region and work with partners to ensure resources are targeted appropriately.

During the forthcoming year, GOs will have three core priorities, based around:

Floor targets for schools-with particular emphasis on ensuring that regeneration and renewal work across Government supports the achievement of these targets;

School behaviour and attendance-joining up local and sub-regional stakeholders with the range of cross Government work to support achievement of targets;

Adult skills-with emphasis on regional skills priorities and basic skills, joining up sub-regional and regional stakeholders and resources to ensure delivery of adult skills targets.

Key Stage 4

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the national standard of teaching at Key Stage 4. [97154]

Mr. Miliband: In his annual report for 2001–02, published on 5 February 2003, HM Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell, reported that inspectors had judged the quality of teaching at Key Stage 4 to be good or better in 79 per cent. of maintained secondary schools and unsatisfactory or poor in 2 per cent. of those schools. He confirmed that the quality of teaching is reflected in rising standards, with more young people completing their compulsory education with a range of good examination results and fewer leaving the system with no qualifications.

Modern Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the completion rates were for the modern apprenticeship programmes in each year since their inception. [94314]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: There are no published rates for completion of modern apprenticeship frameworks. Figures are, however, routinely available for achievement of the main qualifications of Modern Apprenticeship programmes: full National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 for Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMA), and full NVQ level 3 for Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (AMA).

percentage

Academic year of leaving	*Achievement rate of full NVQ level 3 as part of an AMA*	*Achievement rate of full NVQ level 2 as part of an FMA*
August 1994 to July 1995	[1]—	[1]—
August 1995 to July 1996	16	[1]—
August 1996 to July 1997	23	[1]—
August 1997 to July 1998	30	[1]—
August 1998 to July 1999	40	[1]—
August 1999 to July 2000	50	40
2000–01[2]		
August 2000 to October 2000[2]	54	43
November 2000 to January 2001[2]	45	42
February 2001 to March 2001[2]	51	51

[1] Not available.

[2] Complete information is not available for the academic year August 2000 to July 2001.

Ofsted

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what funds his Department has allocated to OFSTED in *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06, (i) in cash terms and (ii) on a full resource budgeting basis. [96284]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The following table sets out my allocations to OFSTED.

£ million

	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
Cash Terms	200	203	212
Resource Budgeting	203	206	215

The Resource Budgeting figures are those I announced in my statement to the house on 19 December, *Official Report*, column 67WS, and includes both resource and capital provision.

The cash figures exclude the provision made for depreciation, cost of capital and other accrual to cash adjustments, such as changes in Debtors and Creditors.

Primary Schools (Security)

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what security guidelines he issues to local education authorities with regard to primary schools; [96646]

(2) what advice he gives local education authorities about security considerations applying to the locations of primary schools; [96647]

(3) what his policy is on location of primary schools adjacent to *(a)* prisons, *(b)* probation centres, *(c)* magistrates' courts, *(d)* military bases and *(e)* drugs and alcohol clinics day centres. [96648]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* My Department has issued guidance on school security that includes "School Security: Dealing with Troublemakers" (jointly with the Home Office) and "Improving Security in Schools" and a video, "Can You See What They See?". We have also established a school security website at: www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolsecurity.

Where local education authorities publish proposals to establish a new school, or transfer an existing school to a new site, the final decision is taken at local level by a School Organisation Committee (SOC) or by a Schools Adjudicator if the SOC cannot reach a unanimous decision. The SOC and the Adjudicator must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State when making their decisions. This includes a range of factors they should consider including the overall effect on standards of provision in the area, existence of safe walking, cycling or bus routes and the views of those affected by the proposals.

Public Bodies

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what funds his Department has allocated to each public body sponsored by the department in *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06, (i) in cash terms and (ii) on a full resource budgeting basis. [96283]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The amounts allocated to each public body and the consequential cash requirements—voted as grant in aid—are shown in the table.

	2003–04		2004–05		2005–06	
	Cash	Resource	Cash	Resource	Cash	Resource (£ million)
Adult Learning Inspectorate	24	24	24	24	24	24
British Educational Communications and Technology Agency[1]	5	6	5	6	6	7
General Teaching Council	1	2	1	1	1	1
Higher Education Funding Council for England	5,411	5,399	5,844	5,833	6,324	6,334
Investors in People UK	5	5	5	5	5	5
Learning and Skills Council[2]	8,095	8,095	8,613	8,613	9,200	9,200
National College for School Leadership	80	82	90	92	92	94
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	60	62	60	62	60	62
Student Loans Company[3]	38	41	—	—	—	—
Sector Skills Development Agency	42	42	45	45	48	48
Teacher Training Agency	496	499	523	526	550	553

[1] This excludes any funding BECTA may receive for managing specific projects.
[2] SC resource figures exclude capital costs and depreciation, which have not yet been agreed.
[3] The figure for 2003–04 is an indicative amount notified to the Student Loans Company pending a full allocation for the whole period.
Notes:
1. All figures are rounded to the nearest million.
2. The cash figures exclude the provision made for depreciation, cost of capital and other.
3. Accrual to cash adjustments, such as changes, in Debtors and Creditors.
4. All allocations for 2004–05 and 2005–05 are indicative and subject to receipt of detailed business plans from each public body.

School Buildings

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimate he has made of the value of school buildings in England; and if he will make a statement. [95784]

Mr. Miliband: We estimate the replacement value of schools buildings in England to be around £93 billion at 2003 price levels. This includes for bringing the buildings up to present design standards but excludes the value of land.

School Meals

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average price of a school meal was in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in each local authority area in England and Wales in each academic year since 1997–98. [96665]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department for Education and Skills does not collect statistics on the price of school meals in schools in England. The Welsh Assembly is responsible for school meal policy for schools in Wales.

Sector Skills Development Agency

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what criteria he used to judge the relevant expertise of appointments to the board and senior management of the Sector Skills Development Agency; and if he will make a statement. [97256]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: All appointments to the Sector Skills Development Agency Board were made under fair and open competition and required high-level representation from the private sector as well as wider employment and voluntary sector interests. Board appointees were judged against the following criteria:

a successful track record of Board level work, strategy development and implementing change

evidence of contribution to employer based initiatives to improve businessproductivity and competitiveness through workforce development

evidence of promoting and encouraging diversity in the workforce a personal profile with evidence of being able to represent others, work in partnership and as part of a team

evidence of developing creative solutions to sophisticated problems

well developed and high effective communication, presentation and negotiating skills.

In addition to the Chief Executive there are four senior management posts which areresponsible for finance, operations, policy and research and marketing. While the selection criteria for each post were different to reflect their diverse technical needs, there were a number of core criteria common to all posts including:

Experience of working at senior management and contributing to the strategic direction of a comparable organisation.

Proven ability to communicate effectively and influence both within an organisation and with external partners and stakeholders.

Proven ability to manage budgets and projects within their area or responsibility in order to meet defined targets within competing priorities.

Proven ability to take decisions decisively and effectively.

The highest standards of probity and integrity.

A strong commitment to promoting equality of opportunity.

Specialist Status Schools

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his answer of 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 783W, on specialist status schools, what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of specialist status on technology colleges. [96767]

Mr. Miliband: The October 2001 Ofsted survey of the programme ("Specialist Schools: An evaluation of progress") looked at the Technology specialism alongside the three other specialisms which were part of the programme in 2000. The survey found that four out of five of the well-established specialist schools covered by the survey were in large measure achieving the aims of the programme and making good use of the advantages it brings. The survey said that for these schools specialist status had often been a catalyst for innovation and helped to sustain or accelerate the momentum of school improvement. The Ofsted survey found no problems specific to Technology Colleges.

The question refers to my answer of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 783W, which said that since the programme began, 32 Technology Colleges have lost their specialist status in comparison to one school designated in another specialism. The reason for this disparity is that Technology Colleges have been part of the programme for longer and there are many more of them. Technology was the first specialism and was introduced in 1994. Schools come up for re-designation every four years (until 2000 this was every three years).

There are currently schools operating in eight specialisms in the programme—Technology Colleges represent 45 per cent. of these schools. The first Language Colleges began operating in 1995. The first Sports and Arts Colleges began operating in 1997. The first specialist schools designated in Science, Engineering, Business and Enterprise and Mathematics and Computing began operating in September 2002.

Student Appraisal

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* continuous assessment and *(b)* examinations as alternative mechanisms for student appraisal. [95941]

Mr. Miliband: The scope for reducing the total burden of external assessment in GCSE and A-level examinations will be considered by our 14–19 Working Group and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. They will be examining the principles underpinning effective assessment, including the nature and amount of assessment. We expect the Working Group to make an interim report within a year.

Teacher Training

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many initial teacher training places funded by his Department have not been filled by the Teacher Training Agency in each subject for each year since 1997. [96700]

Mr. Miliband: Information is shown in the following table.

Number of initial teacher training places filled and unfilled between 1997 and 2002[1,2]

	Filled	*Unfilled*
1997–98		
Primary	11,749	0
Secondary		
Mathematics	1,464	786
English and drama	2,142	8
Science	2,789	511
Modern Foreign Languages	1,799	851
Technology[3]	1,982	1,218
History	964	0
Geography	850	50
Physical Education	1,644	0
Art	896	54
Music	498	102
Religious Education	641	59
Citizenship[4]	—	—
Other	297	53
Total secondary	15,966	3,534
Overall total	27,715	2,835
1998–99		
Primary	11,828	0
Secondary		
Mathematics	1,120	1,030
English and drama	2,133	267
Science	2,279	771
Modern Foreign Languages	1,657	643
Technology[3]	1,682	1,318
History	898	2
Geography	747	253
Physical Education	1,491	0
Art	903	197
Music	493	107
Religious Education	620	130
Citizenship[4]	—	—
Other	356	44
Total secondary	14,379	4,721
Overall total	26,207	4,393
1999–2000		
Primary	12,096	0
Secondary		
Mathematics	1,302	378
English and drama	2,030	130
Science	2,362	28
Modern Foreign Languages	1,469	731
Technology[3]	1,702	1,158
History	816	0
Geography	872	158
Physical Education	1,190	0
Art	799	141
Music	518	52
Religious Education	528	72
Citizenship[4]	—	—
Other	283	67
Total secondary	13,871	2,739
Overall total[1]	25,967	2,643

Number of initial teacher training places filled and unfilled between 1997 and 2002[1,2]

	Filled	*Unfilled*
2000–01		
Primary	13,173	0
Secondary		
Mathematics	1,290	560
English and drama	2,029	131
Science	2,413	277
Modern Foreign Languages	1,635	415
Technology[3]	1,855	145
History	913	0
Geography	899	191
Physical Education	1,205	0
Art	851	0
Music	560	70
Religious Education	573	92
Citizenship[4]	—	—
Other	319	11
Total secondary	14,542	2,073
Overall total	27,715	2,000
2001–02		
Primary	13,109	0
Secondary		
Mathematics	1,553	387
English and drama	2,224	0
Science	2,594	216
Modern Foreign Languages	1,705	345
Technology[3]	2,160	0
History	922	0
Geography	1,025	150
Physical Education	1,330	0
Art	843	7
Music	654	51
Religious Education	588	62
Citizenship[4]	—	—
Other	378	72
Total secondary	15,976	1,414
Overall total	29,085	805
2002–03		
Primary	14,451	0
Secondary		
Mathematics	1,673	267
English and drama	2,479	0
Science	2,701	149
Modern Foreign Languages	1,732	318
Technology[3]	2,404	96
History	985	0
Geography	946	154
Physical Education	1,325	0
Art	885	0
Music	596	104
Religious Education	576	124
Citizenship[4]	185	15
Other	174	126
Total secondary	16,661	1,129
Overall total	31,112	678

[1] The figures shown for 2001–02 and 2002–03 exclude trainees recruited to the Fast Track. Fast Track are not included as part of the TTA's allocated places.

[2] For subjects where unfilled places are shown as zero, allocated places were exceeded.

[3] Technology includes design and technology, business studies and information technology.

[4] 2001–02 was the first year for recruitment to citizenship, and was included in "other" subjects along with economics and social studies. In 2002–03 places allocated to citizenship were separated out and shown separately.

Source:
TTA

Teacher Workload

Mr. Simon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) if he will make a statement on the reforms designed to reduce teacher workload, as outlined in the November 2002 Teachers report, with specific reference to measures which will help teachers to keep up with the pace of change occurring in their profession; [96289]

(2) what actions he is taking to ensure there is adequate PPA time for teachers to prepare lessons for their pupils; and how this will balance against teaching time and the time needed to carry out administrative duties. [96290]

Mr. Miliband: On 15 January the Government signed an historic national agreement with school workforce unions and most employers. The agreement sets out a series of measures that will extend support staff roles, tackle teacher workload, and free teachers to spend more of their time on teaching and focus on the individual learning needs of all pupils. Contractual changes for teachers will be made, including:

No requirement routinely to undertake administrative and clerical tasks, including the 24 tasks set out in the agreement, by September 2003;

A limit of 38 hours on the time a teacher should cover lessons, by September 2004;

The equivalent of at least 10 per cent. of their timetabled teaching time to be guaranteed for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) by September 2005. PPA are core duties and need core time devoted to them. Guaranteeing time during the school day for this is critical to driving up pupil standards.

Schools will be expected to work towards these changes as soon as possible and on later than the dates given above.

Teachers Pay

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average teacher's wage paid in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools is, broken down by LEA. [96492]

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average teacher's salary was for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary education for each local education authority in England and Wales in the last year for which figures are available. [96801]

Mr. Miliband: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

Truancy

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps his Department is taking to combat truancy in schools. [96666]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We are committed to the Public Service Agreement target to reduce truancies by 10 per cent. by 2004 compared to 2002, to sustain the new lower level, and improve overall attendance levels thereafter. To achieve this objective, we are investing nearly £470 million over the next three years in a national behaviour and attendance strategy to support schools. This includes behaviour and attendance training and audits available to all secondary schools from September. Through the Behaviour Improvement

Programme further support is currently being targeted at the 700 schools with the greatest challenges, to be extended to a further 1900 schools by 2005. We have a range of further measures to tackle truancy, including the co-ordination of national truancy sweeps; funding for electronic registration systems; the development of guidance for more effective prosecutions in truancy cases in tandem with a fast-track to prosecution model focusing on multi-agency early intervention to address truancy; and a sustained publicity campaign aimed at parents and pupils. In addition, we are proposing to introduce fixed penalty notices and parenting contracts for parents of persistent truants.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the estimated incidence of truancy is in secondary schools broken down by local authority area, in the last year for which figures are available. [96800]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The incidence of truancy is measured by the percentage of half days missed due to unauthorised absence. The latest year for which figures are available is September 2001–May 2002.

Unauthorised absence in maintained secondary schools in England 2001–02

Local education authority	*Percentage of half days missed due to unauthorised absences*
Barking and Dagenham	2.0
Barnet	0.9
Barnsley	1.6
Bath and North East Somerset	1.1
Bedfordshire	0.4
Bexley	1.2
Birmingham	1.6
Blackburn with Darwen	1.3
Blackpool	1.3
Bolton	1.2
Bournemouth	0.6
Bracknell Forest	0.9
Bedford	2.4
Brent	0.7
Brighton and Hove	1.2
Bristol, City of	2.3
Bromley	1.1
Buckinghamshire	0.5
Bury	0.7
Calderdale	0.8
Cambridgeshire	0.8
Camden	1.4
Cheshire	0.9
Cornwall	0.4
Coventry	1.0
Croydon	0.7
Cumbria	0.8
Darlington	1.1
Derby City	1.5
Derbyshire	1.0
Devon	1.1
Doncaster	1.5
Dorset	0.6
Dudley	0.7
Durham	0.7
Ealing	1.0
East Riding of Yorkshire	0.9
East Sussex	1.4
Enfield	1.9
Essex	0.9
Gateshead	1.0
Gloucestershire	0.5
Greenwich	2.5

Unauthorised absence in maintained secondary schools in England 2001–02

Local education authority	*Percentage of half days missed due to unauthorised absences*
Hackney	2.6
Halton	2.5
Hammersmith and Fulham	1.8
Hampshire	1.1
Haringey	2.4
Harrow	0.7
Hartlepool	1.6
Havering	0.6
Herefordshire	0.8
Hertfordshire	0.9
Hillingdon	1.5
Hounslow	1.1
Isle of Wight	0.7
Isles of Scilly	—
Islington	1.7
Kensington and Chelsea	1.9
Kent	0.7
Kingston upon Hull, City of	2.7
Kingston upon Thames	0.6
Kirklees	1.1
Knowsley	3.1
Lambeth	1.0
Lancashire	0.8
Leeds	0.9
Leicester City	2.3
Leicestershire	1.3
Lewisham	2.7
Lincolnshire	0.7
Liverpool	1.8
London, City of	—
Luton	0.6
Manchester	1.7
Medway	0.6
Merton	1.2
Middlesbrough	1.0
Milton Keynes	0.5
Newcastle upon Tyne	1.7
Newham	2.1
Norfolk	1.1
North East Lincolnshire	1.5
North Lincolnshire	1.3
North Somerset	1.1
North Tyneside	0.7
North Yorkshire	0.5
Northamptonshire	1.0
Northumberland	0.4
Nottingham City	3.1
Nottinghamshire	1.3
Oldham	1.4
Oxfordshire	1.3
Peterborough City	1.2
Plymouth	0.6
Poole	0.8
Portsmouth	1.6
Reading	1.2
Redbridge	0.7
Redcar and Cleveland	1.1
Richmond upon Thames	2.5
Rochdale	1.6
Rotherham	1.6
Rutland	0.5
Salford	1.6
Sandwell	1.7
Sefton	0.7
Sheffield	2.2
Shropshire	0.6
Slough	1.2
Solihull	0.9
Somerset	0.6
South Gloucestershire	1.0
South Tyneside	0.6

Unauthorised absence in maintained secondary schools in England 2001–02

Local education authority	*Percentage of half days missed due to unauthorised absences*
Southampton	1.3
Southend-on-Sea	1.4
Southwark	1.7
St. Helens	0.9
Staffordshire	0.6
Stockport	0.9
Stockton on Tees	0.5
Stoke on Trent	1.6
Suffolk	0.9
Sunderland	1.0
Surrey	1.0
Sutton	0.9
Swindon	0.8
Tameside	1.0
Telford and The Wrenkin	0.6
Thurrock	0.9
Torbay	1.3
Tower Hamlets	2.4
Trafford	0.7
Wakefield	0.8
Walsall	0.8
Waltham Forest	1.7
Wandsworth	1.3
Warrington	0.6
Warwickshire	0.7
West Berkshire	0.6
West Sussex	0.9
Westminster, City of	1.8
Wigan	0.7
Wiltshire	0.7
Windsor and Maidenhead	0.7
Wirral	0.5
Workingham	1.0
Wolverhampton	1.1
Worcestershire	0.6
York, City of	1.0
England	1.1

Undergraduates

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many and what percentage of undergraduates failed to complete their degree courses in each year since 1997. [88960]

Margaret Hodge: The available information on non-completion rates is contained in "Performance Indicators in Higher Education", published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Non-completion rates calculated by HEFCE for full-time students starting first degree courses in UK higher education institutions from 1996–97 onwards are shown in the following table:

Students starting courses in:	*Non-completion rate-percentage*
1996–97	18
1997–98	17
1998–99	17
1999–2000	17

Note:
The non-completion rate has remained broadly the same at 17–18 per cent. since 1991–92

Figures published in 2002 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that the UK has one of the lowest non-completion rates among OECD countries.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Air Weapons

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many criminal activities involving air pellet guns were successfully prosecuted in each year since 1990; what the average age was of individuals successfully prosecuted using these weapons; and if he will make a statement. [94228]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: From the information collected centrally on convictions it is not possible to identify cases arising from recorded crime involving the use of air weapons.

The available information relates to the number of persons convicted of various offences under the Firearms Acts 1968 to 1997 involving air weapons of all types and is contained in the table. The average age of individuals convicted is not available centrally.

Number of defendants convicted at all courts for offences relating to air weapons, England and Wales 1990 to 2001[1]

Offence description	*Statute*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Possession of air weapon by persons previously convicted of crime	Firearms Act 1 968 Section 2 1 (4) as amended by the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act 1994, Sec 157 Sch. 8 part III	52	49	65	40	42	39
Supplying air weapon to person denied them under Section 21	Ibid Section 21(5) as amended by the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act 1994, Sec 157 Sch. 8 part III	5	4	9	1	—	3
Carrying loaded air weapon in public place etc.	Ibid Section 19	404	272	237	184	218	185
Trespassing with air weapon in a building	Ibid Section 20(1)	12	8	6	4	4	2
Trespassing with air weapon on land	Ibid Section 20(2)	142	157	95	57	58	51
Person under 17 acquiring air weapon	Ibid Section 22(1)	7	1	3	3	2	1
Person under 14 having with him an air weapon or ammunition therefore	Ibid Section 22(4)	7	8	6	6	7	14
Person under 17 having with him an air weapon in a public place	Ibid Section 22(5)	37	38	32	33	37	45
Person under 14 making improper use of air weapon when under supervision	Ibid Section 23(1)	—	—	1	—	—	1

Number of defendants convicted at all courts for offences relating to air weapons, England and Wales 1990 to 2001[1]

Offence description	*Statute*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Person supervising person under 14, permitting improper use of air weapon	Ibid Section 22(4)	—	—	1	—	—	—
Selling or letting on hire an air weapon to person under 17	Ibid Section 24(1)	5	4	2	2	3	—
Supplying air weapon to person under 14	Ibid Section 24(4)	3	6	1	3	2	2
Supplying air weapon to person drunk or insane	Ibid Section 25	—	—	—	—	—	—
Failure to hand over air weapon or ammunition on demand by constable	Ibid Section 47(2)	1	1	1	—	1	—
All offences relating to air weapons		675	548	459	333	374	343

		1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*[2]	*2001*
Possession of air weapon by persons previously convicted of crime	Firearms Act 1 968 Section 21(4) as amended by the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act 1994, Sec 157 Sch. 8 part III	49	42	45	47	36	38
Supplying air weapon to person denied them under Section 21	Ibid Section 21(5) as amended by the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act 1994, Sec 157 Sch. 8 part III	—	—	—	1	—	—
Carrying loaded air weapon in public place etc.	Ibid Section 19	202	220	195	176	170	180
Trespassing with air weapon in a building	Ibid Section 20(1)	4	—	—	—	3	1
Trespassing with air weapon on land	Ibid Section 20(2)	32	43	54	23	18	27
Person under 17 acquiring air weapon	Ibid Section 22(1)	8	3	5	1	3	1
Person under 14 having with him an air weapon or ammunition therefore	Ibid Section 22(4)	12	8	6	12	16	3
Person under 17 having with him an air weapon in a public place	Ibid Section 22(5)	43	51	47	54	52	46
Person under 14 making improper use of air weapon when under supervision	Ibid Section 23(1)	—	—	2	—	1	1
Person supervising person under 14, permitting improper use of air weapon	Ibid Section 22(4)	—	3	—	—	2	—
Selling or letting on hire an air weapon to person under 17	Ibid Section 24(1)	2	1	3	1	—	—
Supplying air weapon to person under 14	Ibid Section 24(4)	3	1	—	2	2	2
Supplying air weapon to person drunk or insane	Ibid Section 25	—	—	—	—	—	—
Failure to hand over air weapon or ammunition on demand by constable	Ibid Section 47(2)	—	—	—	—	—	—
All offences relating to air weapons	355	372	357	317	303	299	

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.
[2] Staffordshire police force were only able to submit sample data for persons proceeded against and convicted in the magistrates courts for the year 2000. Although sufficient to estimate higher orders of data, these data are not robust enough at a detailed level and have been excluded from the table

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many *(a)* convictions and *(b)* cautions there were for persons under 17 years having an air weapon in a public place in each year since 1996; [95964]

(2) how many *(a)* convictions and *(b)* cautions there were for carrying a loaded air weapon in a public place in each year since 1996; [95965]

(3) how many *(a)* convictions and *(b)* cautions there were for persons under 14 having an air weapon or ammunition in each year since 1996. [95966]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The information requested is shown in the table. This relates to England and Wales and covers the years 1996 to 2001.

Information for 2002 is due for publication in the late autumn of this year.

Number of persons convicted or cautioned for various firearms offences—England and Wales 1996 to 2001[1]

	Offence description and statute		
	Carrying a loaded air weapon in a public place etc.—Firearms Act 1968 Section 19	*Person under 17 having with him an air weapon in a public place—Firearms Act 1968 Section 22(5)*	*Person under 14 having with him an air weapon or ammunition—Firearms Act 1968 Section 22(4)*
Convicted			
1996	202	43	12
1997	220	51	8
1998	195	47	6
1999	176	54	12
2000[2]	170	52	16
2001	180	46	3
Cautioned			
1996	373	258	70
1997	320	246	52
1998	394	237	44
1999	282	197	54
2000	213	150	45
2001	180	100	24

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.
[2] Staffordshire Police were only able to submit sample data for persons convicted at magistrates courts in 2000. Although sufficient to estimate higher orders of data, these data are not robust enough at a detailed level and have been excluded from the table.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to restrict the use of air guns by minors. [96022]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Government are determined to tackle the problem of air weapon misuse. We intend to increase from 14 years to 17 the age at which a person can own an air weapon, and to tighten up on when they can be used without adult supervision. In addition, we propose to introduce a new offence of having an air weapon in a public place without lawful cause or reasonable excuse. This offence will have a power of arrest attached to it.

Algerian Asylum Seekers

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum seekers from Algeria were *(a)* granted asylum, *(b)* rejected for asylum and in subsequent appeal and *(c)* were removed from the UK in each of the last 10 years; [96016]

(2) how many Algerian citizens have sought asylum in the UK in each of the last 10 years. [96015]

Beverley Hughes: The available information is provided in the tables. The appeals allowed and dismissed figures, and the figures for removals and voluntary departures, given do not necessarily relate to the refusals in the same year. These could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records. The figures exclude subsequent appeals (court of appeal, judicial review and the House of Lords).

Table 1: Asylum applications[1] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, initial decisions[2], removals and voluntary departures[3], nationals of Algeria

		Initial decisions[4]						
		Cases considered under normal procedures			Backlog clearance exercise		
	Applications received	Total initial decisions	Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum	Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave	Total refused	Grants of ELR under backlog criteria[5,6]	Non compliance refusals under backlog criteria[5,7]	Removals and voluntary departures[4]
1992	150	15	[8]—	5	10	[9]—	[9]—	25
1993	275	140	10	10	115	[9]—	[9]—	50
1994	995	440	20	10	410	[9]—	[9]—	85
1995	1,865	745	15	10	720	[9]—	[9]—	150
1996	715	1,880	30	15	1,835	[9]—	[9]—	200
1997	715	765	105	5	655	[9]—	[9]—	180
1998	1,260	500	310	15	180	[9]—	[9]—	65
1999[10]	1,385	905	475	30	160	205	30	[13]—
2000[10,11,12]	1,635	1,935	65	45	1,330	415	85	[13]—
2001[14]	1,145	2,665	60	75	2,530	[9]—	[9]—	125

[1] Figures rounded to nearest 5
[2] Information is of initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.
[3] Includes persons departing 'voluntarily' after enforcement action had been initiated against them, persons leaving under Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes run by the International Organisation for Migration, and removals on safe third country grounds.
[4] The refusal figures for each year do not necessarily relate to the applications received in the same year. The removals figures for each year do not necessarily relate to initial decisions made or appeals heard in the same year.
[5] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre 1996 asylum backlog.
[6] Includes cases where asylum or exceptional leave has been granted under the backlog criteria.
[7] Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.
[8] Equals 1 or 2.
[9] Zero.
[10] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January 1999 and March 2000.
[11] ases considered under the normal procedures may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria.
[12] rom October 2000, the source for data on decisions changed. The nationality breakdown is therefore not directly comparable with previous months.
[13] ationality data is not available for 1999 and 2000 due to data quality issues on IS enforcement databases
[14] rovisional data.

Table 2: Outcome of appeals[1] determined by adjudicators of the Immigration Appellate Authority, excluding dependants, nationals of Algeria

	Appeals determined by adjudicators[2]			
	Total	Allowed	Dismissed	Withdrawn
1992	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—
1993	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—
1994	80	[4]—	70	5
1995	190	[4]—	160	20
1996	225	20	165	40
1997	520	50	445	25
1998	235	40	135	60
1999	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—

Table 2: Outcome of appeals[1] determined by adjudicators of the Immigration Appellate Authority, excluding dependants, nationals of Algeria

	Appeals determined by adjudicators[2]			
	Total	Allowed	Dismissed	Withdrawn
2000	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—
2001	1,140	140	960	45

[1] Provisional estimated figures rounded to the nearest 5.
[2] Figures are based on the cases for which information is recorded on the Refugee Index for the years 1994 to 1998.
[3] Appeals data by nationality are not available.
[4] Equals 1 or 2.

Information on the number of asylum applications, initial decisions and removals is published quarterly on the Home Office website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html. The next publication will be available from 28 February and will cover the final quarter of 2002.

Algerians

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Algerians have been granted *(a)* temporary leave to stay and *(b)* permanent leave to stay in the UK in each of the last 10 years. [96014]

Beverley Hughes: The table gives the number of Algerian nationals granted leave to enter, extensions of leave to remain and settlement (leave to stay permanently) in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years.

	Passengers given leave to enter the UK (number of journeys)	*Grants of extensions of leave to remain (number of decisions)*	*Grants of settlement (number of persons)*
2001	25,800	1,060	770
2000	21,600	850	1,010
1999	19,100	860	1,130
1998	18,500	600	710
1997	17,600	740	370
1996	18,200	740	400
1995	17,600	750	440
1994	18,900	760	400
1993	16,100	900	330
1992	15,300	1,180	240

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10, or three significant figures.
2. The figures given for passengers given leave to enter the UK are of the numbers of journeys made. A person who makes more than one journey is counted on each occasion.
3. Asylum-related grants of settlement rose sharply in 1999 and 2000 due to *(a)* a change in the rules reducing the qualifying periods for people granted asylum and exceptional leave to remain, and effectively increasing the number of people eligible for settlement and *(b)* grants of asylum or exceptional leave to remain under a backlog criteria which contributed significantly to the increase but has now largely been completed.

Detailed information on general immigration can be found in the Home Office publication, "Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2001", available in the Library and via the Home Office website: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/commandpubs1.html

Asylum Process

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average length of the asylum process, including appeals, was for individuals who arrived in the UK in 2002. [96540]

Beverley Hughes: The information is not available for individuals who applied for asylum in 2002 because some applications are still awaiting initial decision or appeals outcomes.

Information on the average time for cases decided, up to and including final appeal, will be published in the Home Office's Annual Report in order to report on the Public Service Agreement (PSA) target 7 published in July 2002.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applicants for asylum, broken down by country of origin, have had their applications refused since 22 October 2001; and how many are known *(a)* to have left the United Kingdom and *(b)* to have remained within the United Kingdom. [96406]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* Information on asylum applications is published quarterly and provides data on initial decisions, appeal outcomes, and removals, by nationality for the latest available calendar months and quarter.

The tables show the number of refusals from initial decisions of asylum applications, and the number of asylum applicants removed from the United Kingdom, between 1 October 2001 and 30 September 2002. This information excludes the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions. Some applicants refused at the initial decision stage will be awaiting the outcome of appeals.

The removal figures do not necessarily relate to the initial decision refusals in the same period. Information on the total number of failed applicants known to have left the United Kingdom and the number known to have remained within the United Kingdom is not available. This could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records. In addition some applicants may leave the United Kingdom without informing the Immigration Service.

Information on the number of asylum applications, initial decisions and removals is published quarterly on the Home Office website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html. The next publication will be available from 28 February and will cover the final quarter of 2002.

Refusals[1,2] of asylum and exceptional leave in the UK, excluding dependants, by nationality, October 2001 to September 2002

	Initial decisions	*Total Refused*
Europe		
Albania	1,280	975
Czech Republic	1,065	1,060
FRY	4,340	2,940
Macedonia	665	440
Poland	800	790
Romania	1,160	1,100
Russia	385	355
Turkey	4,400	4,015
Ukraine	395	375
Other Former USSR	1,855	1,660
Other Former Yugoslavia	200	175
Others	400	365
Total	16,945	14,265
Americas		
Colombia	530	460
Ecuador	305	275
Jamaica	725	700
Others	170	155
Total	1,725	1,590
Middle East		
Iran	3,180	2,550
Iraq	9,820	3,035
Others	920	655
Total	13,915	6,240

Refusals[1,2] of asylum and exceptional leave in the UK, excluding dependants, by nationality, October 2001 to September 2002

	Initial decisions	Total Refused
Africa		
Algeria	1,185	1,125
Angola	1,295	580
Burundi	665	345
Congo	580	455
Dem Rep of Congo	2,055	1,545
Eritrea	960	600
Ethiopia	765	500
Gambia	95	90
Ghana	265	235
Ivory Coast	220	190
Kenya	395	335
Nigeria	1,145	1,050
Rwanda	725	275
Sierra Leone	1,835	1,550
Somalia	7,040	2,840
Sudan	495	395
Tanzania	50	40
Uganda	725	550
Zimbabwe	4,535	3,045
Others	1,530	1,205
Total	26,565	16,945
Asia		
Afghanistan	9,290	2,740
Bangladesh	595	470
China	3,725	3,480
India	1,930	1,870
Nepal	665	645
Pakistan	2,790	2,525
Sri Lanka	5,065	4,175
Others	1,145	910
Total	25,210	16,815
Nationality not known	260	175
Grand total	84,625	56,025

[1] Figures rounded to nearest five, and are provisional.
[2] Information is of initial decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.

Removal of asylum seekers

	Qtr 4 2001	Qtr 1 2002	Qtr 2 2002	Qtr 3 2002	Total removed
Principal Applicants	2,520	2,445	2,585	2,750	10,300
Dependants	500	480	535	815	2,330
Total	3,025	2,920	3,120	3,565	12,630

Notes:
1. Includes persons departing "voluntarily" after enforcement action has been initiated against them and persons leaving under the Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes run by the IOM.
2. Provisional data, rounded to the nearest five.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have been refused support by NASS on the basis of not having made their claim as soon as is reasonably practicable after arriving in the UK on each day since 8 January. [96863]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 February 2003]*: Statistics on the operation of section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, which came into force on 8 January 2003, will be released in due course.

Car-jacking

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many car-jackings have taken place in the Greater London area in each of the last three years. [96248]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Car jacking is not a specific recorded crime category under Home Office counting rules and the information requested is not available centrally. Offences involving the theft or attempted theft of a motorised vehicle by threat or use of force are recorded as either robbery or theft of a motor vehicle.

Commissioners and Tribunals

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff are *(a)* employed, and *(b)* planned to be employed, by each of the commissioners and tribunals which have been created by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and the Intelligence Services Act 1994; and what the annual budget allocated to each commissioner and tribunal is. [95613]

Mr. Blunkett: The Investigatory Powers Tribunal, the Interception of Communications and Intelligence Services Commissioners are currently supported by a Secretariat consisting of three administrative staff. This is planned to rise to six administrative staff over the next few years.

The Office of the Surveillance Commissioner currently has eight support staff. Six surveillance commissioners, three assistant surveillance commissioners, a lead surveillance inspector and four surveillance inspectors assist the Chief Surveillance Commissioner.

For the current financial year the budget for the Office of the Surveillance Commissioner is £1,182,000 and that for the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, the Interception of Communications and Intelligence Services Commissioners Secretariat is £167,000.

Communications Data

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the voluntary code of practice which relates to the retention of communications data. [95560]

Mr. Blunkett: We intend to publish a draft Code of Practice shortly.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number of officials who will be allowed to demand access to communications data and *(b)* the number of requests they are anticipated to make broken down by Government department; and if he will make a statement. [95559]

Mr. Blunkett: The number of officials ('designated persons') able to require communications data will be determined by Orders to be made under Chapter II, Part I of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. We aim to lay these Orders following consultation on the addition of public authorities to the Chapter II regime. The consultation paper, to be issued shortly, will contain the best available information on the numbers of requests for communications data by public authorities.

Congestion Charge

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions have taken place between

law enforcement agencies and the *(a)* Mayor of London and *(b)* Information Commissioner concerning the retention of vehicle identification data collected by the congestion charge administration systems for law enforcement purposes. [95906]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 6 February 2003]*: The Metropolitan Police have discussed and agreed a protocol with Transport for London, under which data on vehicles of interest to the police in combating crime and terrorism are passed to and retained by congestion charge administration systems, and the police are then notified of any movements of the vehicles. I am assured that the data are retained and accessed in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Information Commissioner has been consulted.

The Immigration Service have had no discussions with Transport for London or the Information Commissioner.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department why he has not replied to the letter to him dated 28 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. S. Singh. [94695]

Mr. Blunkett: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 11 February 2003.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 14 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mrs. Emilia Chinweokwu Unegbu-Kirby. [95673]

Mr. Blunkett: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 11 February 2003.

Cremation (Amputated Limbs)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the Regulation as to Cremation 1930, SR & O 1930/1016 to allow amputees to arrange for the cremation of their amputated limbs while they are still alive. [95870]

Hilary Benn: We have no such plans.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 21 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 291W, on the Criminal Records Bureau, what the cost was of the independent review conducted by the French Thornton Partnership Ltd.; and what proportion will be paid by *(a)* Capita and *(b)* the Home Office. [95077]

Hilary Benn: The cost of the independent review conducted by the French Thornton Partnership Ltd. was approximately £76,000.00. The entire cost was borne by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), an Executive Agency of the Home Office who commissioned the review.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps his Department has taken to inform applicants to the Criminal Records Bureau that ex-gratia payments can be made if there has been an element of maladministration in processing their application. [95871]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) has published a Complaints Procedure leaflet, which details the process customers should take if they are not completely satisfied with the service. All complaints regarding maladministration are rigorously investigated and if appropriate, financial redress is made. While there is no specific mention made of ex-gratia payments in the CRB's publicity material, a customer is invited as part of the complaints process to make a claim if he or she feels that an aspect of the service has been mishandled and that this has resulted in loss. Customers are given appropriate advice about redress when they contact the bureau. The complaints procedure is also available in the information pack that is issued to all registered bodies and on the disclosure website, www.disclosure.gov.uk.

The CRB's main concern is to resolve any issues affecting the process of an application. In the first instance, a customer is encouraged to contact the CRB help line service or put their complaint in writing to the CRB customer service manager. The applicant's details will then be directed to the appropriate department for investigation and they will endeavour to resolve the issues raised.

If the customer is not completely satisfied with the way their complaint has been handled, they would be advised to write to the CRB operations director. Should the applicant remain dissatisfied with the operations director's reply they are able to refer their complaint in writing to the chief executive. Alternatively, people may contact their MP who will then raise the matter with the Minister or CRB chief executive. The CRB has appointed a complaint mediator to resolve those complaints where the customer remains dissatisfied with the chief executive's reply. The complaint mediator will make recommendations to the CRB for resolving any outstanding issues.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library copies of the monthly Business Sector data reports that his Department has received in each of the last six months from the Criminal Records Bureau. [91176]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) produces a monthly Business Performance Report for consideration by the CRB Management Board. This provides detailed monthly management information on CRB performance.

As part of the Freedom of Information initiative consideration will be given to publishing these reports on the CRB website, and copying them to the Library, subject to any Commercial in Confidence issues.

Data Surveillance

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to revoke the powers of NHS bodies to undertake surveillance; and if he will make a statement. [95561]

Mr. Lammy: I have been asked to reply.

On 1 January 2003 a new National Health Service Counter Fraud and Security Management Service was created, which should be fully operational from 1 April 2003.

One of its tasks will be to review the arrangements for authorising applications to carry out directed surveillance under Part II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 in NHS trusts as recommended in paragraph 8.25 of the Chief Surveillance Commissioner's report for 2001–02 (HC68).

Drug Use

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the report commissioned by him and prepared by Steven Pudney of the University of Leicester on possible links between soft and hard drug use; and if he will make a statement. [95110]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Professor Pudney's report, "The Road to Ruin", studied the links between a group of drugs (LSD, amphetamine and cannabis) and subsequent use of heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and crack. It identifies a small but significant link between this group of drugs and cocaine and ecstasy. However the report indicates that there is little relationship between the use of this group and the later involvement with heroin and crack. It does not differentiate between cannabis, amphetamine and LSD (which is a Class A drug) so does not prove the case either way of cannabis as a gateway drug.

The findings of the report show that social, economic and family circumstances seem to be the dominant influences on young people's risk of becoming involved in crime and the most harmful drugs. We know that some young people are at particular risk of developing problems with substance misuse. That is why the Government is committed to helping those who are most at risk of developing drug problems through an improved range of early intervention and prevention programmes, which includes education and diversionary activities aimed at young people in high crime areas.

The other key influence on drug use identified in the report is the impact on individuals of the growing social acceptance of drug use and availability of supply. The Government is committed to tackling the social acceptance of drug use through ensuring that all young people and their parents understand the risks and dangers of drugs and know where to go for advice or help. A major new campaign will be launched this spring to drive home the risks of drugs, based on credible information on the dangers of all drugs and encourage young people and their parents to seek further information and advice where necessary. It is important that the message that all illegal drugs are harmful is clear, consistent and widely heard. The updated national drug strategy gives a stronger focus on education and prevention for young people. This means we must also make illegal drugs harder to obtain and tackle the supply at all levels. We will heavily penalise those caught dealing in any drugs, increase the recovery of drug-related criminal assets and strengthen enforcement at a local level. Class A drugs damage the lives of individuals, families and communities. That is why the updated national drug strategy has a tougher focus on Class A drugs.

Empty Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92934]

Beverley Hughes: As at 1 April 1998 the Prison Service had 161 empty homes out of a total of 1,625. The number in each region is not known. There was an additional vacant property at the Emergency Planning College, which is now the responsibility of the Cabinet Office.

As at 24 January 2003 the Prison Service had three empty homes out of a total of 599. These are located in Leeds, Hertfordshire and London and have been vacant for less than six months.

All homes, whether empty or occupied, are under constant review. Generally homes which become vacant are not re-let but are sold on the open market. Consideration is being given to the reintroduction and extension of a scheme under which eligible occupiers are able to buy their homes. However, due to recruitment and retention problems in London and the south-east accommodation in these areas is being retained and in some cases converted for multiple occupation. These properties are re-let on a short-term basis, which will not normally exceed multiples of six months.

Experience Corps

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are members of the Experience Corps scheme; and how many have left. [95509]

Beverley Hughes: As at 31 December 2002, figures supplied by Experience Corps state that they had 79,145 members of which 75,028 had been placed and that they have removed the details of 2,983 members from their database since the programme began.

Infanticidal Mothers

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Criminal Cases Review Commission has to review the cases of mothers convicted of murdering their infant children. [95591]

Hilary Benn: Generally, the Commission can only examine the cases of those who apply to it. Whilst there are exceptions to this, such as the Commission approaching the convicted co-defendants of an applicant whose case merits a referral, this would not extend to examining whole categories of cases such as mothers convicted of murdering their infant children. The Commission publicises its work and the need for applications. Its information pack and audio and videotapes are circulated to Prisons and the Commission has attended prison information days at Her Majesty's Prison Holloway.

Factors such as the age and ill health of applicants and witnesses, and the possibility of the deterioration of evidence are taken into account in assigning priority to applications to the Commission. Priority is also assigned to cases that the Commission believes to be of particular significance to the criminal justice system. Otherwise applications are generally reviewed in date order of receipt, with in-custody cases generally being assigned one year of priority over at-liberty cases. The application of Sally Clark was given priority under this system.

Misuse of Drugs Act

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the responses he has received to the consultation on the draft guidelines in implementing the changes to section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 made by section 38 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001. [96237]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* In line with Cabinet Office Guidance on written consultations, a summary of the views expressed in the consultation on draft guidelines will be published alongside the decision made in the light of that consultation. Individual responses will be made available to anyone who asks for them providing the respondent has not sought confidentiality.

Passports

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many individuals claimed their new passports were lost in the post in 2002; in how many of those cases the Passport Agency issued a replacement passport; and what discussions the Passport Agency has had with the Post Office to ensure new passports are not mislaid in the post. [96187]

Beverley Hughes: The UK Passport Service's records indicate that 2,982 passports were reported as having been lost in the post in the calendar year January to December 2002. Replacement passports would have been issued in response to almost all of these reports.

The UK Passport Service has on-going and regular discussions with the Royal Mail about the loss of passports in the post and about options for delivery which might reduce the number of losses. They work together on investigations into the disappearance of passports in the postal system.

The UK Passport Service issues around 5.5 million passports annually and the vast majority arrive safely at their destination using first class mail. Also, the digital passport contains advanced security features which makes it extremely difficult to manipulate and is of limited value in the hands of somebody other than the rightful holder. Nevertheless losses in the post remain a concern to the UK Passport Service and it is actively investigating alternative, more secure and convenient methods of delivering passports to its customers. It hopes to reach a business decision on this shortly.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995 96 to 2002 03; and if he will make a statement. [92443]

Mr. Blunkett: The number of press releases issued each year by the Department was:

	Number
1995	308
1996	404
1997	386
1998	524
1999	450
2000	472
2001	[1]404
2002	480
2003	37 (in January)

[1] Press notices for the Prison Service are included in this total from May 2001.

Notes:

1. These figures include press notices issued on behalf of the Prisons, Police, Probation and Fire Inspectorates.
2. Quarterly figures for the past seven years could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Surveillance Commissioner

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to respond to the observations on the powers of the police to undertake surveillance made by the Surveillance Commissioner in paragraph 8.9 of his Annual Report (HC 68); and if he will make a statement. [95557]

Mr. Blunkett: It is for Chief Constables to implement the recommendations made following inspections by a Surveillance Commissioner. The Chief Surveillance Commissioner can, if necessary, report to my right hon .Friend the Prime Minister (Mr .Blair) on any failure to implement recommendations.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to remove the powers of parish councils to undertake surveillance as recommended by the Surveillance Commissioner in paragraph 8.14.13 of his annual report (HC 68); and if he will make a statement. [95562]

Mr. Blunkett: Yes.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to review the draft Codes of Practice which relate to surveillance to take account of the observations made by the Surveillance Commissioner in paragraph 9.2 of his Annual Report (HC 68); and if he will make a statement. [95563]

Mr. Blunkett: The draft codes became statutory codes of practice on 1 August 2002. The statutory codes take account of the comments made by the Chief Surveillance Commissioner.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to address the observations on NHS Scotland, made by the Surveillance Commissioner in paragraph 8.12 of his Annual Report (HC 68); and if he will make a statement. [95564]

Mr. Blunkett: Surveillance activities by National Health Service (NHS) Scotland are governed by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Act 2000. The Chief Surveillance Commissioner has written to the First Minister in Scotland about the issues raised in his Annual Report (HC 68).

Surveillance Warrants

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many communications surveillance warrants were issued in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Scotland in each year since 1990. [95863]

Mr. Blunkett: The figures for interception warrants issued since 1990 are published annually in the reports of the Commissioner, initially appointed under the Interception of Communications Act 1985 (IOCA) and, since 2 October 2000, under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA). Copies of the reports are placed in the Library.

Figures for 2002 are 1,466 (England and Wales) and 139 (Scotland). The Interception Commissioner has given his consent that these figures should be published in advance of his annual report.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many telephone helplines are sponsored by his Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95715]

Beverley Hughes: The information on help lines is as follows:

Organisation *MAIN HO NUMBER*	*Enquiry Service* *General HO enquiries*	*Number* *0870 000 1585*	*Rate* *National*
	Text phone	020 7273 3476	Local/National[1]
Ind	Immigration Enquiries	0870 606 7766	National
	Mini com	0800 38 98 289	Free
	Nationality enquiries	0151 237 5200	National
	Asylum support (NASS)	0845 602 1739	National
	NASS helpline	0845 6000914	National
	NASS Voluntary Return helpline	0845 6000914	National
Prison Service	Prison Service enquiry Line	0870000 1397	National
	Prison Service Victim Helpline	0845 758 5112	Local
	Assisted Prison Visits Unit	0845 300 1423	Local
	Prison Officer Recruitment	0845 300 0790	Local
	Prisoners' Family Helpline	0808 808 2003	Free [2]
UKPS	Passport Advice Line	0870 521 0410	National
	Textphone Service	0870 240 8090	National
	Application Form Request line	0901 4700 110	Premium [3]
	Information Faxback Service	0901 4700 130	Premium [3]
	Request Application Form by Fax	0901 4700 120	Premium [3]
CRB	CRB Information Line	0870 9090811	National
	Registration Line	0870 9090 822	National
	Disclosure Line	0870 9090 844	National
	Minicom Line	0870 90 90 344	National
	Welsh line	0870 90 90 233	National
FSS	Headquarters	0121 607 6800	National
HMI Prisons	Headquarters	0207035 2103	Local/National[1]
HMI Probation	Headquarters	020 7035 2202	Local/National[1]
		0161 8480566	National
HMI Constabulary	Wales & C. England	01527 882000	National
	E. England & London	01223467115	National
	N. England	01924332822	National
	S. England	01483 215328	National
	HMIC Training office	01483 215 332	National
Prison & Probation Ombudsman		020 7035 2876	Local/National[1]
		0845 0107938	Local

[1] cost dependent upon the location of the caller
[2] free—although mobile phone networks may set their own tariffs
[3] calls charged at 0.60 per minute and the cost should not exceed £0.90.

Temporary Visa Holders

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many visas for temporary stays in the United Kingdom *(a)* were issued and *(b)* have expired since 29 October 2001; and of the latter (i) how many holders are known to have left the country and (ii) how many holders are known not to have left the country (A) because of applications for asylum, (B) for other lawful reasons and (C) for other unlawful reasons. [96407]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* The latest available data on entry clearance applications for temporary purposes are 1,424,880 applications granted in 2000.

Decisions made in 2001 have not yet been published due to a change in the data available. Data for 2001 and 2002 will be published later this year.

Information on the number of visas which have expired is not available.

Information on the number of visa holders who are known to have left the United Kingdom is not readily available and could be produced only at disproportionate cost by examination of case records. Additionally, these individuals may leave the United Kingdom without informing the Immigration Service.

Detailed information on general immigration can be found in the Home Office publication, "Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2001", available in the Library and via the Home Office website http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/commandpubs1.html.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent advice his Department has issued to procurement staff regarding the procurement of timber from legal and sustainable sources. [95732]

Beverley Hughes: A Timber Procurement Bulletin was sent to all Home Office Procurement Units, agencies and non-departmental public bodies (NDPB's) in June 2002. It is also available on the Home Office intranet site. The bulletin included the model contract specification clause, promulgated by Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in May 2002, together with background information and contact points for further information.

Visas

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those countries from which citizens do not require a visa to enter the UK, but to which UK citizens do require a visa to gain entry. [95998]

Beverley Hughes: The visa requirements for UK nationals visiting other countries vary depending on the purpose and duration of stay and therefore a list of countries as requested cannot be provided. However, details of the visa and entry requirements for UK nationals visiting other countries can be found under the travel section of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website: www.fco.gov.uk. Details of UK visa requirements can be found on the UK Visas website: www.ukvisas.gov.uk

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many sites have been referred by the Government on the basis of intelligence as having weapons of mass destruction to the UN weapons inspection team in Iraq. [96266]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government regularly share information with the UN weapons inspection teams, including information about sites of concern.

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many searches were initiated by UK intelligence of the 100 sites investigated in Iraq by UN weapons inspectors. [96267]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government regularly shares information with the UN weapons inspectors. It is a matter for them to decide upon how to follow up on information passed to them.

Afghanistan

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress his Department has made in meeting its public service agreement target on reducing opium production in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [96291]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK is co-ordinating international support for Afghanistan's drug control efforts and has produced, in consultation with the Afghan government, other donors and international agencies, a strategy for building up Afghan drug law enforcement capacity and providing alternative livelihoods to opium poppy farmers. Experience in Thailand and Pakistan shows that a concerted and co-ordinated effort to eliminate opium poppy cultivation can be successful in the long-term.

At the Afghanistan Reconstruction Conference in January 2002 the UK pledged £200 million of financial assistance over four years.£ 65 million has already been committed to humanitarian and reconstruction programmes. In December 2002 Her Majesty's Customs & Excise delivered the first of a series of counter-narcotics courses for the Afghan police. The Government's Public Service Agreement to contribute to the elimination of Afghan opium cultivation in ten years comes into effect on 1 April 2003. Officials are working on a delivery plan.

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions his Department has had with *(a)* the US Government, *(b)* the Turkish Government and *(c)* the German Government regarding building a secure future for the people of Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [96294]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Afghanistan is frequently on the agenda of meetings at the UN and NATO, in which representatives of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office take part along with colleagues from the US, Turkey and Germany. This is in addition to discussions on Afghanistan at regular bilateral meetings with the countries mentioned. Periodic G8 and EU meetings on Afghanistan provide further opportunities to talk to the US and German governments.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the estimated amount of opium produced in Afghanistan was in each year from 1997 to date. [96471]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since 1994 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has published an annual opium poppy survey for Afghanistan. The estimated amounts (in metric tons) of opium produced for the period since 1997 are as follows:

1997—2,804
1998—2,693
1999—4,565
2000—3,276
2001—185
2002—3,400

American Prisons (UK Nationals)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many UK nationals are held in *(a)* prison, *(b)* custody and *(c)* detention in the United States of America; and if he will make a statement. [95255]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As of 30 January 2003 we were aware of 534 British citizens in prison in the US, 97 British citizens in custody in the US and 60 British citizens in detention in the US. The table gives a breakdown of the numbers detained in each of our consular districts in the US. We have interpreted the "in prison" cases as those serving custodial sentences following a criminal conviction, the "in custody" cases as those awaiting trial or sentencing and the "in detention" cases as those detained by the US Immigration and Nationalisation Service (INS).

British Nationals detained in the United States as of 30 January 2003

Post	*In prison*	*In custody*	*In detention*
Atlanta	35	4	5
Boston	10	3	5
Chicago	38	5	0
Houston	138	5	13
Los Angeles	20	14	13
New York	144	27	12
Orlando	102	33	10
San Francisco	29	1	1
Seattle	11	2	0
Washington	7	3	1
Total	534	97	60
Grand total		691	

Balkans

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit the Balkan countries to assess the progress that has been made towards peace and security in the region; and if he will make a statement. [96293]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited the Balkans in November 2002 and held useful talks with the political leaders in Belgrade, Pristina and Sarajevo. I also visited the region several times last year. I would expect further such visits to go ahead this year. My right hon. Friend and I were encouraged by progress made so far, especially in maintaining peace and security in Bosnia and Kosovo. The Foreign Secretary and I have also held talks with Lord Ashdown and Michael Steiner, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Kosovo, in respect of their work in Bosnia and Kosovo. The new arrangements redefining the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro are a good example of how differences can be resolved in the Balkans through peaceful negotiation. We will continue to engage closely with all governments in the region to integrate them more fully with the EU and international community. This includes improved co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal on the former Yugoslavia.

Diplomatic Representation

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* embassies and *(b)* high commissions there are abroad; and how many have been (i) closed and (ii) opened in each year since 1997. [96304]

Mr. Straw: The FCO is currently represented overseas in 106 embassies and 46 high commissions.

The table gives details of the opening of embassies and high commissions since 1997. There have been no closures of embassies or high commissions during this period. In some cases the mission has been opened previously but not formally as an embassy or high commission. The previous status of the mission is signified in the table.

In addition to these missions the FCO has opened 18 subordinate posts and closed six.

Post opening and closing since 1997

Name	*Open*	*Previous status*
2000–01		
Asmara	1	Previously opened in 1993–94 with local staff only
Tripoli, Libya	1	Mission originally represented by British Interest Section in the Italian embassy
2001–02		
Pyongyang	1	—
Bamako	1	Previously opened in 2000 with local staff only
Dushanbe	1	—
Kabul	1	—
2002–03		
Conakry	1	Previously opened in 1999–2000 with local staff only
Dili	1	Mission originally opened in 2000 as an office of Jakarta

EU Accession Anniversary

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the costs were of events and publicity sponsored and organised by his Department in the United Kingdom and abroad to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the United Kingdom's accession to the European Union. [96576]

Mr. MacShane: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office produced a variety of written material to mark the 30th anniversary of the UK's EU accession for use in electronic and print media. This included articles for the press and a quiz, displayed on the FCO website and distributed to the regional press via the Government News Network (GNN) at a cost of £500.

The FCO also sponsored a display of European Poems on the Underground related to the 30th anniversary. This project was designed to raise awareness of the anniversary and of the FCO website (which gives detailed information about the EU) among the 2.2 million people who use the tube every day, as well as wider media. The total cost of the project was £15,000.

EU Association Agreements

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sanctions are available to the EU in the event of a non-EU state breaching the terms of an Association Agreement with the EU. [96359]

Mr. MacShane: The provisions of the Association Agreements vary. In the case of Association Agreements between the EU and Euro-Mediterranean Partner countries there are provisions for referring any dispute between the Parties to arbitration. If either Party considers that the other has failed to fulfil an obligation under the Agreement it may take appropriate measures, giving priority to those which least disturb the functioning of the Agreement.

Guantanamo Bay (British Prisoners)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to ensure British prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay are treated in accordance with international law. [95911]

Mr. Straw: I have had regular contacts with the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, about the position of the British detainees at Guantanamo Bay, most recently on 23 January. We have made clear our position that, whatever their status, the detainees are entitled to humane treatment, and, if prosecuted, a fair trial. The US has assured us it is treating the men humanely and in accordance with the principles of the Geneva Conventions.

British officials have visited the detainees on four occasions to check on their welfare and none showed any visible signs of mistreatment.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the US Administration to arrange the *(a)* repatriation and *(b)* trial of British prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay; and if he will make a statement. [95912]

Mr. Straw: I have had regular contacts with the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, about the position of the British Detainees at Guantanamo Bay, most recently on 23 January. We have encouraged the US to move forward with the process of determining the detainees' future, and shall continue to do so. Any prosecution of the detainees in the UK would be a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service, not the Government.

Israel

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions since 21st October 2002 UK Ministers have raised with Israel in *(a)* bilateral meetings and *(b)* correspondence the issue of goods from settlements in the Occupied Territories. [96360]

Mr. MacShane: This specific issue has not been raised in Ministerial contacts since 21 October 2002. The UK Permanent Representative to the European Union raised it in talks with the Israeli Ambassador to the EU in January.

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to his Answer of 3 February, *Official Report*, column 8W, on Israel, whether proposals have yet been produced by Israel on the issue of goods exported to the EU which come from settlements in the Occupied Territories. [96361]

Mr. MacShane: Israel has not yet produced proposals. Now that the election period is over, we hope Israel will do so without delay.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which European capital cities the Minister for Europe has visited since his appointment; and which European capital cities he plans to visit over the next three months. [96580]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 10 February 2003]*: I have visited Berlin, Bratislava, Brussels, Budapest, Copenhagen, Dublin, Paris, Prague, Rome, Tallinn Vienna and Vilnius since my appointment. I will continue my programme of visits to European capitals over the next three months and beyond.

Palestinian Authority

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the use made by the Palestinian Authority of funding supplied to it by the European Union; and what steps are taken to ensure that such aid is used for the purposes for which it is intended. [96397]

Mr. MacShane: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear on 21 January 2003, *Official Report* column 149, it is our assessment that EU assistance to the Palestinian Authority provides essential support, without which it is likely that it would not be able to continue operating. At the London meeting on Palestinian reform on 14 January, there was widespread recognition that the Palestinian Authority had achieved great progress in reforming the way that their financial systems operate.

We attach great importance to the highest standards of financial management being adhered to in the disbursement of all EU funding and take seriously any allegations of misuse. The European Commission has in place a number of stringent monitoring and control measures in the implementation of EU financial assistance programmes and disbursements of EU monies to the Palestinian Authority. To date, the Commission has found no evidence that EU monies have been misused by the Palestinian Authority in order to finance terrorism or for anything other than their agreed purpose.

The European Commission has committed itself to continuing to help the Ministry of Finance ensure proper oversight of all Palestinian Authority finances. This is a core objective of several conditions attached to EU budgetary support. A letter of 21 January 2003 from External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten to the European Parliament setting out in detail the Commission's oversight of funding to the Palestinian Authority is available on its Europa website *www.europa.eu.int*.

Saudi Arabia (British Detainees)

Dr. Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment the Department has made of whether there is forensic evidence that incriminates the British detainees charged with bombings in Saudi Arabia. [95523]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 6 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 386W.

Serbia and Montenegro

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the decision by the Yugoslav parliament to loosen ties between Serbia and Montenegro; what implications he estimates this will have for the future of the region; and if he will make a statement. [96292]

Mr. MacShane: On 4 February I congratulated the leaders of Serbia and Montenegro on adopting their new Constitutional Charter, which redefined future relations between the two republics and replaced the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In doing so they have clearly shown to the region a readiness to resolve their differences through peaceful negotiation. Under the new arrangements Serbia and Montenegro will share control of foreign affairs, defence, foreign economic relations, internal economic relations and human and minority rights. But they have also retained the option of reconsidering, after three years and via a referendum, the status of Serbia and Montenegro.

Sudan

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the sale of the Alenia Marconi Systems radar system to the Government of Sudan and its use by that government. [96240]

Mr. Rammell *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* A modern air traffic control system is needed for the large number of commercial and humanitarian flights that fly over and within Sudan and is crucial for the safety of United Nations and Non-Governmental Organisations staff involved in the delivery of vital humanitarian aid in Sudan, the majority of which is currently transported by air. Officials have discussed with aid agencies their concerns about the system.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on arms exports to Sudan; and what steps it has taken to support the EU common position on arms exports to Sudan. [96243]

Mr. Rammell *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* EU Common Position 94/165/CFSP, adopted on 16 March 1994, imposed an arms embargo on Sudan in response to the ongoing civil war. We fully support the EU arms embargo and expect it to remain as long as civil war continues.

Turkey

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with European Union Member States on the opportunity for human rights observers to visit Abdullah Ocalan in prison in Turkey; and if he will make a statement. [96275]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has not discussed this issue with EU member states.

The Council of Europe's Committee on the Prevention of Torture has visited Imrali prison where Mr .Ocalan is held.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when Her Majesty's Government was approached by the French Government to seek agreement for a relaxation of the European Union travel ban on President Mugabe of Zimbabwe; what the purpose was of seeking the relaxation; over what period the allocation was sought; which other Ministers and officials were covered by the prospect of relaxation; when agreement with France was reached; what the reasons for agreeing to the relaxation were; and if he will make a statement. [94095]

Mr. Rammell *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The French mentioned, in the margins of the Copenhagen summit in December, that they were considering inviting Mugabe to Paris for the France-Africa summit scheduled two days after sanctions are due to expire. The French made a formal written request to all EU partners on 23 January; this included requests for visa waivers for Robert Mugabe, Mrs. Mugabe and Foreign Minister Stan Mudenge to attend the France-Africa summit on 20 and 21 February. Apart from this request and responses by a number of member states, which are EU internal documents, there was no correspondence on this matter. Discussion on this issue continues in Brussels. We have made clear throughout our support for the sanctions regime including the travel ban.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Foreign Secretary was informed of the French Government's intentions to request a visa waiver for Mr. Robert Mugabe to attend the Franco-African summit in Paris in February. [94727]

Mr. Rammell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) today, UIN 94095.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British Government was first informed by the French Government that the French Government wished to invite President Mugabe to the Franco-African Summit in Paris on 19 to 21 February 2003; what the British Government's response was; what discussions the UK

Government had with the French Government on this issue; if he will place copies of the relevant correspondence in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [96373]

Mr. Rammell *[holding answer 7 February 2003]*: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) today, UIN 94095.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 12 February 2003

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Broadband Access (Courts)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what proportion of *(a)* magistrates' and *(b)* other courts have broadband access; and what targets have been set for full broadband access in each case. [95742]

Yvette Cooper: For *(a)* magistrates' courts in England and Wales, a high band width, wide area network has been rolled out to nearly 90 per cent. of staff. This roll-out is scheduled to be completed by April 2003, with the exception of one court that is awaiting the completion of a building project. In *(b)* the Crown Court in England and Wales, 5 per cent. of our court staff currently have access to a high band width, wide area network. We plan to extend such access to all Crown Court staff by April 2006. We are currently considering plans for extending access to the county courts of England and Wales.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how many appeals against closure of magistrates' courts have been dealt with by the Department since 1997; how many were *(a)* refused and *(b)* allowed; and if she will make a statement. [95473]

Yvette Cooper: The number of appeals on Courthouse closures given to me by my officials is as follows. Since 1996, the Lord Chancellor's Department has received 83 appeals from paying authorities, against determinations made by Magistrates' Courts Committees to close Magistrate's Courts. Details are shown in the table.

Year	*Appeals Decided*	*Allowed*	*Dismissed*
1996	5	0	5
1997	17	2	15
1998	26	1	25
1999	9	1	8
2000	11	1	10
2001	12	0	12
2002	2	0	2
2003	1	0	1

PRIVY COUNCIL

Lord Chancellor (Pension Arrangements)

Norman Baker: To ask the President of the Council if the Lord Chancellor will make it his policy to end the arrangement whereby holders of his office receive pension arrangements which exceed the ceiling for tax relief proposed in the Government's Green Paper on pensions [96410]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Government is still consulting on its proposals in the recent pensions green paper and associated paper on tax simplification.

E-mail Addresses

Mr. Yeo: To ask the President of the Council by what e-mail address members of the public may contact him; and for each e-mail address if he will state *(a)* the date it became active and *(b)* the number of e-mails received in each month since activation [97466]

Mr. Robin Cook: The public may contact me on the following email address: president@pco.x.gsi.gov.uk. Details of how to contact me and Ben Bradshaw are available on the Department's website: www.pco.gov.uk

This email address has been active since 16 October 2000.

The department does not record information on the number of emails received into this account.

Online Sales/Purchaes

Mr. Yeo: To ask the President of the Council what *(a)* products, *(b)* goods and *(c)* services were bought online by his Department in each of the last five years. [97467]

Mr. Robin Cook: My Department buys most of its stationery online. Training courses, hotel accommodation and air tickets have on occasion been purchased online in the last five years.

TRANSPORT

Air Transport

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the publication of updated consultation documents for the South East on the future development of air transport in the UK; when this consultation period will end; when a White Paper is expected to be published; and what legislation he expects to emerge following its publication. [96883]

Mr. Jamieson: We plan to issue a revised consultation document for the South East, including possible Gatwick options, later this month. The current consultation period throughout the UK will run for a further four months from the date of issue. We expect to announce our conclusions, and any decisions on legislative measures, in a White Paper towards the end of the year.

Car Parking Spaces

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many car parking spaces were provided for *(a)* himself, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, *(d)* Special Advisers, *(e)* departmental officials and *(f)* contractors in each year since 1997. [95291]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 19 November 2002, to the Hon Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) *Official Report*, column 50W. There are four parking spaces for Ministers' official cars. No spaces are allocated for special advisers or specifically for contractors.

Consultants

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much his Department and its predecessors spent on consultants in each year from 1997. [94235]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given today to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), UIN 93235.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much was spent on by predecessor Departments on external consultants in matters relating to transport in each year since 1997. [93235]

Mr Jamieson: I refer to the hon. Member to my pursuant answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 698W, on external consultants, if he will list the consultants used, and the nature and the cost of the work in each case. [93236]

Mr. Jamieson: A list of the consultants used and the total spend against each has been placed in the Libraries of the House. Details of the nature and cost of the work in each case are not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the external consultants used by his Department since its inception; how much each was paid; what the terms of reference for each were; and if he will make a statement. [93956]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given today to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), UIN 9326.

Crossrail

Mike Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what assessment he has made of whether the Strategic Rail Authority has sufficient resources within the existing Comprehensive Spending Review settlement to enable the public sector to contribute to construction of Crossrail; and if he will make a statement; [95940].

(2) whether the proposal submitted to him by London Regional Metro for an East-West Rail Link for London is being considered as part of the business case for Crossrail; and if he will make a statement. [95939]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government has already committed £54 million in support of development work on Crossrail.

It is premature to determine how best Crossrail may be implemented or financed until route options have been considered and a business case for the project established.

The Strategic Rail Authority and Transport for London are aiming to report to Ministers on these matters by the end of February. Their report is separate from the LRM proposal.

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list consultations his Department has conducted since it was established; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [97425]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was established in May 2002. However, a full list of consultations on transport issues that have taken place from May 2002 (as DfT) and before (as DTLR) can be found on the Department's website (www.dft.gov.uk). DfT consultation documents are available on the relevant policy website link:

Aviation (www.aviation.dft.gov.uk/conindex.htm)

Local Transport (www.local-transport.dft.gov.uk/conindex.htm)

Mobility and Inclusion Unit (www.mobility-unit.dft.gov.uk/conindex.htm)

Railways (www.railways.dft.gov.uk/conindex.htm)

Roads, Vehicles and Road Safety (www.roads.dft.gov.uk/conindex.htm)

Shipping (www.shipping.dft.gov.uk/conindex.htm)

DfT consultations are also available through the UK Online website, (www. ukonline.gov.uk).

All these documents follow the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Written Consultation (www.consultation.gov.uk), which came into effect on 1 January 2001.

E-mail Addresses

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport by what e-mail address members of the public may contact *(a)* him and *(b)* each of the Ministers in his Department; and for each e-mail address if he will state (i) the date it became active and (ii) the number of e-mails received in each month since activation. [97440]

Mr. Jamieson: The information relating to e-mail address for each Minister is shown as follows.

Contact	*Published e-mail address*	*Activation date*
Secretary of State for Transport	alistair.darling@dft.gsi.gov.uk	12 June 2002
Departmental Minister	john.spellar@dft.gsi.gov.uk	12 June 2002
Departmental Minister	david.jamieson@dft.gsi.gov.uk	12 June 2002

Information about e-mails received monthly could be obtained only at disproportionate costs.

Local Transport Plan (Leeds)

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the local transport plan budget was for Leeds in *(a)* 2001–02, *(b)* 2002–03 and *(c)* 2003–04; what the spending was in 2001–02; whether full spending is likely to be reached in 2002–03; and what action was taken over under-spending. [96966]

Mr. Jamieson: The Local Transport Plan capital allocations for Leeds City Council were as follows:

	£ million
(a) 2001–02	19.62
(b) 2002–03	26.645
(c) 2003–04	25.823

These figures comprise funding for Integrated Transport, Maintenance and Major Schemes.

Spending in 2001–02 was £20.898 million.

The projected outturn figure for 2002–03 is £23.0 million, which represents an underspend of £3.645 million. Some £1.900 million of this relates to the East Leeds Link Road where the start of construction has been delayed due to prolonged negotiations surrounding developers/landowner contributions. However, this funding can be rolled forward into 2003–04 and will be spent then. The remaining £1.745 million underspend relates to Integrated Transport and Maintenance. This cannot be rolled forward into 2003–04 but it is intended that Single Capital Pot flexibilities will be used so that the resource can be made available for transport in future years.

The Local Transport Capital Settlement letter of 10 December 2002 made clear to local authorities that those failing to deliver would have their indicative allocations reduced in order to free up fimds for better performing authorities.

London Underground PPP

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will publish further letters from his Department on the treatment of revenue shortfalls in the first phase of public-private partnership for the London Underground; [96574].

(2) what terms of the agreement have been reached between Transport for London, the Mayor of London's transport agency and his Department's officials on the proposed public-private partnership for the London Underground; [96573]

(3) what recent discussions have taken place between *(a)* his officials, *(b)* Transport for London, *(c)* the Mayor of London's transport agency and *(d)* Department of Transport officials to finalise arrangements for the proposed public-private partnership for the London Underground; and if he will make a statement on the implications for public finances of the agreement. [96572]

Mr. Jamieson: The exchange of letters between My right hon.Friend the Secretary of State and the Mayor, and between officials of the Department and Transport for London, was placed in the Libraries of the House on Tuesday 4 February.

The level of grant provision for London Underground remains as determined in the 2002 Spending Review. The Government has, however, reiterated its earlier commitments to review grant levels during future Spending Reviews, and in the event of major unforeseen circumstances.

Rail Freight

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the existing rail freight links between the North of England and the Continent. [97272]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority's strategic plan, published on 30 January, explains its priorities including those for freight. The Government published a report on its targets and progress in meeting them in relation to the 10-year plan on 17 December 2002. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

Rail Services

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what services *(a)* in the north west and *(b)* in the UK as a whole will be cut under proposals announced by the Strategic Rail Authority. [92575]

Mr. Jamieson: I understand from the Strategic Rail Authority that in the UK as a whole 104 services per day will be withdrawn, out of a total of about 17,000 per day. 44 of these operate in the north west; 12 are Virgin Crosscountry services between Birmingham and Blackpool and 32 are Central Trains services between Manchester airport and Crewe. Services on a number of other routes will be reduced. Virgin Crosscountry routes affected are between Birmingham and Cardiff, Poole, Swansea and Swindon, and the non-CrossCountry routes where services will be reduced are Oxford to Bristol, Southampton to Bournemouth, and Derby to Birmingham.

Road Tax

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many vehicles qualified for 25-year road tax exemption discs in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000 and *(c)* 2001. [97074]

Mr. Jamieson: The 25 Year Exempt taxation class was replaced by the Historic Vehicle taxation class in March 1998. This class applies to vehicles constructed before 1 January 1973. The number of vehicles licensed under the Historic Vehicle class for the years in question is shown in the following table.

Year	*Number of licensed vehicles (Exempt Historic vehicle class)*
1999	353,543
2000	339,996
2001	328,072

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many road traffic accidents have been recorded on the A14 between Stowmarket and Bury St. Edmunds in *(a)* 2000–01 *(b)* 2001–02 and *(c)* 2002–February 2003. [97393]

Mr. Jamieson: The following table shows the recorded number of accidents along the A14 between Stowmarket and Bury St. Edmunds, in 2000 and in 2001. Figures for 2002 are not yet available.

Year	*Total*
2000	37
2001	34

Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many people have been prosecuted in the London Borough of Harrow for having an unlicensed vehicle in each of the last five years. [96798]

Mr. Jamieson: Specific figures are not available for the London Borough of Harrow but the number of cases successfully prosecuted by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's local office at Stanmore (which includes that Harrow area) were as follows (records were kept centrally before 2000–01):

Year	*Prosecutions*
2000–01	16,423
2001–02	17,325
2002–03[1]	16,297

[1] January

Many other unlicensed vehicle cases were settled out of court by payment of a penalty. Figures are only available for the whole of the London district:

Year	
2000–01	39,932
2001–02	42,190
2002–03[1]	32,442

[1] Denotes nine months to January only.

DEFENCE

Al Yamamah Deal

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the report on the Al Yamamah deal with Saudi Arabia will be published. [96172]

Mr. Ingram: I assume the question refers to the 1992 National Audit Office report about the Al Yamamah programme. The report refers to confidential arrangements between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia on a programme which is of great significance for British jobs and exports. The report has not been published because publication would breach that pledge of confidentiality; the report has therefore been withheld under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Airborne Stand-off Radar Programme

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the airborne stand-off radar programme to be completed. [95420]

Mr. Ingram: The acquisition phase of the ASTOR programme is due to complete in 2008, when the fifth ASTOR system enters service. The contract with Raytheon Systems Ltd also provides for contractor logistic support until 2015. On current plans ASTOR will remain in service until 2035.

Anti-tank Weapon

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he expects the new anti-tank weapon to enter service on time and within the Ministry of Defence's proposed budget. [95414]

Mr. Ingram: Yes. The light forces anti-tank guided weapon system is expected to enter service in 2006 within its approved cost and timescale.

Armed Forces (Statistics)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people there were in the UK *(a)* Army, *(b)* Navy and *(c)* Air Force in each year from 1996–97 to 2003–04 (planned). [97346]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to table 2.8 of the United Kingdom Defence Statistics 2002, which provides historic information up to April 2002.

Each Service sets manpower requirements at the level required to deliver the capabilities needed to meet their endorsed requirements. The requirements, and the performance in meeting them, are reported by the Defence Analytical Services Agency, both annually in United Kingdom Defence Statistics and quarterly under National Statistics arrangements. Copies of these can be found in the Library of the House.

Armed Small Craft

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to increase the numbers of armed small craft in the Royal Navy. [95874]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 329W.

Britannia

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total sale proceeds have been from the disposal of Her Majesty's yacht Britannia; and if he will make a statement. [95776]

Mr. Ingram: A contract for the sale of the former HMY BRITANNIA was let by the Ministry of Defence's Disposal Services Agency (DSA) (then the Disposal Sales Agency) in 1998. I am withholding the information requested in accordance with Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Capita

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his Answer of 9 January, *Official*

Report, column 60W, on Capita, if he will give *(a)* the value, *(b)* a brief description and *(c)* the length of each contract. [96757]

Mr. Ingram [*holding answer 11 February 2003*]:

Capita Business Services Ltd

MSC5–07998	Consultancy Service Duration: October 2000 to February 2003
ABRO1A/0112	Consultancy for Staff Recruitment Duration: Contract placed March 2000 and now complete.
CBC-2B-0139	Consultancy for Staff Recruitment Duration: May 2002 to March 2003
CP21B-1178	Management Consultancy Services Duration: December 1997 to December 2002

Capita Group plc

CPPF1–102–14	Management Consultancy Services Duration: January 1997 to January 2002

Capita RAS Ltd

CBC-2B-0003	Consultancy for Staff Recruitment Duration: December 1998 to March 2002
CP21A-1411	Consultancy for Staff Recruitment Duration: Contract placed April 2001 and now complete
CP21B-1249	Consultancy for Staff Recruitment Duration: December 1998 to December 2001

Capita Property Services Ltd

DABMSC-10851	Subsumed into WS35–806

Capita Property Consultancy

WS35–806	Project management Services Duration: Contract placed May 1992 and now complete

The values of individual contracts are withheld under Exemption 13 of the Code of practice on Access to Government Information but the total value of these contracts is approximately £1.8 million.

Defence Finance

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much unallocated funds there were in financial years *(a)* 2002–03, *(b)* 2003–04 and *(c)* 2004–05 under the headings of (i) operations, (ii) personnel, (iii) logistics, (iv) procurement, (v) central, (vi) war pensions and allowances, (vii) Armed Forces Retired Pay and Pensions and (viii) unprogrammed operations/conflict prevention; and if he will make a statement. [96748]

Mr. Ingram: In the current financial year, there are no defence funds that are not allocated to budget holders. For the years 2003–04 and 2004–05, the Spending Review settlement included a small non-cash unallocated provision to deal with certain non-cash pressures.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the share of the defence budget accounted for by *(a)* procurement costs and *(b)* personnel costs in each year from 1982–83 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [96818]

Mr. Ingram: Figures for the share of Ministry of Defence expenditure attributed to defence equipment procurement costs for the years 1982–83 to 2000–01 and personnel costs for the years 1982–83 to 2002–03 are presented in the following table.

Comparable data for equipment procurement expenditure are not available beyond 2000–01 following the introduction of Resource Accounting and Budgeting. However, data for personnel costs are available for 2001–02 and 2002–03 on a resource basis.

The figures are shown for each year as a percentage share of total defence expenditure. Equipment Procurement and personnel expenditure figures for the years up to, and including 2000–01 are published by the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA) in UK Defence Statistics and pre-1992 were reported in Volume 2 of the Statement on the Defence Estimates (both of these are available in the Library of the House). The most recent resource based personnel figures for 2001–02 have been extracted from the MOD Departmental Resource Accounts (DRAc). For 2002–03, the planned outturn has been extracted from MOD Winter Supplementary Estimates.

Ministry of Defence equipment procurement and personnel expenditure as a percentage of total MOD expenditure: 1982–83 to 2002–03

Year	*Equipment procurement costs as percentage of total defence expenditure*[1]	*Personnel costs*[2] *as percentage of total defence expenditure*[1]
1982–83	47	38
1983–84	48	37
1984–85	50	35
1985–86	50	36
1986–87	48	38
1987–88	49	38
1988–89	47	40
1989–90	46	39
1990–91	44	40
1991–92	44	40
1992–93	42	44
1993–94	42	42
1994–95	42	41
1995–96	42	40
1996–97	43	39
1997–98	45	40
1998–99	46	38
1999–2000	45	38
2000–01	44	37
2001–02	n/a	40
2002–03	n/a	39

[1] "Total Defence Expenditure" represents Departmental Expenditure in "cash" and from 2001–02 in "near cash" terms. It differs slightly from the "Adjusted Defence Budget" which excludes a variety of accounting and definitional adjustments as outlined in the footnotes to table 1.3 of UK Defence Statistics.
[2] The figure for "personnel costs" used as the basis for the percentage share, up to and including 2000–01 is the expenditure in "cash" terms as published in UKDS 2002 Table 1.3. For 2001–02 data have been extracted from the MOD Departmental Resource Accounts (DRAc). For 2002–03 data have been extracted from the MOD Winter Supplementary Estimates. Data

for 2002–03 are the planned outturn. Personnel costs include Service and Civilian pay, other allowances and ERNIC contribution.

Source:
UK Defence Statistics and Volume 2 of Statement on the Defence Estimates

Defence Industries (French Market Access)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress he has made since 14 October 2002 in securing better market access for UK companies in France. [95426]

Mr. Ingram: Ministry of Defence support for defence companies seeking markets in France, and elsewhere, is available through the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO). DESO provides advice and assistance tailored to individual market opportunities. Additionally, in 2003, MOD is supporting a number of opportunities for United Kingdom companies to engage with potential markets in France and listed below are major events in the UK and France at which British and French industry will be represented.

Date	*Event*	*Location*
13 March 2003	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises "Shop Window"	UK
14–18 May 2003	EUROSEM 03	France
15–22 June 2003	Paris Airshow	France
17–21 June 2003	Eurosatory	France
21–25 October 2003	Euronaval	France

Defence Spending

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of procurement expenditure of his Department in *(a)* cash terms and *(b)* real terms in each year since 1980–81; and what his estimate is of procurement expenditure as a percentage of total spending in each year since 1980–81. [95798]

Mr. Ingram: Figures for the amount the Ministry of Defence spends on defence equipment procurement for the years 1980–81 to 2000–01 are presented in the table below. The figures are shown for each year in *(a)* cash terms, *(b)* real terms and *(c)* as a percentage of total defence expenditure. Equipment Procurement figures are published by the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA) in the United Kingdom Defence Statistics and pre- 1992 were reported in Volume 2 of the Statement on the Defence Estimates (both of these are available in the Library of the House). Comparable data beyond 2000–01 are not available following the introduction of Resource Accounting & Budgeting.

Ministry of Defence equipment procurement expenditure in cash and real terms and as a percentage of total MOD expenditure: 1980–81—2000–01

Year	*Equipment procurement cash terms (£ millions)*	*Equipment procurement real terms [1] at 2001–02 prices (£ millions)*	*Percentage of total defence expenditure [2]*
1980–81	5,324	13,315	48
1981–82	6,121	13,979	49
1982–83	6,815	14,552	47
1983–84	7,504	15,335	48
1984–85	8,573	16,643	50
1985–86	8,978	16,527	50
1986–87	8,726	15,557	48
1987–88	9,146	15,467	49
1988–89	8,902	14,095	47
1989–90	9,527	14,077	46
1990–91	9,863	13,519	44
1991–92	10,842	14,007	44
1992–93	9,872	12,354	42
1993–94	9,781	11,945	42
1994–95	9,415	11,347	42
1995–96	8,937	10,473	42
1996–97	9,494	10,783	43
1997–98	9,373	10,327	45
1998–99	10,281	11,025	46
1999–2000	10,094	10,569	45
2000–01	10,408	10,654	44

Notes:
[1] Adjusted using HM Treasury Gross Domestic Product (GDP) deflator at market prices as at 23 December 2002
[2] "Total Defence Expenditure" excludes a variety of accounting and definitional adjustments as outlined in the footnotes to table 1.3 of UK Defence Statistics and are consistent with the figures shown in the "Total Defence Expenditure" category in that table.

Source:
UK Defence Statistics and Volume 2 of Statement of Defence Estimates.

Eurofighter

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 27 January, *Official Report*, column 638W, on the Eurofighter, what criteria were used in selecting areas for the testing of Eurofighter. [97601]

Mr. Ingram: The three managed areas designated for the training of fast jet crews were selected on the basis that they were sufficiently large to enable training at high speeds, were relatively close to operating bases, and minimised the effect on civilair routes.

It is anticipated that the majority of supersonic flights will take place over the sea in the two more southerly areas. The third most northerly area is essential for backup training, particularly when sea and wind states are determined to be too high for safe training over the water. Supersonic flight will not be permitted over land.

Eurofighter Typhoon

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the Eurofighter Typhoon to be operational and at what stage ground strike capability will be added. [97232]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* We expect Typhoon to be available for operational deployment in the second half of this decade. The aircraft will be multi-role. Designed primarily for air superiority, it will be fitted with an initial ground attack capability. Thereafter, it will benefit from progressive enhancements to its ground attack capabilities as part of the aircraft's planned procurement programme.

Field Hospitals

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* anaesthetists, *(b)* doctors, *(c)* surgeons, *(d)* trained nurses and *(e)* commissioned nurses there are in each reserve field hospital unit. [96934]

Dr. Moonie: The strength of *(a)* anaesthetists, *(b)* doctors, *(c)* surgeons and *(d)* commissioned nurses within each reserve field hospital, as at February 2003, is given in the table. There are no other rank trained nurses in reserve field hospitals.

Field hospital	*201*	*202*	*203*	*204*	*205*	*207*	*208*	*212*	*243*	*256*	*CVHQ AMS*
Number of anaesthetists	5	2	2	1	1	2	2	4	2	6	12
Number of doctors	23	22	13	14	16	7	15	20	9	20	11
Number of surgeons	4	4	2	2	3	0	1	7	4	4	20
Number of commissioned nurses	119	112	62	58	95	70	104	90	66	86	147

Flags of Convenience

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many ships chartered for military operations are registered under flags of convenience. [96511]

Mr. Ingram: The definition of flag of convenience is loose and ambiguous and indeed, the Department for Transport does not officially recognise this terminology. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 7 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 464W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser), regarding the flag states of the vessels chartered for use in the Mediterranean/Gulf regions.

Future Integrated Soldier Technology Programme

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what criteria will inform his decision on selection of the prime contractor for the Future Integrated Soldier Technology programme, with particular reference to *(a)* price and *(b)* technical specification; [95423]

(2) when he plans to announce selection of the prime contractor for the Future Integrated Soldier Technology programme; and whether the Future Integrated Soldier Technology programme will be the centrepiece of infantrymen's personal combat equipment in the future; [95421]

(3) if he will take the value of export opportunities for British businesses into account in his assessment of the relative merits of the competing contractors for the Future Integrated Soldier Technology programme; [95425]

(4) what estimate he has made of the potential value of the export market for Future Integrated Soldier Technology equipment systems and sub-systems over the next 20 years; [95424]

(5) what the value is of *(a)* the next assessment phase and *(b)* the demonstration and manufacture phases of the Future Integrated Soldier Technology programme. [95422]

Mr. Ingram: The Future Integrated Soldier Technology (FIST) programme will bring the benefits of technology improvements to the infantry soldier by providing an integrated suite of equipment which will enhance mission effectiveness in dismounted close combat. An announcement on the Prime Contractor for the Assessment Phase (AP) of the FIST programme will be made shortly.

Expenditure of up to £30 million is anticipated during AP. Demonstration and Manufacture costs are expected to be up to around £800 million dependent on the precise configuration of the suite of equipment identified during the AP. The cost and scope of work to be performed will be more closely defined during the AP.

Evaluation of the competing proposals will be based on a number of criteria. Both bids are based on the same level of funding in the AP so price will not be a discriminator, and technical specifications will only be developed as a product from the AP. Selection will be informed by assessments of the bidders' planning and scheduling proposals, their proposals on technology exploitation during AP, their preparedness to engage in effective partnering arrangements, and their acceptance of contractual terms and conditions.

Wider factors, consistent with our Defence Industrial Policy will also be considered including potential export value to the United Kingdom defence industrial base. Current analysis of the potential export market suggests opportunities in the region of £3 billion over 15 years.

Gas Masks

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Service personnel have been supplied with gas mask filters that are out of date; and if he will make a statement. [96930]

Mr. Ingram: To the best of our knowledge, no Service personnel have been issued with gas mask filters which are out of date, and no defect reports have been received from units about either respirators or respirator filters. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to him on 11 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 633W.

HMS Nottingham

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 747W, on HMS Nottingham, what changes to current departmental expenditure commitments he plans to make. [96893]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 11 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 635W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey).

Landing Ship Dock Auxiliary Vessels

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects construction to be completed on the new Landing Ship Dock (Auxiliary) vessels (LSD (A)). [95417]

Mr. Ingram: Construction of the first Landing Ship Dock (Auxiliary), RFA LARGS BAY, is due to complete in March 2004. The vessel will then undergo a series of sea trials prior to its acceptance into service in autumn 2004. Construction of the remaining three vessels is planned to complete during 2004 and 2005, followed by sea trials and acceptance into service.

Medical Discharge (RAF)

Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what circumstances an RAF employee can be asked to forfeit his entitlement to medical discharge. [97511]

Dr. Moonie: RAF Personnel do not have an entitlement, either statutory or regulational, to medical discharge.

The discharge of personnel below the minimum Royal Air Force medicalstandard is decided at the Personnel Management Agency, following consideration of an individual's case by a Medical Board. The individual is invited to provide a personal statement as part of this process.

Merlin Helicopter

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Merlin helicopters are grounded in order to provide spare parts for operational Merlin helicopters. [96942]

Mr. Ingram: The term 'grounded' is normally used only when a whole fleet or mark of aircraft is identified as unsafe to fly because of specific serious engineering or airworthiness problems which call into question the safety of the aircraft type. No Merlin helicopters are being used to provide spares for operational aircraft.

Middle East (Equipment Suitability)

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the *(a)* quality and *(b)* suitability for the climate and conditions of the equipment supplied to army personnel in preparation for deployment to the middle east. [96663]

Mr. Ingram: All our troops are provided with personal equipment that is right for the operation to be undertaken. The clothing, boots and other personal equipment that is provided to each soldier has been tested, and procured to a high quality and reliability standard. The views of soldiers are taken into account during this process. We hold stocks of all types of personal equipment for the variety of operations that might occur but, because it is not sensible to tie up assets for all contingencies, these basic stocks are supplemented as operations become better defined. Adequate stocks of desert equipment for Army personnel will be available for Operation Telic.

Naval Complement

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* Royal Navy and *(b)* Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels available for sale to foreign navies. [95889]

Mr. Ingram: The only Royal Navy vessel available for sale at present to foreign Governments is HMS Sheffield. There are no Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels available for sale to foreign navies at present.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to order *(a)* a primary casualty receiving ship for the Royal Navy and *(b)* additional tankers for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary services. [95892]

Mr. Ingram: Initial Gate approval for procurement of a Primary Casualty Receiving Capability (PCRC) was granted on 20 December 2001. A contract was awarded to BMT Defence Services on 21 December 2001 for support in determining the size and shape of an afloat medical facility that would meet our needs and to establish which ship types could potentially become host platforms. In parallel, the PCRC Integrated Project Team (IPT) is considering which procurement options are likely to prove most cost effective. It is anticipated that tendering for the demonstration and manufacture phase of the project should take place during 2003–04. The In Service Date will depend upon the final technical specification and procurement route selected but should be towards the end of the decade.

Following the expected entry into service of the Auxiliary Oilers RFA Wave Knight and RFA Wave Ruler, which should occur in early spring this year, we plan to acquire future afloat support capability, including that currently provided by Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels, as part of our larger afloat support strategy.

Currently, the Defence Procurement Agency's Military Afloat Reach and Sustainability (MARS) project is investigating these future afloat support needs and the most flexible and cost-effective means of meeting them. Although the programme is at an early stage, initial reactions have been received following an industry day, which was held in October 2002, and we will be seeking innovative and cost effective proposals from industry as it progresses.

Nuclear-Powered Submarines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the eventual disposal of the hulks of paid-off SSNs and former Polaris submarines. [95884]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 12 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 423W by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Moonie). Since then approval has been given for the Isolus project to enter an assessment phase, and we are now seeking outline proposals from industry for the interim storage of radioactive material from the decommissioned submarines. Over 30 companies have expressed an interest in the work and an industry briefing day is to be held in late February.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the locations of each paid-off SSN and former Polaris submarine. [95886]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Moonie) on 12 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 423W. In addition, HMS Dreadnought, the former Polaris submarine that was decommissioned in 1983 is stored safely afloat at the Rosyth Dockyard.

Ptarmigan

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the completion of the Ptarmigan upgrades. [95189]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence is committed to sustaining the Ptarmigan trunk communication system for land forces and continues to keep the system available at high readiness for any potential operations. To enable Ptarmigan to cope with increasing demands placed on it, two planned enhancements were completed in 2002. One will enable Ptarmigan to connect to future systems such as Bowman. The other allows more rapid and flexible deployment of some of the more mobile components of Ptarmigan. We are currently making minor modifications to the Ptarmigan system to enable it to be used more effectively in the context of potential operations. I am withholding specific details under Exemption 1 (Defence, security and international relations) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Royal Air Force

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when 5 Squadron will be disbanded; and to which squadrons 5 Squadron personnel will be re-assigned. [96929]

Mr. Ingram: 5 Squadron disbanded on 30 September 2002. Personnel were assigned to the following Squadrons:

1 Squadron Cottesmore;

3 Squadron Cottesmore;

4 Squadron Cottesmore;

9 Squadron Marham;

11 Squadron Leeming;

20 Squadron Wittering;

25 Squadron Leeming;

31 Squadron Marham;

43 Squadron Leuchars;

54 Squadron Coltishall;

56 Squadron Coningsby/Leuchars;

111 Squadron Leuchars;

230 Squadron Aldergrove; and

617 Squadron Lossiemouth.

In addition, some personnel were not assigned to a new Squadron but were posted to other branches and headquarters in the Ministry of Defence.

SA80/L86A2 Weapons

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many SA80 L86A2 weapons will be withdrawn from operational service following the introduction into service of the new light machine gun; and if he will make a statement. [97190]

Mr. Ingram: No SA80 L86A2 weapons will be withdrawn from operational service following the introduction into service of the new light machine gun.

Satellite Communications Systems

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on satellite communications systems; and what increases he plans to these capabilities. [95412]

Mr. Ingram: Military satellite communications are currently provided by the SKYNET 4 system, supplemented as necessary by commercial satellite systems and the use of satellite communications systems operated by Allies. SKYNET 4 will reach the end of its operationally useful life later this decade and we are seeking to continue and update our capability through the SKYNET 5 service provision contract currently being negotiated with Paradigm Secure Communications. The SKYNET 5 contract will include modernisation of satellite ground terminals.

We expect SKYNET 5 to introduce, from the middle of the decade, enhanced voice and data services with better resilience together with improved flexibility to support remote, mobile operations. It will make an important contribution to our aim of developing network enabled capability. The improvements will be introduced progressively and support to existing systems will be maintained as required during transition to SKYNET 5.

Sea King Helicopters

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the planned disposal of seven Sea King MK6 helicopters. [94575]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member on 5 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 933W. One Sea King Mk 6 helicopter has been designated as scrap. No final decision has yet been made concerning plans for six other Sea King Mk 6 helicopters.

Target Locator Systems

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he expects the laser target locator systems to enter service *(a)* with the Royal Artillery forward observers and *(b)* as part of the enhancements to the Warrior armoured infantry fighting vehicle and the CVR(T) reconnaissance fleets; [95186]

(2) when he expects the new laser rangefinders to enter service; and if they will be within the Ministry of Defence's estimated budget. [95411]

Mr. Ingram: The laser target locator systems for Royal Artillery (RA) forward observers are expected to enter service by the end of March 2003. This system is intended to be operated whilst the observer is dismounted. The equipment will be issued to RA forward observers operating from Warrior OPV, Saxon or in the dismounted role. The project is within the estimated budget.

The separate programme providing laser target locator systems as part of the enhancement of the Warrior Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle and CVR(T) reconnaissance fleets, will be rolled out between 2004 and 2006. The RA variant of Warrior and some Scimitar CVR(T) vehicles already have this capability. This project is also within the estimated budget.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Territorial Army centres in Lancashire are providing reservists to UK forces; and how many reservists from the Territorial Army Centre in Chorley have been called to join UK forces. [96741]

Dr. Moonie: The following Territorial Army Centres in Lancashire are providing reservists as a result of recent mobilisation orders:

Territorial army centre	*Location*
B Company, Lancastrian and Cumbrian Volunteers	Moss street, Blackburn
B Squadron, 207 Field Hospital (Volunteers)	Canterbury street, Blackburn
Detachment C Squadron, 208 Field Hospital (Volunteers)	Caton road, Lancaster
Detachment E (14) Evacuation Squadron, 5 GS Medical Regiment	Devonshire road, Chorley, Preston
Detachment 29 Company, 3 (Volunteer) Military Intelligence Battalion	Devonshire road, Chorley, Preston

As at Friday 7 February, the following numbers of reservists from the Territorial Army Centre at Chorley have been called up for mobilisation:

Territorial army centre	*Number of reservists*
Detachment E (14) Evacuation Squadron, 5 GS Medical Regiment	14
Detachment 29 Company, 3 (Volunteer) Military Intelligence Battalion	6

Typhoon (Meteor Missile)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what interim measures have been put in place in advance of the air defence Meteor missile entering service with the Typhoon fighters; [95419]

(2) when he expects the new air defence Meteor missile to enter service with the Typhoon fighters. [95418]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence intends to procure the Advanced Medium Range Air to Air Missile from the USA to equip Typhoon until Meteor enters service in 2012.

Wheeled Tanker

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the new wheeled tankers for the armed forces to enter service; and if he expects this to remain within the Ministry of Defence's proposed budget. [95415]

Mr. Ingram: The wheeled tankers are expected to enter service in 2004 within the approved cost and timescale.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

British Energy

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been paid to consultants engaged by her Department to assess the financial situation of British Energy; and if she will list the consultants engaged to conduct this work since September 2002. [96989]

Mr. Wilson: At end-January 2003, the Department had been invoiced for or paid around £9.8 million to its advisers in respect of their work on the financial situation of British Energy. The Department has engaged the following advisers:

Credit Suisse First Boston—financial adviser
Deloitte and Touche—accountancy adviser
Slaughter and May—legal adviser
McGrigor Donald—Scottish legal adviser
Stikeman Elliott—Canadian legal adviser
Crowell Moring—US legal adviser
Mr Christopher Knight—independent financial adviser

Chemical Sales (Israel)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which chemicals with potential military and civil dual-use capabilities the United Kingdom has licensed for sale to Israel; and what steps have been taken to ensure these chemicals have not been put to military use. [96987]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 10 February 2003]*: Details of all export licences are published by destination in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls; copies of which are available from the Libraries of the House.

The Government has made clear its commitment to effective monitoring of the end-use of UK defence exports where this can make a genuine contribution to preventing their diversion or misuse. However, follow-up monitoring can only confirm if UK exports have been misused or diverted after the export has taken place. The Government believes that the most effective way to prevent misuse or diversion of UK defence exports is by rigorous assessment at the export licensing stage. To this end we have taken a number of steps to strengthen end-user risk assessment in the export

licensing process. Before taking a decision on an export licence application, the Government takes into account all reliable information about end-users of potential concern, including reporting from other Government Departments and UK posts overseas, and also from any relevant information received from non-governmental organisations and other external sources. Overseas posts have standing instructions to report any misuse of UK-origin defence equipment so that it can be taken into account in the licensing process.

Coal Reserves

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimates she has made of the total coal reserves available in the *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* Wales. [96270]

Mr. Wilson: The Coal Authority has (in consultation with the industry) estimated that established reserves workable by either opencast or deep-mining methods in Britain total some 222 million tonnes with a further known potential of 380 million tonnes. The extent to which thee tonnages are available is influenced by a range of factors, not least operators' ability to mine the coal safely and economically and to secure the necessary consents to do so. No separate figures are available for Wales.

In addition, the Department recently commissioned a report which examined coal reserves and resources accessible from remaining deep mines (excluding the Selby Complex scheduled to close in March 2004). Total reserve and resources was estimated to be in the order of 150m tonnes, 14m tonnes of which is in Wales. The report, produced by IMC Group Consulting Limited, is shortly to be published on the DTI Website.

Financial Reporting Council

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on responsibility for the appointment of the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Financial Reporting Council. [97385]

Ms Hewitt: The constitution of the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) provides that the Chairman and Deputy Chairmen of the FRC are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Governor of the Bank of England acting jointly.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action she intends to take against the companies listed in the Iraqi submission to the United Nations Security Council in its weapons programmes, as military equipment and services suppliers to Iraq. [95898]

Mr. Wilson: Any listing in the Iraqi submission would not in itself imply there has been a breach of UK export controls. Any allegations that there has been a breach of UK export controls would require careful examination by HM Customs and Excise, which is responsible for the enforcement of UK export controls.

Mains Gas Network

Matthew Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to extend the national mains gas network. [94946]

Mr. Wilson: The Government has encouraged the development of the mains gas network by stimulating competition and reducing connection costs. It continues to work with industry and other interested parties to seek ways in which to assist the fuel poor in non-gas areas.

Miners' Compensation

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of the miners' respiratory compensation settlements are for chronic bronchitis only; how many cases that have been settled have been paid; and how many claims registered in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 (i) have been finalised and (ii) are outstanding. [96269]

Mr. Wilson: As of 2 February 2003, IRISC, the Department's claims handlers, had made over 28,000 full and finals offers for chronic bronchitis only, this out of a total of nearly 58,500 full and final offers. Nearly 23,000 chronic bronchitis only offers have been accepted and have received payment in settlement of their claim, and around 5,000 offers remain under consideration with solicitors.

In 1998 IRISC registered nearly 53,500 claims for respiratory disease. As at 29 January 2003, 22,800 had been settled in full.

In 1999 IRISC registered nearly 29,500 claims for respiratory disease. As at 29 January 2003, 10,704 had been settled in full.

Claims are processed in order of priority points, as set out in the Claims Handling Agreement, not by date of claim.

Miners' Pension Fund

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the value of the Miners' Pension Fund was in each year since the year before it was supported by Government finance, to 2003; and what bonuses have been paid out in each of these years. [96761]

Mr. Wilson: The market value of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme fund as at 30 September for each year since 1993, is as follows:

£million

Year	*Market Value of Fund*
1993	7,528
1994	7,763
1995	8,582
1996	9,389
1997	10,988
1998	10,394
1999	12,423
2000	14,220
2001	11,521
2002	9,774

Bonuses under the arrangements introduced at privatisation first became payable in 1997 and are as follows:

£million

Year	*Bonus Payments made*
1997	23
1998	69
1999	76
2000	82
2001	119
2002	127

OECD Bribery Convention

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the policy of the Department is on incorporation of the OECD Convention on Bribery; and if she will make a statement. [96817]

Mr. Wilson: The Government is fully supportive of this Convention and views it as a minimum standard to be attained.

In February 2002 the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security (ATCS) Act came into effect. Part 12 of the Act puts beyond doubt that the law of bribery applies to acts involving foreign office holders, including Ministers, MPs and judges, and takes jurisdiction over crimes of bribery committed by UK nationals and UK companies overseas. Previously some part of the offence had to take place in the UK.

The measures outlaw acts of bribery by UK nationals and companies abroad in the same circumstances as they are outlawed at home. This extraterritoriality goes beyond the specific requirements of the OECD Convention and demonstrates the seriousness of the Government's commitment to reduce bribery in international business.

Plutonium

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the risk of terrorists *(a)* intercepting and *(b)* stealing plutonium in transit by sea from Sellafield to (i) Japan, (ii) European Union member states and (iii) Switzerland. [96988]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 10 February 2002]:* The Department of Trade and Industry's Office for Civil Nuclear Security (OCNS) is responsible for regulating civil nuclear security in the UK including security of transport of nuclear material. The security standards, procedures and specific arrangements reflect published guidance issued by the IAEA. Security precautions for the transportation of nuclear material are kept under regular review. However, it is not Government policy to disclose details of security measures taken in connection with the transportation of nuclear material.

In respect of transports of MOX, OCNS has confirmed that the extensive security arrangements in place both for transports of MOX carried out between the UK and countries in Europe and those undertaken by UK operators between Europe and Japan are amply robust to deal with any potential threats. This matter has been reviewed in the context of the terrorist attacks that took place in September 2001 and the circumstances arising since then.

Roof Contracting Industry (Insurance Cover)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions officials from her Department have had with representatives of the roof contracting industry regarding the availability of insurance cover; and if she will make a statement. [96897]

Mr. Wilson: A number of meetings have taken place at official level with representatives of the roofing contractors industry and other construction industry sectors about the availability of insurance cover.

A study is being undertaken by the Construction Sector Unit to establish the extent and nature of the difficulties contractors face in obtaining a range of different types of insurance; to obtain a clearer understanding of the reasons for the problems; and how the industry could better represent its approach to risk assessment, management and control to the insurance industry. The National Federation of Roofing Contractors has participated in this study.

The Government is also keen to have the views of all affected industries, including building, construction and roofing, on the review of the Employer's Liability Compulsory Insurance (ELCI) scheme.All written contributions should be sent to: ELCI Review Team, Department of Work and Pensions, The Adelphi, Level 2, 1- 11 John Adam Street, London, WC2N 6HT or by e-mail to *bob.elam@xlwp.gsi.gov.uk*

Small Businesses

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to her Answer of 8th January, Official Report, column 248W, on small retail businesses, how many enterprises there are in the UK of all sizes. [97574]

Mr. Wilson: In the UK at the start of 2001 there were an estimated 3,746,370 businesses in the private sector and public corporations.

Wind Farms

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* off-shore and *(b)* land-based wind farm projects are under construction; and what the expected completion dates are. [97069]

Mr. Wilson: The Government does not require developers to inform us of when a project will commence construction or when construction is completed. The Government therefore has no details of how many wind farms are under construction or when they will be completed.

TREASURY

AADs

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many accompanying administrative documents AADs for duty-suspended excise goods were in

circulation in each year from 1998 to 2002; how many were outstanding in each year from 1998 to 2002; and how many undischarged AADs there are against which assessments have been raised. [97341]

John Healey: The information on the number of accompanying administrative documents is not available. The information on assessments issued against outstanding AADs is not held centrally by Customs and could only be collected at disproportionate cost.

Corporation Tax

Adam Price: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the effect of a 2 per cent. reduction in the rate of corporation tax would be on tax revenue. [97248]

Dawn Primarolo: Table 5 of the "Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs November 2002" shows the direct effects of percentage point changes in each of the starting rate, the small companies' rate and the main rate of corporation tax.

Customs and Excise

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who owns the Customs and Excise headquarters at Custom House, Lower Thames Street, London; how many staff work there and what work they are engaged in; what his estimate is of the market value of the building; and if he will make a statement. [91726]

John Healey: For details of ownership of Custom House, London I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby on 7 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 746–50W.

In June 2000 Customs & Excise's valuers estimated the Market Value of Custom House, London at £26.75 million. 850 law enforcement staff work in the building. No details can be given of the work they are engaged in; Exemption 4 (Law enforcement and legal proceedings) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information applies.

Adam Price: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many members of Customs and Excise's National Investigation Service are suspended pending criminal investigations. [95239]

John Healey: On 1 April 2001 HM Customs and Excise implemented a fundamental restructuring along functional lines creating two core businesses: Business Services and Taxes and Law Enforcement. The National Investigation Service is now part of the Law Enforcement structure. At 12 February 2003 six Officers from the investigation arm of Law Enforcement are suspended pending criminal investigations. All involve allegations of potential gross misconduct, which if proved may result in dismissal.

Duty Diversion Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the estimated total loss in excise duty due to diversion fraud including frauds not actually investigated is for each year from 1993 to 2002. [97397]

John Healey: Figures are not available in this format for all years. Diversion fraud in the main concerns alcohol products. Estimates of total losses for outward diversion fraud for alcohol in the years 1994–1995 to 1999–2000 were published in the report by John Roques, "The collection of excise duties in HM Customs and Excise", a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

Estimates for total revenue evaded from all alcohol fraud (including diversion frauds) in the years 1999–2000 and 2000–01 are provided in the HM Customs and Excise document "Measuring indirect tax losses" published with the pre Budget report November 2002, a copy of which is also available in the Library of the House.

ECOFIN

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the minutes of the meetings of ECOFIN and its associated committees which *(a)* he and *(b)* officials from his Department have attended since 1997. [96838]

Ruth Kelly: Minutes of ECOFIN meetings are published on the website of the Council of the European Union: http://register.consilium.eu.int/isoregister/frames/intromnfsEN.htm.

Press notices are accessible at: http://ue.eu.int/newsroom/loadbook.asp?BID=93&LANG=1.

The Treasury Ministers report by written answer on the issues discussed at the ECOFIN meetings and on the position taken by the United Kingdom.

The minutes of ECOFIN's associated committees, (the Economic and Financial Committee and the Economic Policy Committee) attended by senior Treasury officials, are not published.

FTSE 100

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact of the fall in the value of the FTSE 100 index on *(a)* total tax revenues, *(b)* income tax revenue and *(c)* corporation tax revenue. [96837]

Ruth Kelly: Consistent with the Code for fiscal stability, an update of projections for the public finances taking into account the effects of changes in share prices will be published in the forthcoming Budget.

Greener Fuels

Bob Spink: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether the incentives he has applied to encourage the use of greener fuels are intended to be permanent. [96833]

John Healey: In Budget 2001, the Government reduced the duty rate on road fuel gases to 9p per kilogramme and made a commitment to freeze duty on road fuel gases in real terms until at least 2004.

All other duty rates are reviewed by the Chancellor on a Budget-by-Budget basis, taking into account all relevant economic, social and environmental factors. Fuel duties, as with all other excise duties, are considered as part of the Budget process.

Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether HM Customs and Excise has been repaid the VAT bill by the Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland identified in the inspector's report published by the Northern Ireland Certification Officer. [96655]

John Healey: HM Customs and Excise are statutorily debarred from disclosing information relating to the tax affairs of individuals or companies. Exemption 15 (statutory and other restrictions) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information applies.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what calculation he has made of the impact on jobs of the introduction of the new Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. [97047]

John Healey: The reforms to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme (LTCS) announced in the 2002 pre-Budget report will involve allocating approximately two-thirds of the funding currently going through the scheme to public spending to encourage sustainable waste management. This reform is intended to deliver a strategic and coherent approach to waste management which, as part of the Government's overall waste strategy, should have a positive impact on the development of waste management industries and related employment in these industries. In order to ensure a smooth transition to the new spending programme, the Government have announced transition funding for waste projects in England which would otherwise have a shortfall between the funding committed through the LTCS and that need to complete planned activity during 2003–04. The Scottish Executive has made a similar announcement regarding projects in Scotland.

London Stock Exchange

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 27 January, *Official Report*, column 953W, on the London Stock Exchange, what the level of transactions on the London Stock Exchange was between 1999 and 2002 as measured by value in comparison to other major stock exchanges of the world. [96892]

Ruth Kelly: Following are figures for turnover on leading stock exchanges, taken from the statistics section of the World Federation of Exchanges' website (www.world-exchanges.org). The federation cautions that exchanges use different definitions and calculation methods to compile turnover statistics, so the resulting figures are not necessarily directly comparable.

Annual value of turnover on stock exchanges in domestic currencies

Exchange	1999	2002	Percentage change 1999 to 2002
London Stock Exchange (£ million)	2,106,252	2,657,290	26
NYSE ($ million)	8,945,205	10,311,156	15
NASDAQ ($ million)	10,467,369	7,254,595	-31
Tokyo (yen million)	185,656,910	195,014,915	5
Deutsche Boerse (euro million)	1,472,829	1,279,948	-13
Euronext[1] (euro million)	—	2,097,837	—

[1] The Euronext group of exchanges was created in 2000.

Police Authorities

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to assess the efficiency of police authorities, using the methodology set out in the HMT Public Services Productivity Panel Paper, Improving Police Performance: A New Approach to Measuring Police Efficiency (HMT, April 2000); and if he will make a statement. [95728]

Mr. Denham: The Government announced in the 2002 Spending Review, "2002 Spending Review, New Public Spending Plans 2003–06, July 2002, Cm 5570", that it would publish comparisons of police forces linking resources to performance against key outcomes, including reducing crime and bringing offenders to justice.

The Home Office is moving forward a comprehensive programme designed to assess overall policing performance, called the Policing Performance Assessment Framework.

The approach and methodologies set out in the Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) Public Services Productivity Panel Paper, "Improving Police Performance: A New Approach to Measuring Police Efficiency (HMT, April 2000)" have been taken into consideration during the development of this programme, which will come to fruition over the next few years.

Basic comparisons of police force performance will be published shortly (in the form of performance radars) and these comparisons will eventually evolve so as to incorporate information on policing efficiency as the Policing Performance Assessment Framework is introduced.

Support Staff

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his Answers of 31st January, (refs. 90981 and 90982), how many support staff there were in *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [95938]

John Healey: In 2001–02 approximately 3,800 staff years were allocated to support functions. Figures for 2002–03 are not yet available.

Tobacco Smuggling

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the target market share of smuggled cigarettes was in financial years *(a)* 2003–04 and *(b)* 2004–05; and if he will make a statement. [97026]

John Healey: Customs Public Service Agreement and Service Delivery Agreement for 2001 -2004 set targets for the market share of smuggling cigarettes to be no more than 20 per cent. in 2003–04 and 18 per cent. in

2004–05. Further details can be found in Customs Spring Reports for 2000–2001 and 2002, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

CABINET OFFICE

Government Car Service

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many chauffeurs are employed by the Government Car Service; and what the ratio is of chauffeurs to cars held in the car pool; [94990]

(2) what the total mileage as contained in log sheets supplied by Government Car Service drivers is for the most recent month for which figures are available, broken down by Department; [94995]

(3) how many cars there have been in the Government Car Service pool in each year since 1997; who has access to them; and what the average engine size of the cars was in each year since 1997. [94991]

Mr. Alexander: The responsibility for the provision of ministerial cars and drivers has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Member. Copies of his letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

PRIME MINISTER

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list consultations his Office has conducted since 1997; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [97419]

The Prime Minister: My Office has not published any consultation documents.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Civil Servants (Private Sector Appointments)

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the cases in the last 10 years where senior civil servants have been granted clearance to accept private sector appointments. [96653]

Jane Kennedy: The Northern Ireland Office has granted permission in one case, in the last 10 years, for a senior civil servant to accept a private sector appointment.

Within the Northern Ireland Administration the information sought is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. To compile the necessary information would require scrutiny of the personal files of all current members of the Senior Civil Service and those who have retired or resigned over the last 10 years.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what procedures are in place regarding civil servants from Northern Ireland accepting private sector appointments on their retirement. [96654]

Jane Kennedy: The procedures governing the acceptance of business appointments by civil servants are set out in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Pay and Conditions of Service Code, paragraphs 914–942 and in the Northern Ireland Office staff handbook Guidance on Conditions of Service for HCS chapter 20, page 111–113. These procedures apply to the acceptance of appointments within business and other bodies. These sections of the Code and the staff handbook are currently under review.

I have placed copies of the relevant sections of the staff handbooks referred to in the Library.

Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people were *(a)* formally interviewed, *(b)* cautioned and *(c)* charged in relation to the allegation of invoice fraud made in the Certification Officer Inspector's report on the Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland. [96656]

Jane Kennedy: Two persons were formally interviewed under caution by the police in June 1999 in connection with alleged false invoicing. Neither was formally cautioned or charged.

Railways

Mr Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to seek the opinion of an independent railway civil engineer on the cost of upgrading the Lisburn to Antrim railway line before a decision is taken on the closure of the line. [97290]

Angela Smith: An economic and financial appraisal completed in February 2001 by independent consultants ERM, and subsequently independently validated in April 2002 by Halcrow Group Limited, concluded that to upgrade the line so that it could continue to be used for scheduled services and to provide the necessary rolling stock would cost in the region of £18–19million. I have no plans to commission any further studies of these costs.

Mr Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the likely savings from the withdrawal of the Lisburn to Antrim rail service and what plans there are to use the line as an emergency diversionary route. [97291]

Angela Smith: Translink have advised that savings in track maintenance costs arising from the withdrawal of services on the Lisburn to Antrim railway line would amount to £370,000 per annum. Capital expenditure in the order of £18 to £19 million would be required in the medium to long-term to retain services on the line. The line continues to be available as a diversionary route when the main line from Lisburn to Belfast is closed. I intend to make a written statement about the future of services on the Lisburn to Antrim line fairly soon. This statement will cover the issue of the value of the line as a diversionary route.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to seek the opinion of an independent railway operations expert on the viability of maintaining an enhanced timetable of services on the Lisburn to Antrim railway line before a decision is made on the closure of the line. [97292]

Angela Smith: It is clear that an enhanced timetable of services on the Lisburn to Antrim railway line could only be introduced at the expense of a reduced timetable of services elsewhere on the network, and in particular on the direct line from Antrim to Belfast via Bleach Green junction. Switching more trains to run on the Lisburn to Antrim line would disadvantage more people than it would help. Accordingly, I have no plans to seek the opinion of an independent railway operations expert on the viability of maintaining an enhanced timetable of services on the Lisburn to Antrim railway line.

WALES

Unadopted Sewers

11. **Huw Irranca-Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Welsh Assembly Secretaries on the issue of unadopted sewers. [96353]

Mr. Touhig: My right hon. Friend and I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and Assembly Secretaries about issues affecting Wales. I understand that Defra and the National Assembly have appointed consultants to undertake research into the extent and condition of existing private drains and sewers in England and Wales.

Air Transport

12. **Albert Owen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues and National Assembly for Wales Secretaries on the development of regional airports and air services in Wales. [96354]

Peter Hain: The Department for Transport and the National Assembly are currently consulting on an air transport strategy for Wales, which recognises the potential of regional airports, including RAF Valley in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Orthopaedic Care (Gwent)

13. **Mr. David:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the recent report on orthopaedics in Gwent by Professor Edwards. [96355]

Mr. Touhig: I have regular discussions with the Assembly's Minister for Health and Social Services, and the Secretary of State has regular meetings with the First Minister about the provision of health care in Wales. I welcome the report by Professor Edwards into the provision of orthopaedic care in Gwent and have noted with interest the findings and recommendations.

Policing

14. **Ian Lucas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Chief Constable of North Wales concerning policing matters in Wales. [96356]

Peter Hain: I have regular discussions with the Chief Constables of all four Welsh forces.

Gareth Thomas: What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues and National Assembly Secretaries about police funding in Wales. [96357]

Peter Hain: I have discussed the level of police funding with ministerial colleagues and Assembly Ministers. I am pleased that, this year, Welsh forces will receive £355.2 million in grant funding—an increase of 3.6 per cent.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Roger Williams: What discussions he has had with the Lord Chancellor's Department regarding magistrates courts closures in Wales. [96352]

Peter Hain: I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues about matters affecting Wales, but decisions about the future of individual courts are a matter for local Magistrates' Courts Committees.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90595]

Peter Hain: All Wales Office staff already earn more than £5.30 an hour. Therefore any increase in the minimum wage by *(a)*, *(b)*, *(c)*, *(d)*, and *(e)* will have no impact on the cost of salaries for the Wales Office.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EU Aid Programmes

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of UK spending on international development in 2002–03 will be spent through European Union programmes; what assessment she has made of the quality and prioritisation of EU aid programmes; what plans she has to re-direct UK spending on international development away from the EU; and if she will make a statement. [95832]

Clare Short: Provisional figures for EC development spending in 2002 indicate that around 25 per cent. of DFID's budget has been spent through European Commission programmes.

The EC development budget particularly for those regions funded from the regular budget, performs poorly compared with other multilateral providers. Some of the EC's programme are of high quality but overall they are not focused on reducing poverty. While quality should improve if the reforms launched in 2000 have the desired impact, procedures are still cumbersome and the process of deconcentration is behind schedule.

Prioritisation needs radical overhaul. Allocation decisions too often reflect the political consensus by the Council of Ministers and European Parliament to maintain spending at historical levels in middle income regions which reflect domestic or foreign policy considerations. These programmes do not generate the institutional reforms these regions require. We want to see the pledge, explicit in the EC's Development Policy Statement of November 2000, to focus on poverty reduction reflected in annual decisions over resource transfers. Given the clear links between poverty and global security the Commission and Member States need to widen the horizon beyond the near abroad and focus scarce grant resources where they can make the most difference in tackling poverty and instability. Provisional figures indicate that in 2001 only 43 per cent. of the EC's budget was spent in the poorest countries. Although an improvement from 38 per cent. in the previous year, we believe the Commission should achieve the target of spending 70 per cent. of the development budget in low income countries by 2006.

EC budget figures are set until 2006. Discussions about the next financial perspectives over the budget for 2007–2013 are at a very early stage, and might be influenced by the outcome of the Convention debate on the future of Europe. There are some key questions: if Commission programmes can be better delivered through national agencies or other multilateral providers, then it is hard to justify their continuation. If the Commission can demonstrate its comparative advantage in terms of effectiveness, impact and outcomes then we should also use it more as a channel for national funds. Unless they can do this, we will seek a reduction in future Commission aid levels. We need to focus their programmes where they can add value, and cut back other activities.

Iain Hook

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what investigations she is carrying out into the death of Iain Hook; and if she will make a statement. [96771]

Clare Short: Her Majesty's Government have insisted on a full investigation by the UN and Israeli Authorities. We have made our concerns clear at the highest levels, and have been assured that the Israeli Defence Force enquiry would be rigorous and comprehensive. We are in close touch with the UN about the investigation they are carrying out. We, and Mr Hook's family, will fully consider the outcome of these investigations when they are made available.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Badgers

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have been undertaken under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [95946]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table for England and Wales, 1997 to 2001.

Statistics for 2002 will be available in the late autumn of this year.

Number of defendants[1] proceeded against for offences against the Protection of Badgers Act 1992

England and Wales 1997–2001

	Number of defendants proceeded against	*Offence description*	*Statute*
1997	44	Offences relating to cruelty to badgers and special protection for badgers and their setts	Protection of Badgers Act 1992 (except section 13)
1998	19		
1999	30		
2000[2]	21		

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.
[2] Staffordshire Police were only able to submit sample data for persons proceeded against at magistrates courts in 2000. Although sufficient to estimate higher orders of data, these data are not robust enough at a detailed level and have been excluded from the table.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Anti-Social Behaviour Orders have been issued in 2002–03 for offenders aged 15 to 18-years-old. [96018]

Mr. Denham: The number of notifications received by the Home Office of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) issued within England and Wales, from 1 January 2002 up to 30 September 2002 (latest available), for persons aged 10 to 17 years is 105. For persons aged 18 years and over the figure is 59. A further 10 ASBOs have been issued within the same period where the age of the recipient has not been given. A more detailed breakdown by age is not available.

We are aware that the numbers of ASBOs made nationally have been consistently under reported in returns made by magistrates courts and are considering how reporting can be improved.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* anti-social behaviour orders, *(b)* parenting orders and *(c)* curfew orders have been issued in the City of Leeds in the last three years. [96967]

Mr. Denham: The table shows the number of notifications received by the Home Office of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) issued within the West Yorkshire Magistrates' Courts Committee (MCCs) area (in which the City of Leeds is situated) and by local government authority up to 30 September 2002 (latest available).

We are aware that the numbers of ASBOs made nationally have been consistently under reported in returns made by magistrates' courts and are considering how reporting can be improved.

Table A: The number of ASBOs as notified to the Home Office, by Magistrates' Courts Committee and local authority area within England and Wales, April 1999 to September 2002

MCC/Local authority area	*Total issued*
West Yorkshire MCC	22
Of which:	
From 1 April 1999 to 31 May 2000 by pfa	4
From 1 June 2000 to 30 September 2002 by local authority area	18
Bradford, City of	2
Kirklees MC	3
Leeds CC	13

Note:
Between 1 April 1999 to 31 May 2000 data available by police force area (pfa) only

Youth Justice Board (YJB) figures indicate that between April 2000 (when YJB data collection on Parenting Orders started) up to September 2002 (latest available) a total of three Parenting Orders were imposed in Leeds.

Figures from the electronic monitoring contractors indicate that a total of 1,465 Curfew Orders with electronic monitoring were imposed in Leeds during the years 2000 to 2002.

Table B: The number of Curfew Orders imposed in the City of Leeds on juveniles and adults for the years 2000 to 2002

Year	*Number of orders*
Juvenile Curfew Orders (aged 10–15)	
2000	0
2001	16
2002	41
Total	57
Adult Curfew Orders (aged 16+)	
2000	431
2001	368
2002	609
Total	1,408

No applications have yet been received to establish a local child curfew scheme under section 14 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Some local authorities and police forces have considered the possibility but concluded that other measures should be taken to tackle relevant local problems.

Settlement Applications

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the countries from which people have come who have applied for settlement in the last five years; and what percentage of applications was refused. [95999]

Beverley Hughes: The available statistics are given in the following table.

The information relates to decisions on applications for settlement by main nationality. The latest available data are for 2001. Data for 2002 will be published later this year.

Table 1 Decisions on applications for settlement, by nationality, excluding EEA nationals, 2001
United Kingdom

Geographical region and nationality	*Number of decisions*	*Percentage refused*
All nationalities	109,170	2.2
Europe		
Bulgaria	320	4.3
Croatia	665	0.3
Cyprus	250	4.4
Czech Republic	480	0.2
Estonia	40	0.0
Hungary	220	0.9
Latvia	70	1.4
Lithuania	125	4.8
Malta	95	0.0
Poland	950	0.5
Romania	365	2.5
Russia	1,035	1.2
Slovakia	430	0.5
Slovenia	10	0.0
Switzerland	220	1.4
Turkey	3,265	0.8
Ukraine	420	3.1
Yugoslavia	2,800	0.7
Other former USSR	350	2.0
Other former Yugoslavia	1,570	0.4
Other Europe	255	0.4
Europe	13,935	1.0
Americas		
Argentina	120	0.0
Barbados	115	1.7
Brazil	590	2.9
Canada	1,330	0.8
Chile	80	5.1
Colombia	755	1.3
Guyana	210	3.3
Jamaica	3,240	12.1
Mexico	130	0.0
Peru	155	2.0
Trinidad and Tobago	385	5.2
USA	4,415	0.7
Venezuela	85	0.0
Other Americas	815	3.9
Americas	12,425	4.2
Africa		
Algeria	795	2.8
Angola	275	0.7
Congo (Dem. Rep.)[1]	740	0.7
Egypt	415	2.6
Ethiopia	455	0.0
Ghana	2,555	4.6
Kenya	1,055	6.4
Libya	385	3.4
Mauritius	395	5.1
Morocco	585	2.2
Nigeria	5,275	4.4
Sierra Leone	905	3.5
Somalia	8,300	0.1
South Africa	4,825	1.4
Sudan	615	2.8
Tanzania	310	10.9
Tunisia	195	0.5
Uganda	770	4.0
Zambia	380	9.2
Zimbabwe	1,025	4.7
Other Africa	1,990	2.1
Africa	32,250	2.5
Asia		
Indian sub-continent		
Bangladesh	4,115	1.7
India	7,470	2.6
Pakistan	11,785	2.1
Indian sub-continent	23,370	2.2
Middle East		
Iran	1,505	3.0
Iraq	1,650	0.4
Israel	325	1.5
Jordan	185	4.9
Kuwait	20	25.0
Lebanon	275	2.6
Saudi Arabia	45	0.0
Syria	175	1.1
Yemen	380	2.6
Other Middle East	130	0.8
Middle East	4,685	1.9
Remainder of Asia		
China	1,550	2.5
Hong Kong	635	4.6
Indonesia	205	0.5
Japan	1,700	0.3
Malaysia	725	3.2
Philippines	1,380	1.7
Singapore	225	1.3
South Korea	490	1.6
Sri Lanka	4,060	0.5
Taiwan	170	3.0
Thailand	1,265	0.7
Other Asia	3,660	0.4
Remainder of Asia	16,065	1.1
Asia	44,120	1.8
Oceania		
Australia	3,230	0.7
New Zealand	2,195	0.5
Other Oceania	60	1.6
Oceania	5,485	0.6
British Overseas		
Citizens	560	7.5
Stateless	390	1.0
Other countries		
Not elsewhere specified		
All nationalities	109,170	2.2

[1] The Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Zaire

Notes:
Data rounded to the nearest five.
Percentages rounded to one decimal place.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 30 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 1035W, on Afghan asylum claims, how many Afghan refugees granted asylum have claimed that they fought for the Taliban but *(a)* that they did not support the Taliban and *(b)* that they were coerced. [96529]

Beverley Hughes: We are under no obligation to give refuge to terrorists or anybody else who poses a threat to the United Kingdom's national security, such as Taliban fighters. As a result of media speculation, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) has

reviewed all Afghan applicants granted asylum who applied since 1 October 2001, shortly before the fall of the Taliban.

No cases were found of people granted asylum because they were committed to the Taliban regime and feared persecution from the new government. There were three who gave credible accounts of being opposed to the Taliban but having been forcibly conscripted by them. All three claimed to have escaped when an opportunity presented itself and none was engaged in direct combat with British or US ground forces.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the use of *(a)* chartered and *(b)* military flights for the deportation of failed asylum claimants. [96530]

Beverley Hughes: The use of charter flights is a means of removing large numbers of failed asylum seekers and other immigration offenders when there is no availability of seats on scheduled aircraft.

They are also used for removals to destinations that carriers from the United Kingdom currently do not operate to, eg Kosovo.

Charter flights have been used to remove large numbers of failed asylum seekers since March 2001. During the current financial year over 2000 failed asylum seekers have been removed on such flights.

Military flights are not used for the removal of failed asylum seekers at this time.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many accommodation and property companies he has commissioned to find properties with planning permission for use as hostels for the accommodation of asylum seekers; where properties selected for such use are located; what costs have been incurred by the Home Office in connection with such properties; what the anticipated *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue costs are; what consultations have taken place with (i) hon. Members and (ii) other bodies; and if he will make a statement. [92878]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is currently conducting a procurement exercise for the provision of accommodation to support the Induction Centre for London and the south east which will include consultation with relevant local stakeholders as part of this procurement process.

NASS is also considering proposals for short term emergency accommodation in the regions. If contracts are entered into, this accommodation will be used until the national network of induction centres is established.

Broadband Access

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of *(a)* police forces and *(b)* probation services have broadband access; and what targets have been set for full broadband access in each case. [95743]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 February 2003]*: All police forces have access to a secure, high capacity Internet connection via the Criminal Justice Extranet (CJX), which provides secure messaging, information and document exchange and user directories for the police forces.

The CJX provides forces with access to the Internet and there are no additional plans or targets to introduce separate broadband access.

Many Probation Areas have Internet access via stand-alone PC's. It is not known what proportion of these have broadband access and no targets have been set for the provision of broadband access.

Burnley Riots

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the costs of policing the disturbances in Burnley in 2001 were. [96597]

Mr. Denham: I understand from the Chief Constable (Mr Paul Stephenson QPM) that the additional costs of policing the disturbances was 1.3million. On 30 January 2002 we announced a special grant of £820,000. This grant met 64 per cent. of the additional costs incurred by the force.

Child Protection

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many full-time police officers are assigned to child protection departments in each constabulary in England and Wales. [96023]

Mr. Denham: Information is not collected centrally on the number of police officers deployed to child protection duties. The allocation of resources within a force is decided locally by the Chief Constable or, in the case of the Metropolitan Police Service, the Commissioner. Under the National Policing Plan all forces and authorities are expected to review their force policy and local service plans to ensure that child protection is given the appropriate priority.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action is being taken to raise the priority level of child protection policing in policing plans. [96024]

Mr. Denham: The National Policing Plan (NPP) specifically asks all police forces and authorities to review their force policy and local policing plans to ensure that child protection is given the appropriate priority.

Police forces and authorities are required to take into account the contents of the NPP when preparing their local annual and three-year policing plans. Guidance on three-year plans has been issued, and asks forces and authorities to submit their three-year plans to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary by 31 March 2003.

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research studies he has commissioned on the efficacy of CCTV in reducing crime; and what the results were. [96762]

Mr. Denham: Under the Crime Reduction Programme CCTV Initiative around £170 million will be spent between 1998 and 2003 funding 684 CCTV

schemes. More than 550 of these schemes are already fully operational, with further schemes coming on line weekly.

As a condition of funding, each scheme is required to undertake an independent evaluation of its effectiveness as a tool to assist the police and reduce crime and the fear of crime. These evaluations will cover implementation, impact and cost effectiveness. In addition, to help ensure maximum impact and sustainability of CCTV, a £1.5 million Home Office funded national evaluation programme is being carried out by the Scarman Centre, University of Leicester, on 17 approved CCTV initiative schemes. The final report will not be published until 2004 but interim reports will be available before then. The first—providing guidance for practitioners on implementation of CCTV schemes—is due for publication shortly.

Crime Data

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the links between crime levels and *(a)* poverty, *(b)* income inequality, *(c)* legal drug abuse, *(d)* illegal use of drugs and *(e)* family break-up; and if he will make a statement. [95724]

Mr. Denham: The British Crime Survey (BCS) 2001–02 provides information on victims of crime and includes statistics on risks of crime by household type for burglary (table 4.03), vehicle thefts (table 5.04) and violent crime (6.02). Figures are broken down into categories which include household income, employment status and area type. More detailed analysis of the risks of burglary, based on the 1998 BCS, was published in 1999. This analysis did not show an independent link between risk of burglary victimisation and household income. The BCS 2001–02 also published risks by types of neighbourhood. This showed that people living in the more deprived 'striving areas' tended to experience higher risks generally, although there was also an increased risk in 'rising areas', such as affluent urban areas.

In terms of offending, poverty has been identified as one of the potential risk factors associated with offending. For example, a study of working class boys found that a combination of low income, poor housing and large family size consistently identified an increased risk of self-reported offending, criminal convictions and both juvenile and adult offending (Farrington 1992b and 1992c).

The new English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) research programme, which involves interviewing and drug testing adults arrested by the police, confirms a link between drug misuse and crime. Analysis on the links between crime, family background and drug use is published in the 1998–99 Youth Lifestyles Survey. This examined the extent to which various factors were associated with offending among young people aged 12 to 30. Figures show, for example, that young people who lived in a lone parent or a step parent family were more likely to be serious or persistent offenders than those who lived with their natural parents. However, persistent, serious conflict between parents, or between a parent and a child, appears to be more important, in this respect, than family structure. While some structures—notably lone parent families—are correlated with an increased risk that children will offend, the evidence suggests that this is a product of factors that also affect children in two-parent families. Drug users were also more likely to be serious or persistent offenders than non-drug users.

In the spring we intend to publish a series of reports on the relationship between binge-drinking by young people and offending. Work is also being undertaken on a literature review on the relationship between alcohol and violence.

Crime Statistics (Hertfordshire)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give a breakdown of crime statistics for *(a)* Hertsmere and *(b)* Hertfordshire for each year since 1997, including the most recent figures available. [96948]

Mr. Denham: The number of offences recorded in the Hertsmere Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP), and the Hertfordshire police force area for the years requested are given in the table.

Currently, six key offence groups are recorded and published at Crime and Disorder Partnership level. Data have been collected at this level since 1 April 1999. All main offence groups are collected at police force area level.

There was a change in counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998, which would have the tendency to increase the number of offences counted. Numbers of offences before and after this date are therefore not directly comparable.

Table A—Number of recorded offences in Hertsmere Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.

	Violence against the person	*Sexual offences*	*Robbery*	*Burglary in a dwelling*	*Theft of a motor vehicle*	*Theft from a vehicle*
1999–2000[1]	1,000	60	49	480	325	1,305
2001–01	453	33	52	512	303	1.223
2001–02	303	22	77	544	395	1,135

[1] Parts of this area were policed by the Metropolitan Police until 1 April 2000, when responsibility for policing was transferred to Hertfordshire Constabulary.

Table B—Number of offences recorded by Hertfordshire Constabulary, from 1997 to 2001/02, by offence group

Year	Total	Violence against the person	Sexual offences	Robbery	Burglary	Theft and handling stolen goods	Fraud and Forgery	Criminal damage	Drug and other offences
1997 [1]	50,050	2,311	290	289	9,345	26,200	1,345	9,831	[3]439
1998–99 [2]	49,309	3,313	321	250	8,353	22,935	2,312	10,177	1,648
1999–00 [2,4]	52,741	3,703	348	420	8,689	23,358	2,935	11,560	1,728
2000–01	64,215	4,485	397	508	9,945	28,987	3,982	13,839	2,072
2001–02	67,437	4,713	381	683	10,682	30,213	3,475	15,323	1,967

[1] Recorded on a calendar year basis.
[2] The number of crimes recorded in that financial year using the expanded offence coverage and revised counting rules which came into effect on 1 April 1998.
[3] Before 1 April 1998 the only drug offence recorded was "trafficking".
[4] Parts of this area were policed by the Metropolitan Police until 1 April 2000, when responsibility for policing was transferred to Hertfordshire Constabulary. The figures given for this year are based on the 'Old boundaries'.

Cruelty to Animals

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had about the possible linkages between cruelty to animals and offences against the person. [96148]

Mr. Denham: The Department has not held recent discussions on the possible linkages between cruelty to animals and offences against the person, however, the Department is aware of the current external debates on this issue.

Drug-related Crime

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the percentage of crime related to drug use in *(a)* rural areas and *(b)* the Eastern region of the United Kingdom. [97593]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Recorded crime figures include statistics on drugs offences, such as possession, and on acquisitive crimes, such as burglary, but do not record whether the latter are related to an offender's drug habits.

However, the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) research programme, which involves interviewing and drug testing those arrested by the police, confirms a link between drug misuse and crime, although the conclusions do not relate specifically to rural areas or the Eastern region of the United Kingdom. Analysis of the data from the first eight sites in the survey, collected during 1999–2000, shows that 65 per cent. of arrestees provided a urine sample that tested positive for one or more illegal drug.

The analysis also shows that up to 29 per cent. of arrestees tested positive for opiates (including heroin) and/or cocaine (including crack).

As a guide to the proportion of crime that is drug-related, analysis of the NEW-ADAM self-report data indicates that while only 21 per cent. of non-drug using arrestees reported having previously offended in the past 12 months, this figure rises to 75 per cent. for those arrestees who use heroin and/or cocaine/crack. Moreover, while users of both heroin and cocaine/crack represented just under one quarter of all arrestees interviewed, they were responsible for more than three fifths of all the illegal income reported.

In support of this, 55 per cent. of arrestees who reported using one or more drugs in the last 12 months and committing one or more acquisitive crimes, acknowledged a link between their drug use and their offending behaviour. This proportion rose to 78 per cent. for arrestees who said they had used heroin and cocaine/crack.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of crime in the *(a)* Leeds West constituency and *(b)* the city of Leeds was deemed to be drug related in the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [96974]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Recorded crime figures include statistics on drugs offences, such as possession, and on acquisitive crimes, such as burglary, but do not record whether the latter are related to an offender's drug habits.

However, the new English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) research programme, which involves interviewing and drug testing those arrested by the police, confirms a link between drug misuse and crime, although the conclusions do not relate specifically to Leeds. Analysis of the data from the first eight sites in the survey, collected during 1999–2000, shows that 65 per cent. of arrestees provided a urine sample that tested positive for one or more illegal drug. The analysis also shows that up to 29 per cent. of arrestees tested positive for opiates (including heroin) and/or cocaine (including crack).

As a guide to the proportion of crime that is drug-related, analysis of the NEW-ADAM self-report data indicates that while only 21 per cent. of non-drug using arrestees reported having previously offended in the past 12 months, this figure rises to 75 per cent. for those arrestees who use heroin and/or cocaine/crack. Moreover, while users of both heroin and cocaine/crack represented just under one quarter of all arrestees interviewed, they were responsible for more than three fifths of all the illegal income reported.

In support of this, 55 per cent. of arrestees who reported using one or more drugs in the last 12 months and committing one or more acquisitive crimes, acknowledged a link between their drug use and their offending behaviour. This proportion rose to 78 per cent. for arrestees who said they had used heroin and cocaine/crack.

Drug-related Crime (Portsmouth, South)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of crime in the Portsmouth, South constituency was deemed to be drug-related in the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [97280]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Recorded crime figures include statistics on drugs offences, such as possession, and on acquisitive crimes, such as burglary, but do not record whether the latter are related to an offender's drug habits.

However, the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) research programme, which involves interviewing and drug testing those arrested by the police, confirms a link between drug misuse and crime, although the conclusions do not relate specifically to Portsmouth. Analysis of the data from the first eight sites in the survey, collected during 1999–2000, shows that 65 per cent. of arrestees provided a urine sample that tested positive for one or more illegal drug. The analysis also shows that up to 29 per cent. of arrestees tested positive for opiates (including heroin) and/or cocaine (including crack).

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Elderly People

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police hours were spent by the Metropolitan Police in the last 12 months for which figures are available on searching for elderly people who have wandered or absconded from *(a)* their homes or *(b)* places of residence; and what the total cost was of such exercises. [96993]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* The Commissioner for Police of the Metropolis informs me that the information sought is not recorded centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate costs.

Firearms

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the outcomes of the UK Gun Summit held on 10 January 2003. [96902]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The discussions which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary chaired on 10 January allowed the Government, representatives of community groups and the law enforcement authorities to engage together to look for solutions to the problem of people carrying and using guns, and the attitudes and experiences which lead them to do so. The meeting looked widely at legislation and law enforcement issues, at community involvement and at the underlying causes of gun crime. We are pursuing a range of follow up actions designed to take this work forward and to encourage and maintain community involvement. We have announced proposals for legislation and we will be making further proposals for action in the coming weeks.

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what co-operation exists between the UK and European police forces to combat illicit firearm trafficking. [96904]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: There is good co-operation between the UK and EU law enforcement agencies in combating illicit firearms trafficking and the UK is represented in a number of international fora aimed at ensuring joint working to combat this threat.

UK law enforcement is active in the Interpol Weapons and Explosives Tracking System (IWETS), the South European Co-operation Initiative (SECI), the United Nations panel of experts for small arms and light weapons tracing and marking (SALW), and the EU Small Arms Policy Committee (SAPC).

UK enforcement agencies have also forged strong bi-lateral links with their European partner agencies in their attempts to tackle the problem of cross border trafficking in small arms and light weapons.

Michael Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes involving the use of guns were committed in Staffordshire over the last 12 months for which figures are available; and in which locations. [90152]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* There were 116 recorded crimes in Staffordshire in the year ending March 2002 which involved firearms (excluding air weapons). Details of the locations of the offences are not available.

Graffiti

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many successful prosecutions there have been in each of the last 10 years against those who target *(a)* vehicles and *(b)* buildings with graffiti. [95661]

Mr. Denham: It is not possible to distinguish offences of graffiti from other types of criminal damage in the Home Office figures for court proceedings as the circumstances of individual offences are not collected centrally.

Greater London Assembly

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what financial assistance his Department gave to the Greater London Assembly in 2002; and for what projects. [95851]

Mr. Denham: The figures provided are for the financial year 2002–03 and relate to the Greater London Authority.

The Home Office has allocated £1,015,895,687 in police grant to the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA), which is part of the Greater London Authority. In addition, we are providing the following specific grants to the MPA:

£62 million from the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) to continue funding for CFF officers recruited in 2000–01 and 2001–02 and for CFF officers to be recruited in 2002–03;

£9.9 million from the DNA Expansion Programme;

roughly £20 million towards the cost of police officers' London Allowance;

£2.45 million to meet the cost of free travel for police officers;

an extra £13.1 million from the Street Crime Initiative;

an extra £46.3 million to counter terrorism (comprising £34 million for police officers, £8 million for community support officers and £4.3 million for associated counter-terrorism work).

We are also making available to the MPA the following capital resources:

£44.5 million in general capital grant and supplementary credit approvals;

£41 million for "Airwave", the new radio communications system;

£25 million for the Metropolitan Police's Command Control and Communications Information (C3i) System;

an extra £1 million for two successful bids from the £20 million Premises Improvement Fund.

Identity Cards

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the enquiries of the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey to his private office, when the hon. Member will receive a transcript of the speech he made on identity cards on 15 January. [97416]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* A copy of the transcript was sent to the hon. Member's office on 7 February.

Missing Persons

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children *(a)* ran away from home, *(b)* were listed as missing and *(c)* were abducted each year since 1997. [88188]

Mr. Denham: Statistics on the number of children who run away are not collected on a national basis.

Estimates of the scale of the problem have been made in the course of research studies. The most recent, by the Children's Society in 1999[1], drew on a national sample of nearly 13,000 young people. The study found that each year 77,000 young people under the age of 16 in the UK run away overnight. Because many young people run away more than once, this equates to 129,000 running away incidents each year. Details of this study are available in the recent report by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) 'Young Runaways'.

[1] Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) Still Running. London: The children's Society

'Children Missing from Care and from Home'—a guide of good practice—was published in tandem with the 'Young Runaways' report. This guidance was issued to every English local authority in November 2002, under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. This means that, other than in exceptional circumstances, Councils must follow its advice. This guidance recognises that local authorities, the police, and other agencies (including voluntary sector organisations) need to co-operate at local level to ensure a consistent response to the needs of children who have run away from their homes. The guidance requires that all reported runaways, and those not reported but who self refer, should be offered access to an independent interview upon their return—to identify the reasons for running away and agree an appropriate response.

Statistics are held by the Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB) on the number of cases where young people remain missing for more than 14 days, or other exceptional cases which are reported before that time. The number of cases recorded since 1997–98 is shown in the table.

	Number of children reported missing
1997–98	938
1998–99	1,184
1999–2000	1,467
2000–01	1,021
2001–02	1,037

Note:
Prior to July 1998 missing persons were not reported to the PNMPB until 28 days after their disappearance.

Source:
Police National Missing Persons Bureau.

The Home Office collects statistics from police forces on the number of child abductions committed each year. The offence of 'child abduction' is part of the violence against the person category of recorded crime. It includes both parental and non-parental abductions. The number of offences recorded by the police since 1997–98 is shown in the table.

	Total number of offences of child abduction
1997–98[1]	391
1998–99[2]	502
1999–2000	577
2000–01	546
2001–02	583

[1] The number of crimes recorded in that financial year using the coverage and rules in use until 31 March 1998.

[2] The number of crimes recorded in that financial year using the expanded offence coverage and revised counting rules which came into effect on 1 April 1998.

Source:
Home Office (2002) Crime in England and Wales 2001–02.

Offences of abduction which are sexually motivated will be recorded in the separate abduction category of recorded crime. However, this offence relates both to the abduction of adult and child female victims. It is not possible to dis-aggregate these statistics into child victims only.

Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish the Explanatory Notes for the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. [97184]

Beverley Hughes: They were published on 6 February 2003.

CS Spray

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces in England and Wales used CS gas operationally in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [95487]

Mr. Denham: I understand from the Association of Chief Police Officers that 40 police forces in England and Wales have access to CS spray. Information on the extent of its use operationally is not collected centrally.

Police Funding

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what figures in the British Crime Survey Recorded Crime Statistics he used to calculate the formula for the allocation of funds to the 30 Basic Command Units. [95988]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* To calculate the formula for the allocation of funds to the 30 Basic Command units (BCU), the data source was Recorded Crime Statistics as published in "Crime in England and Wales
2001/02", a copy of which is in the Library, not British Crime Survey data.

Four crime criteria were used:

Ranking of total acquisitive type crimes by BCU in 2001–02;

Ranking of total acquisitive type crimes per head of the population in the BCU area;

Ranking for total burglary and robbery crimes only per BCD; and

Ranking of the percentage increase in acquisitive type crimes 2000–01 to 2001–02.

Acquisitive type crimes were defined for this purpose as burglary, robbery and theft of, and from, vehicles. These types of crimes are most closely associated with drug use.

Police Recruits

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost is of recruiting a police officer; and what the change has been in the level of police grant in Essex from 2001–02 to 2002–03. [93402]

Mr. Denham: The recruitment of police officers is the responsibility of the Chief Officer of each force. No central records are kept of the overall cost of recruiting a police officer.

When rates of payment to be made under the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) in 2000–01 were agreed with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities, £1,000 was included for recruitment. This payment has been up-rated annually to £1,056 per recruit in 2002–03.

Including CFF, Rural and general grant, Essex received a total allocation of £156.6 million in 2002–03. This was an increase over 2001–02 of 3.9 per cent.

Police Special Branches

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many officers are employed in the Metropolitan Police Special Branch; [96563]

(2) how many officers are employed in Special Branches, including Ports Units, in police forces in England and Wales outside London. [96564]

Mr. Denham: Information collected annually by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary shows that on 31 March 2002 there was a total of 3,463 officers in forces' Special Branches, including 619 ports unit officers. It is not our practice to disclose detail at force level in the interests of national security as to do so could compromise operations.

Police Standards Unit

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 715W, on Police Standards Unit, which initiatives have been aided by the work of the Police Standards Unit. [96191]

Mr. Denham: The Police Standards Unit is supporting a number of initiatives across police forces in England and Wales to improve police performance. The initiatives include sponsoring and sharing good practice to reduce repeat victimisation, vehicle crime, domestic burglary and drug crime; tackling persistent offenders and street crime; aiding the implementation of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) and helping forces make the best use of forensic opportunities.

Retail Industry Crime

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 14 January, *Official Report*, column 585W, on retail industry crime, when the consultation on the means of creating and maintaining effective partnerships to reduce opportunities for crime against business will report. [96763]

Mr. Denham: The consultation period ends on 28 February 2003. The responses will be collated and analysed over the following eight to 12 weeks and consideration given to the best means of taking business crime reduction partnerships forward. A report should be available by June, and I expect to announce any new arrangements which follow on from the consultation later in the summer.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 586W, on small retail businesses, whether the results of the new survey of crime affecting retail and manufacturing business will be *(a)* published online and *(b)* placed in the Library. [96766]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in April last year a new survey of crime affecting retail and manufacturing business. This

will give a range of information about the types of crime which most impact on these business sectors and provide insights into the most effective interventions to address them. Results of the survey should be available later this year and will be published both online and placed in the Library.

Splash Programmes

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what funding is available to Splash programmes for *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06, broken down by region; what will be the amount of funding provided by each contributing agency; what will be the amount of funding necessary to run each Splash scheme; and if he will make a statement; [95931]

(2) what measures are being taken to increase youth participation in the Splash programme; and if he will make a statement; [95932]

(3) whether there will be a formal report on the Splash programme of 2002; and if he will make a statement. [95933]

Mr. Denham: In summer 2002 around 370 Splash and Splash Extra schemes were run in high crime areas, enabling over 90,000 young people to take part in a wide range of activities. These schemes contributed to an overall reduction in local crime rates of 5.2 per cent., with reductions of up to 31 per cent. in street crime and robbery in some areas. A full report on the evaluation of the 2002 programme will be published in the spring.

Each Splash Scheme costs £15,000 for a five-week summer programme, including £5,000 from partner agencies, and £6,000 for a two-week Easter programme, including £2,000 from partners.

For 2003, the Government will be launching a new single programme of positive activities for young people to provide year round out of school activities for eight to 19-year-olds. The new programme will absorb Splash and Splash Extra, and will deliver activities to more young people, providing support for those most at risk. The new programme will mean less bureaucracy for local areas, allowing them to focus on delivering good quality programmes to young people at risk of crime and social exclusion. While it is not yet possible to provide a regional breakdown of the funding that will be available, we are planning on each region having an increase compared to last year, with an overall increase in the total budget.

We would hope to sustain this level of activity and funding in subsequent years, but we shall need to review the position in the light of our experience this year.

Surveillance Commissioner

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* authorisations, *(b)* prior authorisations and *(c)* renewals of surveillance have been denied by the Surveillance Commissioner (i) in total and (ii) in relation to the Metropolitan Police; and if he will ask the Surveillance Commissioner to report on these matters in future annual reports. [95558]

Mr. Denham: As stated in paragraph 6.10 of the Chief Surveillance Commissioner Annual Report only one authorisation for intrusive surveillance was quashed. This was not a Metropolitan Police case.

Sussex Police

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 27 January, *Official Report*, column 116W, on Sussex police, of the 34 officers transferred from Sussex police in the year to 31 March 2002, where they were transferred to. [96013]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally. However I understand from Sussex police that the officers transferred to the forces shown in the table.

Police officers transferred from Sussex Police: 2001–02

To force	*Number transferred*
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	1
British Transport Police	4
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	2
Cumbria Constabulary	1
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	3
Dorset Police	2
Dyfed-Powys Police	1
Greater Manchester Police	1
Guernsey Police	1
Hampshire Constabulary	4
Humberside Police	1
Kent County Constabulary	4
Metropolitan Police	6
Nottinghamshire Police	1
West Mercia Constabulary	1
Wiltshire Constabulary	1
Total transfers out of Sussex	34

West Yorkshire Police

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many uniformed police officers West Yorkshire Police employed in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 2002. [96623]

Mr. Denham: Information about the number of uniformed police officers is not collected centrally. Responsibility for determining police officer numbers in a force rests with the chief constable.

West Yorkshire Police had 5,209 police officers on 31 March 1997 and 4,889 officers on 31 March 2002. The decline in police officer strength in West Yorkshire after March 1997 was much more marked than the overall decline that occurred nationally, despite the force having done a little better than the national average in terms of resources. However, police officer strength in West Yorkshire has been rising since March 2001. In the 12 months to March 2002 force strength increased by 74 officers, I understand that the force expects further substantial growth by March 2003.

The number of civilian support staff in the force has increased since March 1997 by 130 to 2,364 in March 2002.

Wildlife (Illegal Trade)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will include tougher sentences for illegal trade in wildlife in the Criminal Justice Bill; [94943]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on increasing prison sentences for illegal trade in wildlife. [94942]

Hilary Benn: The Government's consultation paper, "Review of the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1991" which was issued on 15 January, recommends an increase in penalties for certain illegal wildlife trade offences. The deadline for responses is 4 April 2003. There are no current plans to include this in the Criminal Justice Bill, but the Government may consider the proposal in the light of amendments tabled.

Working Holiday Visa Scheme

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will include within his current review of the Working Holidaymaker Visa Scheme an assessment of *(a)* the case for gap year assistant teachers continuing to receive small monetary payments from UK schools including state schools and *(b)* the benefits to schools of such visas covering more than one calendar year. [97376]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* Working Holidaymakers can enter the United Kingdom for a period of up to two years. They are entitled as workers to be paid the national minimum wage or more in the normal way. They may engage in full-time employment for up to 50 per cent. of their stay, and can work in all schools up to the level of junior supply teachers.

The objectives of the review of the Working Holidaymaker scheme are to make it more inclusive, remove unnecessary work restrictions and reduce abuse of the category. We have agreed that the review will include consideration of the particular interests of gap year entrants. An announcement of the outcome of the review will be made in due course.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Archaeological Sites (Cornwall)

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the impact of archaeological sites on the tourism industry of Cornwall. [96585]

Dr. Howells: DCMS has not made a formal assessment of the impact of archaeological sites on Cornwall's tourism industry. Nevertheless, the tourist boards recognise the important role that Cornwall's archaeological heritage plays in attracting visitors to the area.

British Writers

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding *(a)* her Department and *(b)* her Department's agencies provide to support young British writers. [96881]

Dr. Howells: The Arts Council of England, which my Department funds, runs a number of schemes to support young British writers. These schemes total £756,800 in 2002–2003.

Capital Projects

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will place the evaluations for each Capital Modernisation Fund projects in her Department since 1998 in the Library; and if she will make a statement. [97029]

Dr. Howells: As the Department's Capital Modernisation Fund projects have not concluded full evaluation reports are not yet available.

Club Licensing

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the costs for existing licence holders of initial registration under the new licensing system as proposed in the Licensing and Entertainment Bill. [97402]

Dr. Howells: The Government estimate that under the provisions of the Licensing Bill an application for a premises licence will cost between £100 and £500. If an existing licence holder currently has permission to sell alcohol and intends to do so under the new licensing regime they will also have to acquire a personal licence. Existing holders of justices' licences will automatically qualify for a personal licence at a cost of around £30, subject to the right of the chief officer of police to object if they are satisfied that the exceptional circumstances of the case are such that granting the application would undermine the Bill's crime objective.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the projected fees are for *(a)* a premises licence and *(b)* a club licensing certificate under the proposed Licensing and Entertainment Bill; and what the expected scale of charges is. [97406]

Dr. Howells: The Government estimate that under the provisions of the Licensing Bill an application for a premises licence or a club premises certificate would cost between £100 and £500 with an annual charge of between £50 and £150 to maintain a revenue stream and cover continuing inspection and enforcement. The Government envisage that fees will be set in bands depending on the size of the premises and are consulting industry, local authorities and others on the precise details of the fee structure.

Computer Misuse

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many laptop computers were used by *(a)* Ministers and special advisers and

(b) officials in her Department in each year since 1995, how many were (i) lost and (ii) stolen; what their cost was; and if she will make a statement. [97507]

Dr. Howells: At present, one laptop computer is used by a Minister and 80 are used by officials. It is not possible to provide information for previous years.

One laptop computer was stolen last year, one in 2001 and one in 1999. The average value of the stolen equipment was £2,500.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many cases of computer *(a)* hacking, *(b)* fraud and *(c)* theft her Department recorded in 2001–02; and on how many occasions computer systems have been illegally accessed by computer hackers (i) within and (ii) outside her Department. [97555]

Dr. Howells: DCMS did not record any cases of computer hacking or fraud in the period in question. There were four instances of computer theft in 2001 and three in 2002. DCMS has no evidence that any departmental computer systems were illegally accessed by hackers, inside or outside the Department.

Departmental Budgets

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the allocated budgets are for each of her Department's internal directorates in *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06. [97524]

Dr. Howells: The administration cost budgets for the Department's internal directorates for financial years 2003–06 have not yet been allocated. The budgets for 2003–04 will be allocated to internal directorates after the Department's Management Board has reviewed their annual business plans in March.

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will list consultations her Department has conducted since 1997; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed [97434]

Dr. Howells: The Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Written Consultation, which requires departments to keep a central register of consultations, applies to all formal national consultations from1 January 2001. The information requested before that date is not stored centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. Since 2001, the details are as follows:

Title	*Opening date for responses*	*Closing date for responses*
National Gallery/national Portrait Gallery Review: stage one consultation	8 January 2001	30 January 2001
National Heritage Memorial Fund Review: stage one consultation	4 April 2001	25 May 2001
Report of the Gambling Review Body	17 July 2001	31 October 2001
National Museum of Science and Industry Review: stage one consultation	1 August 2001	19 October 2001
Geffrye Museum/Horniman Museum/Museum of London Review: stage one consultation	8 August 2001	12 October 2001
Consultation on the draft Digital Television Action Plan	12 October 2001	2 January 2002
English Heritage Review stage one consultation	16 October 2001	11 January 2002
Public Lending Right. Quinquennial Performance Review: consultation Paper	13 November 2001	1 February 2002
Quinquennial Review on the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art	19 November 2001	8 February 2002
National Maritime Museum quinquennial Performance Review	22 November 2001	8 February 2002
Consultation on Media Ownership Rules	26 November 2001	28 February 2002
Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester: quinquennial Performance Review	5 December 2001	28 February 2002
Spectrum Planning Consultation	11 December 2001	12 April 2002
Council of Europe—Convention on the Protection of Audiovisual Heritage	20 December 2001	19 March 2002
Review of Progress toward digital switchover	14 February 2002	8 May 2002
Regent's park Sports Facilities Consultations	18 March 2002	10 May 2002
UK's Open General Export Licensing (OGEL) Limits	19 April 2002	14 June 2002
Changes to Licensing Houses during all New Year's Eve	24 April 2002	19 June 2002
The Draft Communications Bill	7 May 2002	2 August 2002
Prize Competitions	23 May 2002	31 August 2002
National Lottery Licensing and Regulation Consultation	27 June 2002	30 September 2002
Review of Lottery Funding: a consultation on Lottery Distribution Policy	29 July 2002	20 October 2002
Children's Play review	16 December 2002	7 March 2003

E-mail Addresses

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport by what e-mail address members of the public may contact *(a)* her and *(b)* each of the Ministers in her Department; and for each e-mail address if she will state (i) the date it became active and (ii) the number of e-mails received in each month since activation. [97460]

Dr. Howells: My colleagues and I can be reached at the following addresses:

tessa.jowell@culture.gsi.gov.uk,

kim.howells@culture.gsi.gov.uk,

richard.caborn@culture.gsi.gov.uk, and

tessa.blackstone@culture.gsi.gov.uk.

These addresses were set up on the date each Minister was appointed. 11 June 2001 for the first address and 12 June 2001 for the others.

It is not possible to provide a breakdown by month since the activation of each address save at disproportionate cost. However, so far this year each account has received the following number of e-mails.

	January 2003	As of 10 February 2003
Tessa Jowell	109	27
Kim Howells	39	19
Richard Caborn	19	19
Tessa Blackstone	89	26

Entertainment Licences

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate she has made of the number of additional entertainment licences required because of the reform of the two in a bar rule under the Licensing and Entertainment Bill; and what assessment she has made of additional costs. [97472]

Dr. Howells: Under the provisions of the Bill there will be no separate licence for the provision of public entertainment. Permission to carry on any of the activities licensable under the Bill will be covered by a single premises licence. It will cost no more, in terms of time or money, to apply for a licence permitting the sale of alcohol and the provision of entertainment than it would to apply for one permitting the sale of alcohol only.

The Regulatory Impact Assessment that was published alongside the Licensing Bill states that just over 9,000 on-licensed premises and registered members clubs hold permanent public entertainment licences or certificates of suitability. An estimated 37,000 temporary public entertainment licences are also issued each year. The Government have made no estimate of the number of premises that will apply for permission to provide entertainment under the new licensing regime. We expect, however, that the removal of the cost deterrent in applying for permission to provide entertainment, along with the provision of a less bureaucratic system and measures to prevent unnecessary conditions being attached to licences by licensing authorities will encourage many more premises to take the opportunity to provide public entertainment.

European City of Culture

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans are in place to assist the promotion of *(a)* Cardiff, *(b)* Liverpool, *(c)* Newcastle and Gateshead, *(d)* Oxford, *(e)* Bristol and *(f)* Birmingham in their bids to obtain the title of European City of Culture 2008. [97928]

Mr. Caborn: Each of the shortlisted cities will be designated a Centre of Culture. This is a UK only initiative and is not part of the EU's Capital of Culture programme. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is in consultation with the shortlisted cities to explore ways of developing the designation and maximising its impact and strengthening the UK's position in Europe as a major cultural destination.

The independent advisory panel that recommended the shortlist is now undertaking a further and more intensive programme of assessment of the shortlisted bids before making a final recommendation on the choice of City to go forward as the UK's nomination for European Capital of Culture 2008.

Jarvis plc

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what communications she has had with Jarvis plc regarding the consequences of the design of their new headquarters on the architectural heritage of the Smithfield area of the City of London; [95663]

(2) to what extent her Department has been consulted on the construction work in progress in the Smithfield area of the City of London. [95662]

Dr. Howells: This Department has not been consulted on the construction work in the Smithfield area, and has had no communications with Jarvis Plc on this matter.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent involvement she has had in the oversight of new construction in historically sensitive areas of the City of London. [95664]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State issued a Certificate of Immunity from Listing in respect of Drapers' Gardens, Throgmorton Avenue, London EC2, on 8 January 2003.

National Lottery

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many lottery *(a)* applications and *(b)* awards there have been for the Conwy constituency in each year since 1997; and what the national averages were in each year. [96632]

Mr. Caborn: This Department does not hold comprehensive information on lottery applications, in terms of the number of applications made, or the amounts requested on a constituency level.

The following table sets out the awards that have been made in the Conwy constituency since 1997 to date and is broken down by calendar year, along with UK constituency national award averages.

Year	Conwy constituency number of awards	UK constituency national award average
1997	31	22
1998	33	14
1999	47	31
2000	39	37
2001	55	33
2002	50	38

Note:
The figures set out in the table were generated from the Department's National Lottery. Awards Database and the information held is supplied to us from the Lottery Distributors.

Online Sales/Purchases

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what *(a)* products, *(b)* goods and *(c)* services were (i) bought and (ii) sold online by her Department in each of the last five years. [97461]

Dr. Howells: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport achieved the target of 90 per cent. of low value procurement via electronic means. It is not possible to separate the categories of purchases but all stationery,

low value office equipment and some low value services are procured either online or through the Government Procurement Card. No sales have taken place online.

Youth Athletics (Wales)

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much direct government funding was given to youth athletics in Wales in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000 and *(c)* 2001. [97107]

Mr. Caborn: This is a devolved matter which is the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Capital Projects

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will place the evaluations for the Capital Modernisation Fund projects relating to *(a)* national IT strategy, *(b)* space for sports and arts, *(c)* school laboratories for the 21st century, *(d)* wired-up communities, *(e)* university for industry on-line, *(f)* new technology institutes, *(g)* cybrarian, *(h)* sixth form rationalisation, *(i)* specialist schools, *(j)* computers for teachers phase II, *(k)* HE student support service, *(l)* SEN communication aids, *(m)* E-registration, *(n)* schools management system, *(o)* ICT for children in care curriculum online, *(p)* school security from learning to earning, *(q)* playground renovation and *(r)* centres of vocational excellence in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [97022]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Projects are at different stages and evaluation reports are not yet available for them all. The following projects are complete and copies of their evaluation reports have been placed in the Library:

National IT strategy

Wired-up communities

University for industry on-line

The project covering children in care is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. The project covering space for sports and arts is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

I will place copies of the evaluation reports from this Department's other projects in the Library when they become available. They are also routinely placed on the DfES website.

Child Care

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many applications with regard to *(a)* childcare workers and *(b)* premises are awaiting (i) registration and (ii) inspection; and what steps he is taking to process these applications. [87981]

Mr. Miliband: This is a matter for the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). The HM Chief Inspector for Schools, David Bell will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of his letter will be placed in the Library.

Early Years/Sure Start Funding

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his Department's policy in respect of Early Years and Sure Start funding is in relation to funding for *(a)* Stoke on Trent and *(b)* Staffordshire; and who will take the lead in developing services. [93160]

Maria Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

Sure Start Unit brings together at a national level responsibility for early education, childcare and health and family support in one, cross-departmental unit. This national change does not, however, alter the existing roles and responsibilities of Local Authorities (including Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire). They retain their significant responsibilities under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 for early years and childcare. This includes developing local strategic plans for delivery against key government targets for early years and childcare services. Funding is provided to local authorities to enable them to achieve targets and deliver against objectives set out in their plans.

There are also no current plans to change the funding arrangements for Sure Start Local Programmes. Local Authorities will need to take the services provided through such programmes into account in developing their plans.

Early-years Premises

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many early years settings have been *(a)* required and *(b)* recommended to upgrade their premises as a result of OFSTED inspections. [93432]

Mr. Miliband: This is a matter for the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). The HM Chief Inspector for Schools, David Bell will write to the hon. Member and a copy of his letter will be placed in the Library.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when young people of Redcar and Cleveland Borough will be able to apply for education maintenance allowances. [96915]

Margaret Hodge: The national Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme will be available from September 2004 across the whole of England.

In areas such as Redcar and Cleveland, which were not part of the pilot scheme, the first tranche of eligible students will be those who reach the compulsory school leaving age in the 2003–04 academic year.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimate he has made of the cost of the Education Maintenance Allowance in the next *(a)* year and *(b)* three years. [95652]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme will continue to be available in 56 local education authority pilot areas for 2003–04 and planned expenditure for this year is £220.5 million. EMAs will be made available across the whole of England from September 2004 and funding allocated in the latest spending review settlement is £300.5 million for 2004–05 and £470.5 million for 2005–06. The final resources required will depend on the details agreed for the national scheme.

Higher Education

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills whether it is his target to increase participation in higher education *(a)* towards and *(b)* to 50 per cent. of those aged 18 to 30. [94324]

Margaret Hodge: The target is to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent. of those aged 18 to 30-years-old by 2010, as measured by the Initial Entry Rate figure.

This measure is based on adding up the percentages of the population in each year group, between the ages of 18 and 30, who enter higher education for the first time.

This target was one of the Public Service Agreements set out during Spending Review 2000 and was confirmed in Spending Review 2002.

St. Bees Village Primary School

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for what reason restrictions have recently been placed on the number of hours the St Bees Village Primary School After School Club is allowed to open; who took this decision; on what authority it was based; and if he will make a statement. [94284]

Mr. Miliband: In England, regulation of day care for children under the age of eight is the responsibility of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Under Part XA of the Children Act 1989, an after school club must be registered with Ofsted, if care is provided for more than two hours in any day and for more than five days in a year. Schools are exempted from these requirements but there are circumstances in which these exemptions do not apply.

As the regulatory arrangements in this case are a matter for Ofsted, their HM Chief Inspector for Schools, David Bell, will write to my right hon. Friend and a copy of his letter will be placed in the Library.

Student Grants

Mr. Keith Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what percentage of the 30 per cent. of students who it is estimated in the White Paper The Future of Higher Education will qualify for a full grant will be going into full-time higher education at the age of 18. [97170]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 11 January 2003]:* I refer my right hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) on 6 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 358w.

Teaching Quality Academy

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when the consultation period on the establishment of the teaching quality academy will end. [94071]

Margaret Hodge: Consultation is being carried out simultaneously by Universities UK (UUK), the Standing Conference of Principles (SCOP), the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) and the Higher Education Staff Development Agency (HESDA). It will be completed by the end of March.

Universities' Revenue

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the estimated total extra revenue is that universities will receive per year following the introduction of deferred top up fees. [96277]

Margaret Hodge: The amount of fee income raised when the new arrangements are introduced will depend on which institutions decide to charge variable fees and at what level, together with the number of students taking those courses.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will estimate the costs of his plans to provide free tuition to students from low-income families. [94753]

Margaret Hodge: For 2002–03, it is costing the Government £477 million to provide tuition fee remission for full-time home and EU students from low-income families at higher education institutions in England and Wales. We intend to continue the present level of fee remission support for students from low-income families.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Democratic Republic of Congo

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo on implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1457 in respect of ending illegal activities relating to conflict diamonds; and if he will make a statement. [96534]

Mr. Rammell: Officials have had regular contact with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo regarding implementation of the Kimberley Process certification scheme to regulate the international trade in rough diamonds. The DRC is now a participant in the scheme, which we see as the most effective way of dealing with the illicit trade in diamonds—particularly conflict diamonds.

The scheme came into force on 1 January 2003 and the Government of the DRC has reported a substantial increase in the volume of diamonds being channelled through legitimate sources since this date. Successful implementation of the scheme in the DRC is clearly linked to the current peace process.

We will continue to encourage the DRC and others to implement in full. Together with the European Commission, we stand ready to offer technical assistance to achieve that, if asked.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence he has received from the United Nations relating to the UN report on illegal resource exploitation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; what additional investigations in the United Kingdom have been or will be undertaken; and if he will make a statement. [96535]

Mr. Rammell: We take seriously the allegations in the UN Expert Panel report against 12 UK companies. Where there is clear evidence of wrongdoing HMG will consider taking appropriate action. We asked for further information from the UN Expert Panel in November 2002 regarding the allegations. However, the Panel's mandate expired when it submitted its report (i.e. on 18 October 2002) and it was therefore unable to re-start work to produce the information requested until a new mandate had been granted. This was given by UN Security Council Resolution 1457 of 24 January. We are pressing the Panel to provide the information as soon as possible.

Sanctions

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what United Nations, European Union, African Union and other international mechanisms are in place to monitor and enforce sanctions against *(a)* the Democratic Republic of Congo and *(b)* Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [96536]

Mr. Rammell: There is an EU arms embargo against the Democratic Republic of Congo, last revised by Common Position 2002/829/CFSP of 21 October 2002.

The EU adopted Common Position 2002/145/CFSP on 18 February 2002 introducing targeted sanctions against Zimbabwe. These measures include an arms embargo, an embargo against items that could be used for internal repression, a travel ban and an asset freeze. These last two measures are targeted against 79 members of the ruling Zanu-PF party.

It is the responsibility of each EU Member State to ensure that they enforce each of these sanctions regimes.

Eritrea/Ethiopia

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Eritrea on following a peaceful settlement to territorial disputes with Ethiopia. [97049]

Mr. Rammell: The European Union resumed the political dialogue with Eritrea under the Cotonou agreement with the signing of a Country Strategy Paper on 14 November 2002. Within this framework, we have had discussions with the Government of Eritrea to discuss the implementation of the 12 December 2000 peace agreement signed in Algiers between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Although there are difficult issues remaining, both sides have given clear assurances that they remain committed to the peace process.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90508]

Mr. Rammell: The cost of external consultants in 2001/02 was £20.01 million.

The vast majority of expenditure is associated with our major Information Communications Technology (ICT) and Estate construction programmes. Consultants have also advised on legal, financial and personnel issues and provided support in areas where we have skills shortages. The increase in expenditure compared to 2000–01 is associated with the growth of our ICT programmes.

These figures cover the usual consulting roles eg. for advising on options and feasibility in the initial stages of a project. The figures quoted above exclude the costs of whole projects being implemented by outside consultants eg. Cap Gemini/Ernst and Young who are main contractors for the installation of the PRISM ICT system.

Iain Hook

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what investigations have been put in hand by British police into the death of Iain Hook on 22 November 2002. [96946]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are in close touch with the Suffolk police, who are helping the UK coroner in his investigation into Mr. Hook's death. They will await the outcome of the coroner's investigation before considering any further action.

Kosovo

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Serbs have returned to Kosovo in each month since 1 January 2002. [95547]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 February 2003]*: United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) figures indicate that from January to April 2002 inclusive, an average of 72 Serbs returned each month to Kosovo. The figures for the remaining months of 2002 are: May (93), June (56), July (68), August (97), September (206), October (43), November (44), December (27). Figures for returns to Kosovo in January 2003 are not yet available.

Kyrgyzstan

Mr. Peter Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Kyrgyzstan Government to establish relations; and if he will make a statement. [91762]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The British Ambassador, who is resident in Kazakhstan, last met the Kyrgyz Foreign Minister on 28 January. During the meeting he relayed concerns about the timing of a Referendum on Constitutional Reform. Embassy officials pay regular visits to Kyrgyzstan and regularly hold discussions with the Kyrgyz Government. The Department for International Development (DfID) has an office in Kyrgyzstan. My right hon. Friend Secretary of State for International Development plans to visit the country in the next few months.

Pakistan

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the answer of 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 768W, on Pakistan, what steps he plans to take as a result of the Government's concerns about the reports of Pakistan's nuclear-related dealings with other countries. [97478]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have for some time taken, and will continue to take, every available opportunity to impress upon Pakistan the need for compliance with the requirements of UN Security Council Resolution 1172. A key requirement of the Resolution is that Pakistan accede to, and abide by the obligations of, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We have made our concerns about their nuclear activities clear to Pakistan.

Somaliland

Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future of Somaliland. [96186]

Mr. Rammell: Somaliland organised successful local elections in December 2002, and will hold presidential and parliamentary elections later this year. Our hope is that these elections will help to bring further stability, prosperity and democracy to Somaliland.

We will monitor developments with keen interest and continue to discuss Somaliland with our partners in the European Union and the United Nations Security Council. We believe it should be for the people of Somalia to decide for themselves on their future.

Sudan

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the implications for the peace process of the start of conflict in Darfur, Sudan. [97048]

Mr. Rammell: We do not expect the conflict in Darfur to destabilise the Sudan peace process.

UN Counter-Terrorism Committee

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in the United Nations Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee since September 2001; what role is played by the United Kingdom in the CTC; and what initiatives have been put forward by the United Kingdom. [96927]

Mr. Rammell: UN Security Council Resolution 1373 requested States to report on the measures taken to implement the resolution and established an ad-hoc Committee of the Security Council, the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) to monitor implementation of the measures imposed. The UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Sir Jeremy Greenstock has had the Chair of the CTC since its inception but will relinquish it to the Spanish Permanent Representative in April 2003.

As chair the UK has worked to achieve a CTC which is focused and dynamic. The UK has drawn up work programmes to take forward work in the three key areas: monitoring States' implementation of 1373, facilitating the provision of assistance, and improving international co-operation on counter-terrorism, particularly between international and regional organisations. With this in mind and at UK instigation, the CTC is hosting a meeting with regional and international organisations on 7 March 2003, to look at their possible roles.

Since September 2001, 179 of the 191 member states have submitted one or more reports to the CTC. The CTC is now reviewing these, writing to the States concerned to seek further information where necessary, and will be working closely with the 13 states which have yet to submit a report.

UN Resolutions (Israel)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the resolutions passed by the *(a)* United Nations General Assembly and *(b)* United Nations Security Council in respect of Israel, which Israel to date has not complied with; and if he will make a statement on efforts made to ensure Israeli compliance. [96991]

Mr. Rammell *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* A number of resolutions are passed at the UN General Assembly each year on the Israel/Palestine question. These resolutions are not legally binding on the parties. Resolutions of the UN General Assembly can be found on the UN website at www.un.org.

Israel has not complied in full with UN Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1402 (2002) and 1435 (2002). But these resolutions also contain provisions calling on parties other than Israel to take certain action e.g. agreeing a cease-fire, recognising Israel's sovereignty. We continue to support all efforts to resume the Middle East Peace Process, including through the work of the Quartet, of which the UN is a member.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the United Kingdom provided the United Nations Security Council with new information on the increasing terrorist access to and possible use of *(a)* nuclear, *(b)* chemical, *(c)* biological and *(d)* other potentially deadly materials prior to the debate on combating terrorism in the United Nations Security Council on 20 January. [96926]

Mr. Rammell: The United Kingdom provided no new information to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) specifically in connection with the debate on combating terrorism on 20 January. In his speech on 20 January to the UNSC my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary highlighted the need to recognise the dangers inherent in a world where WMD and terrorism co-exist.

We remain in close contact on these issues with Security Council partners and have also shared information with fellow members of multilateral export control regimes. In addition we regularly share information on the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction with the IAEA and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Zimbabwe

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sanctions are in place against members of the Zimbabwe Government. [93611]

Mr. Rammell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale today (UIN 94093 and 94094).

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) whether the Government intend to extend the travel ban on President Mugabe and the other Zimbabwe government officials beyond 18 February; whether it will do so in association with other European Union countries; and if he will make a statement; [94093]

(2) what assessment Her Majesty's Government have made of the effectiveness of the sanctions applied to *(a)* President Mugabe and *(b)* other members of the government of Zimbabwe; what consideration the Government have given to extending the travel restrictions to other ministers and officials of the Government; and if he will make a statement. [94094]

Mr. Rammell: The EU imposed targeted sanctions on the Zimbabwe Government on 18 February 2002 (a travel ban and assets freeze on leading members of the ZANU-PF regime and an arms embargo). They are proving effective in helping to isolate the ZANU-PF leadership without hurting the ordinary people of Zimbabwe. The sanctions were extended twice in 2002, to ensure that all Government ministers and politburo members were covered (79 people in total). We have not ruled out further additions.

We want to see the current EU measures extended beyond 18 February. But this requires a unanimous decision by all EU member states.

We have been in regular contact in recent weeks with all EU partners. EU Foreign Ministers discussed this issue, and the future of the overall sanctions regime, on 27 January, but did not reach a decision. Permanent Representatives discussed it on 30 January and on 5 February, again without reaching consensus. The UK will continue to argue for the maintenance of a robust sanctions regime at the next Coreper meeting on 12 February.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the British Government's policy on what constitutes political dialogue that promotes democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Zimbabwe, as expressed in the Council Common Position concerning restrictive measures against Zimbabwe, Article 3.4–2002/145/CFSP; what discussions he has had with European partners on reaching a common understanding of this article; and if he will make a statement. [96362]

Mr. Rammell: Decisions on what constitutes political dialogue that promotes democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Zimbabwe are made on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with EU partners.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action on the situation in Zimbabwe European Union governments have agreed to take in meetings of the General Affairs and External Relations Council and at meetings of the European Council during the Danish Presidency of the EU; and if he will make a statement. [96364]

Mr. Rammell: Zimbabwe was discussed at three meetings of the General Affairs and External Relations Council under the Danish Presidency.

On 22 July 2002, the Council decided to extend the travel ban list to include 79 names, continue "appropriate measures" towards Zimbabwe under the Cotonou agreement, condemn the fast track land reform process as a cause of the present crisis and decide to continue to expand its programme of humanitarian assistance in Zimbabwe.

On 30 September the Council discussed preparations for the EU-SADC Ministerial Meeting which took place in Maputo in November, including Zimbabwean participation.

On 10 December the Council agreed that the Troika would visit Africa to discuss arrangements for the EU-Africa Summit, including Zimbabwean participation.

The European Council did not discuss Zimbabwe under the Danish Presidency. Full conclusions are available from the Council website, which is at: www.europa.eu.int

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) whether those Zimbabwean officials with assets frozen under EU sanctions will be able to access those assets if that sanctions regime is not extended on 18 February; what measures would be in place to stop this money returning to Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement; [96371]

(2) what *(a)* bilateral and *(b)* multilateral steps government departments are taking to ensure that those Zimbabwean Government officials' assets that are frozen under EU sanctions will remain frozen should the EU's sanctions regime not be extended on 18 February; and if he will make a statement. [96372]

Mr. Rammell *[holding answer 7 February 2003]:* The Government remain committed to a rollover of a robust EU package of measures against the ZANU-PF regime, including the assets freeze.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy that people born in the UK but living in Zimbabwe may have their passport stamped born in UK. [97173]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The town of birth is shown in British passports, but not the actual country unless it is needed to avoid ambiguity. We have no plans to stamp the UK as place of birth into the passports of British citizens living in Zimbabwe.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Minimum Income Standard

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what discussions he has had with the Treasury to establish a minimum income standard which includes targeted support to meet the costs of caring for a disabled child. [96312]

Maria Eagle: DWP Ministers meet with ministerial colleagues regularly to discuss issues related to the alleviation of child poverty. They attend the Ministerial Group on Children and Young People (MISC9) and the Joint Ministerial Committee on Poverty, both of which address child poverty issues.

We do recognise that disabled children, and their families, have additional needs. We are committed to helping severely disabled people with the extra costs they face as a result of their disabilities. In April 2002 the disabled child premium was increased by £5 a week on top of the normal uprating, to £35.50. In April 2003, it will rise again by £5 above inflation, to more than £40 a week on top of basic Income Support or tax credits. In addition, the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance was extended to three and four-year-olds in April 2001, providing an extra £39.30 a week to those families.

A full analysis of our strategy to eradicate child poverty is given in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. "Opportunity for all—fourth annual report" (CM 5598) was published in September 2002. It reports on a range of outcome indicators covering many dimensions of poverty and social exclusion.

Benefit/Pension Entitlement

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if the Government will review benefit and pension entitlement with regard to the relationship between the lower earnings threshold and national insurance contributions. [97076]

Mr. McCartney: The Lower Earnings Limit is currently set at £75 a week, and will rise to £77 a week from the start of the new tax year.

Until April 2000 employees started paying national insurance contributions, and building up entitlement to contributory benefits, once their earnings reached the Lower Earnings Limit. However from April 2000 a new employees' earnings threshold was introduced as the point from which employees start to pay contributions. This is currently £89 a week, and will remain at this level for 2003–04. This means that employees who earn between the Lower Earnings Level and the earnings threshold do not have to pay national insurance contributions, but nevertheless continue to build up entitlement to contributory benefits such as state pension.

The recent Green Paper "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement" (Cm 5677) recognised that some people, in particular women, in low-paid or part-time work may face difficulties in accruing sufficient individual rights for the state pension. We will continue to look at the effect of this on contributory and other benefits.

Demography

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the Office for National Statistics' report "Social Trends" predicting a continued rise in the proportion of the population over 65; and if he will make a statement. [96729]

Mr. McCartney: The number of people aged over 65 in the UK is expected to increase more rapidly than the population as a whole, leading to a rise in the proportion of the population aged over 65.

The figures in the Office for National Statistics' report "Social Trends" predicting the rise in the proportion of the population over 65 are the same as those considered by this Department when producing the pensions Green Paper, "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement" (Cm5677).

The Green Paper sets out our proposals.

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list consultations his Department has conducted since it was established; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [97424]

Mr. McCartney: The Government's code of practice on written consultation applies to written consultations which have a national impact on policy and services from 1 January 2001. The Department for Work and Pensions came into being in June 2001. All copies of consultation documents are published online on both the Department for Work and Pensions and UK Online websites. Paper copies are also available.

Details on the timing of each consultation since June 2001 are in the table.

Title of consultation	*Start date*	*End date*
Amending the Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979	23.07.01	15.10.01
Occupational Pension Scheme Winding up Notices and Reports (etc) Regulations 2001	01.08.01	23.10.01
Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Disclosure of Information) Amendment Regulations 2001	13.08.01	15.11.01
Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Contracting-out) draft miscellaneous amending regulations	03.05.01	31.07.01
Changes to Invalid Care Allowance	23.07.01	15.10.01

Title of consultation	*Start date*	*End date*
The Minimum Funding Requirement: The next stage of reform. Consultation on the draft Occupational Pension Schemes (Minimum Funding Requirement and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2001	18.09.01	12.10.01
Private Pensions Simplification	19.10.01	31.01.02
Bulk transfer of accrued pensions rights without member consent	20.12.01	22.03.02
Revised code of practice on fo gathering of information as required in Social Security Fraud Act 2001	08.04.02	20.04.02
Consultation on Three Recommendations in the Myners' report "Institutional Investment in the UK-a review"	04.02.02	03.05.02
Member nominated trustees and directors	12.02.02	13.03.02
Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (OPRA) quinquennial review	10.05.02	02.08.02
Measuring Child Poverty	18.04.02	10.07.02
The future of the residential allowance component of Income Support, Minimum Income Guarantee, Jobseeker's Allowance	22.05.02	31.08.02
Equality, Opportunity, and Independence for all (Race Relations Amendment Act)	30.05.02	30.09.02
Social Security Advisory Committee Review	16.10.02	08.01 .03
Pathways to work: Helping people into employment	18.11.02	10.02.03
Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement	17.12.02	28.03.03

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for what reasons disability living allowance spending has increased from 1995–96 to 2003–04 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [97361]

Maria Eagle: DLA provides a contribution towards the extra costs faced by severely disabled people. It is paid to those who require personal care and/or have walking difficulties as a result of their disabilities. Spending on the benefit has increased steadily year on year because more people than ever are receiving the benefit (and because its value has been maintained by increasing the rates at which it is paid each year in line with the movement in prices as measured by the retail prices index).

Early Years and Sure Start

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his Department's policy in respect of Early Years and Sure Start funding is in relation to funding for *(a)* Stoke on Trent and *(b)* Staffordshire; and who will take the lead in developing services. [93161]

Maria Eagle: Sure Start Unit brings together at a national level responsibility for early education, childcare and health and family support in one, cross-departmental unit. This national change does not, however, alter the existing roles and responsibilities of Local Authorities (including Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire). They retain their significant responsibilities under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 for early years and childcare. This includes developing local strategic plans for delivery against key government targets for early years and childcare services. Funding is provided to local authorities to enable them to achieve targets and deliver against objectives set out in their plans.

There are also no current plans to change the funding arrangements for Sure Start Local Programmes. Local Authorities will need to take the services provided through such programmes into account in developing their plans.

External Consultants

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his answer of 21 January 2003 to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), *Official Report*, column 261W, on external consultants, if he will list the projects completed by external consultants during 2001–02, with the cost of each project. [96786]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) on 4 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Ménière's Disease

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will treat those suffering from Ménière's disease as eligible for disability living allowance. [96287]

Maria Eagle: People with Ménière's disease are entitled to Disability Living Allowance if they meet the usual qualifying conditions for the benefit, which depend on the effects that severe physical or mental disability have on a person's need for personal care and/or their ability to walk and not on particular disabilities or diagnoses.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many minimum income guarantee claimants are aged *(a)* 75 and above and *(b)* 80 and above. [97381]

Mr. McCartney: The information is shown in the table.

Age	*Number of MIG claimants*
75 and over	930,400
80 and over	659,000

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90594]

Mr. McCartney: The information is in the table.

Estimate of the full year impact on the Department of Work and Pensions of increases to the National Minimum Wage (NMW)

Proposed NMW (£)	*England*[1]	*Scotland*[1]	*Wales*[1]	*Total*[1]
(a) 4.26	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
(b) 4.17	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
(c) 4.87	6.990	0.949	0.496	8.435
(d) 5.00	9.863	1.342	0.694	11.899
(e) 5.30	16.952	2.340	1.194	20.486

[1] Figures are in £ millions

Notes:

1. Total costs include Employers National Insurance Contributions (ERNIC) and superannuation charges.

2. Average earnings have increased by 3.8 per cent. over the 12 months to November 2002 (*Source:* Office of National Statistics, "Average Earnings" published 15 January 2003). When applied to the 2002 NMW this would increase the rate to £4.26. All DWP staff are paid hourly rates above this level.

NIRS2

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many people received *(a)* compensation under the existing rules and *(b)* flat rate £10 payments for incorrect payments triggered by the NIRS2 computer system; [83211]

(2) how much was paid in *(a)* compensation under the existing rules and *(b)* flat rate £10 payments for incorrect payments triggered by the NIRS2 computer system. [83212]

Malcolm Wicks: Precise numbers of people who received compensation under the existing rules is not available but, in total, compensation amounting to £4,604,282 has been paid to our customers and of that amount £1,650,122 was in respect of compensation under the existing Departmental scheme; and £2,954,160 was in respect of the £10 special scheme.

Absenteeism

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department, its predecessors and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93498]

Mr. McCartney: Between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2001 there were 31,296 recorded instances of unauthorised absence (i.e. incidences of strike action and people absent without leave only) for the Department and each of its constituent agencies. The Department for Work and Pensions is committed to working in partnership as a means of eliminating industrial action.

Between 1 January 2002 and 31 December 2002 there were 25,024 instances of unauthorised absences (absenteeism) in the Department and each of its constituent agencies.

The number of instances of unauthorised absences for the Department, its predecessors and its agencies between 1990 and 2000 is not available.

The number of instances of unauthorised absence for the Department and each of its agencies for January 2003 is not available yet.

The rate of staff sickness in the Department, its predecessors and each of its agencies between 1990 and 1993 is not available. ITSA was privatised during 1998/1999, therefore consistent staff sickness rate figures for ITSA are not available between 2000 and 2003. The Appeals Service became a departmental agency in April 2000.

The rate of staff sickness for The Appeals Service prior to April 2000 is therefore not available. The Contributions Agency was transferred to the Inland Revenue in 1999.

The rate of staff sickness in the Department's remaining constituent agencies between 1994 and 2001 is summarised below. The figures represent the average number of working days lost per staff year.

Year[1]	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
ES	11.3	12.4	12.1	13.0	11.0	11.5	11.8	12.8
CSA	11.6	13.4	12.3	11.9	11.1	12.1	11.1	11.0
BA	12.4	12.7	12.3	12.5	11.1	11.0	11.1	10.6
DSS	12.7	10.5	9.0	9.9	8.1	8.5	7.6	9.4
CA	11.3	12.5	12.0	11.1	9.2	—	—	—
TAS	—	—	—	—	—	—	[2]10.4	9.6
ITSA	8.4	9.7	8.9	8.7	7.9	7.1	11.1	—
HSE	8.6	9.1	8.7	10.0	9.4	9.6	8.6	7.9

[1] Calendar Years
[2] Staff sickness rate for the period April 2000—December 2000.
ES = Employment Service
CSA = Child Support Agency
BA = Benefits Agency
DSS = Department for Social Security
CA = Contributions Agency
TAS = The Appeals Service
ITSA = Information Technology Services Agency
HSE = Health and Safety Executive

Figures for 2002 are currently being collected and will be published later this year. In 1998 the Cabinet Office set targets to reduce sickness absenteeism by 20 per cent. at the end of 2001 and by 30 per cent. at the end of 2003.

This equated to a target for all agencies of 9.5 days by December 2001 and 8 days for the Department by December 2003. The Department for Work and Pensions is committed to meeting this target by continuing to manage sickness absence effectively.

Pension Schemes

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many workers are in *(a)* defined contribution and *(b)* final salary occupational schemes; and how many and what proportion of those workers are contracted out of the state scheme. [96178]

Mr. McCartney: Partial preliminary results from the GAD 2000 survey have been published but have not yet ybeen fully validated and do not give details of public sector scheme membership.

The figures show active membership of occupational pension schemes at the time the survey was carried out, rather than the total membership throughout the 1995–96 tax year.

Thousand

	Type of scheme	
1995 totals	*Final salary*	*Defined contribution*
All occupational schemes	8,950	1,060
Numbers contracted out	8,305	460
Proportion contracted out (percentage)	93	43

Source:
The GAD 1995 Survey of Occupational Pension Schemes.

Textile Industry (Redundant Staff)

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what retraining programme his Department supports for redundant staff of the textile industry. [92158]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Jobcentre Plus offers assistance to help companies handle any significant reduction in staffing they may have to make, and help to those employees who are affected in identifying alternative jobs or any training they require.

We have introduced the Rapid Response Service to provide support for people affected by redundancies including those in the textile industries and help them make the transition into sustainable new jobs. The nature of the help provided by the service is tailored to the needs of the individuals, the employer and the local labour market. This can include offering information, advice and guidance to those affected, help with job search, facilitating retraining where necessary or developing customised retraining programmes. People affected by redundancy can also have early access to Jobcentre Plus programmes such as the new deals and work-based learning for adults.

We offer a range of training opportunities to ensure that unemployed people, including those made redundant from the textile industry, have the skills and experience they need to find and remain at work. Work Based Learning for Adults provides people with real work experience and the opportunity to develop job-related skills. We have developed Ambition programmes to help unemployed and disadvantaged people gain the right skills to meet the needs of employers in key sectors such as construction, retail, information technology and energy.

We, along with colleagues in the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Trade and Industry, have asked the regional development agencies to lead in the development of the frameworks for regional employment and skills action (FRESAs). This strategic partnership of organisations includes Jobcentre Plus, the CBI, the TUC, the Learning and Skills Council and local authorities. The work of the FRESAs will provide a co-ordinated strategy for skills in each region, ensuring a more efficient and co-ordinated service for employers and individuals alike. Each region has had a Framework in place since October 2002.

Unallocated Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the current unallocated provision in his Department's total resource and capital budget for 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [97344]

Mr. McCartney: The Departmental Unallocated Provision for the financial year 2003–04 is £105.088 million.

Winter Fuel Payment/Concessionary TV Licence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the administrative costs of *(a)* the winter fuel allowance and *(b)* the free TV licence for the over 75s, in each year from 1998–99 to 2003–04 (planned). [97356]

Mr. McCartney: Information is not currently available in the format requested. The Department now accounts for its administration and benefit expenditure by Strategic Objective, as set out in its Public Service Agreements (PSA), and by individual Requests for Resources (RfRs), as set out in the Departmental Estimates and Accounts.

HEALTH

Alcohol Strategy

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the alcohol strategy will ensure that young people with underlying emotional or mental health problems be assessed and where necessary referred to tier 3 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. [96003]

Ms Blears: The Government are committed to implementing the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy by 2004. The strategy will be prepared by the Cabinet Office strategy unit, who will consider a wide range of issues including health service needs and the needs of vulnerable young people. The strategy will be published in summer 2003.

The capacity of the child and adolescent mental health services to respond to a range of needs—including those of young people whose alcohol problems have underlying emotional/mental health

causes—is steadily improving. However, appropriate assessment and referral arrangements are for local services to determine.

Nutritional Health

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research projects his Department is sponsoring into the links between poor diet and specific diseases; and what plans he has for future research. [96830]

Ms Blears: Through the policy research programme, the Department has funded a programme of research, in two phases and with a total value of about £2.5 million, which has addressed priorities important to improving nutritional health.

The first phase, from 1994 to 1997, which was commissioned and managed jointly with the Medical Research Council (MRC), focused specifically on the relationship between nutritional factors and clinical outcome and, in particular on the role of diet and nutrition in the prevention and development of cancers and cardiovascular disease.

The second phase, from 1997 to 2002, included studies that looked at facilitators and barriers to good nutritional health, obesity and interventions aimed at achieving recommended dietary changes, particularly in low-income groups. Still looking at the dietary risk factors linking to cardiovascular disease and cancers, this phase of the programme also included work on nutritional aspects of bone health.

This time limited programme of research has now been completed and the Department is currently producing an overview of findings from the second phase, the purpose of which is to highlight key messages for policy and practice. The Department is also currently funding a systematic review of the facilitators and barriers to healthy eating for children aged 4 to 10 years, having just completed a similar review for young people.

The Department has no immediate plans to commission additional work following on from this programme, but further studies that link poor diet and specific diseases might emerge as priorities under future bidding rounds for policy research programme funding.

In addition, the Department has funded, via the National Asthma Campaign managed programme, a study examining the effect of dietary supplementation with magnesium or vitamin C in asthma.

The main Government agency for research into the causes and treatments of disease is the MRC, which receives its funding from the Department of Trade and Industry via the Office of Science and Technology. The MRC has a large portfolio covering all aspects of nutrition from basic research to clinical trials. In 2001–02 the MRC spent an estimated £316.6 million on its nutrition portfolio.

Included in this figure is the work being carried out at the MRC resource centre for human nutrition research, the Dunne Nutrition Unit in Cambridge and the international nutrition group in Gambia. Examples of the research covered in the portfolio are projects designed to test the hypothesis that nutrition during infancy and childhood has a significant impact on health, neuro-cognitive development and later propensity to disease, and projects designed to identify the principal molecular, cellular and genetic mechanisms by which poor maternal nutrition might impair the early development of the mammalian embryo.

Acrylamide

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the research commissioned by the Food Standards Agency into the prevalence of acrylamide in cooked and prepared food. [96244]

Ms Blears: Following the Swedish research published in April 2002, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) commissioned its own work, published in May 2002, which confirmed these initial findings. Since then, the FSA has played a significant role in contributing to European and international efforts to develop an understanding of acrylamide in food.

The FSA is currently negotiating contracts with organisations successful in a recent tender exercise for research projects in the following areas:

Identification of the mechanism of formation of acrylamide in cooked foods, with the aim of recommending possible means of controlling acrylamide formation.

Identification of potential precursors in food and investigation of the relationship between processing parameters such as ingredients, cooking temperatures etc and the formation of acrylamide, with a view to identifying methods to reduce levels in cereal-based food.

Assessment of the level of acrylamide in the United Kingdom diet.

The Agency also recently issued a further call for research proposals investigating the effect of domestic cooking on acrylamide levels in food.

NHS Salaries

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list posts in acute hospital trusts carrying a salary of more than £100,000; [93640]

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS posts are paid a salary in excess of £100,000 in each national health service trust in England. [96102]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the numbers of employees for whom information is available centrally whose remuneration in 2001–02 was over £100,000 has been placed in the Library. These figures largely cover medical consultants. The figures refer to all National Health Service trusts.

Asylum Seekers

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many registered asylum seekers have received dialysis treatment from the NHS in each of the last three years. [97283]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* This information is not held centrally.

Attention Deficit Disorder

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the National Service Framework for Children will include guidance concerning the early diagnosis and treatment of attention deficient disorder and attention deficit hyper-activity disorder. [96640]

Jacqui Smith: The national service framework for children, young people and maternity services will raise standards of care for children generally within the national health service, local authority social services and education services.

A small number of exemplars will be developed to illustrate the main principles, although no decision has been made on the conditions to be covered.

Blood Stocks

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the level of blood stocks available to NHS hospitals in the United Kingdom. [96095]

Ms Blears: For the past three years national health service hospitals in England have received all the blood they need. On 6 February 2003, 63,770 units of blood were held centrally. This represents seven days supply. At any one time, a further two days supply of blood are being processed by the National Blood Service.

Information on the current levels of blood stocks in Scotland and Wales is the responsibility of the devolved Administrations. While the institutions in Northern Ireland are dissolved, responsibility rests with Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office.

Brighton Body Positive Project

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the future funding *(a)* through the AIDS support grant and *(b)* from the Brighton and Hove PCT of the Brighton Body Positive Project; [96027]

(2) if he will make a statement on the work of the Brighton Body Positive Project; [96028]

(3) what the impact will be on public funding for the Brighton Body Positive Project of changes in the way the AIDS support grant is allocated. [96030]

Ms Blears: The Department values the important contribution that voluntary organisations like Brighton Body Positive can make to services for people with HIV. The future funding of Brighton Body Positive will be for the local commissioners of HIV services to decide taking account of local priorities and available resources.

The review of the AIDS support grant is currently being finalised. Introduction of the revised formula from April 2003 will be managed to avoid destabilising existing services in areas where funding is reduced.

The review is aimed at addressing the changing nature of the HIV epidemic in England, including the social care needs of families and children affected by HIV.

Child Protection

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many communications to social services departments regarding procedures for dealing with vulnerable children have been issued by his Department since 25 February 2000. [96037]

Jacqui Smith: Communications to social services departments regarding procedures for dealing with vulnerable children since February 2000 have included:

the "Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (April 2000)";

together with, "Assessing Children in Need and their Families: Practice Guidance (April 2000)";

supplementary guidance to "Working Together to Safeguard Children (December 1999)" guidance focusing on "Safeguarding Children Involved In Prostitution (June 2000)";

guidance focusing on "Complex Child Abuse Investigations: Inter-Agency Issues (May 2002)";

supplementary guidance to "Working Together to Safeguard Children (December 1999)" focusing on "Safeguarding Children in whom Illness is Induced or Fabricated by Carers with Parenting Responsibilities (August 2002)";

"Learning from Past Experience—A Review of Serious Case Reviews (June 2002)";

my letter of 28 January 2002, Child Protection Responsibilities of Primary Care Trusts;

my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health's letter of 28 January 2003 reminding trusts of their responsibilities to children, particularly those relating to child protection;

Local Authority Circular (2000)18 "Amendment to guidance to local authority social services departments on visits by children to special hospitals";

Local Authority Circular (2001)27 "Access to education for children and young people with medical needs";

Local Authority Circular (2002)17 "Children missing from care and from home: good practice guidance";

Local Authority Social Services Letter (2001)2 "The Children and Families court advisory and support service (CAFCASS) and complaints about the functioning of child protection conferences"; and

Local Authority Social Services Letter (2002)4 "Guidance on accommodating children in need and their families".

Children in Care

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what central database is kept of children in the care of Social Services who go missing from their usual place of residence. [95995]

Jacqui Smith: Every English local authority is required to submit an annual statistical return to the Department, which includes information about the numbers of children who have gone missing from care in their area over a 12 month period.

"Children Missing from Care and Home—a guide to good practice" was issued to every English local authority in November 2002, under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. The guidance requires that where a child in care is assessed to be missing, social services should pass on this information to the police who should then ensure that their details are included on the police national computer.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many communications to NHS trusts regarding procedures for dealing with children suspected of suffering harm at the hands of their carers have been issued by his Department since 25 February 2000. [96038]

Jacqui Smith: Communications to national health service trusts regarding procedures for dealing with children suspected of suffering harm at the hands of their carers include:

"the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (April 2000)";

together with, "Assessing Children in Need and their Families: Practice Guidance (April 2000)";

supplementary guidance to "Working Together to Safeguard Children (December 1999)" focusing on "Safeguarding Children Involved In Prostitution (June 2000)";

guidance focusing on "Complex Child Abuse Investigations: Inter-Agency Issues (May 2002)"

supplementary guidance to "Working Together to Safeguard Children (December 1999)" focusing on "Safeguarding Children in whom Illness is Induced or Fabricated by Carers with Parenting Responsibilities (August 2002)";

my letter of 28 January 2002 "Child Protection Responsibilities of Primary Care Trusts";

my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Health's letter of 28 January 2003 reminding trusts of their responsibilities to children, particularly those relating to child protection and;

Revised Health Service Circular HSC 1999/160 (issued in August 2000) "Visits by Children to Ashworth, Broadmoor and Rampton Hospitals Directions".

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met a delegation of *(a)* children in care and *(b)* local authority social service directors to discuss improvements in educating children in care; and when he next plans to do so. [96122]

Jacqui Smith: I meet regularly with representatives of the Association of Directors of Social Services to discuss a range of children's services issues including the educational achievement of children in care. The last meeting took place on 18 December 2002. The next meeting is scheduled for 18 March 2003.

Though I have not met recently with a delegation of children in care, I am kept informed of their views through the Quality Protects national reference group. The group comprises children and young people in care as well as young people who have left care. The group was established to provide a means by which Government can hear the views of children and young people on how the Quality Protects programme is working on the ground.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome sufferers there are in England; how many of them are receiving treatment from the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [97504]

Jacqui Smith: The Department of Health does not routinely collect statistics on the prevalence of individual conditions. The report of the independent chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgicencephalomyelitis working group, published in January 2002, estimated a population prevalence of around 0.2 to 0.4 per cent, in adults and around 0.07 per cent.in children.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent guidance he has issued to hospital trusts and PCTs on the provision of services to myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome sufferers; and if he will make a statement. [97505]

Jacqui Smith: We have issued no guidance to hospital trusts and primary care trusts on the provision of services to patients with chronic fatigue syndrome/ myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME).

In October 2002 however, we did make the National Health Service aware, through the Chief Executive's Bulletin and the GP Bulletin, of the guidance produced by Action for ME called Guidance on the management of CFS/ME.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have died from coronary heart disease in *(a)* Jarrow constituency, *(b)* South Tyneside, *(c)* the North East and *(d)* the UK in each year since 1997; and what measures his Department has taken to help reduce deaths from coronary heart disease in South Tyneside. [96379]

Ms Blears: Statistical returns of deaths attributed to coronary heart disease are currently available for the period 1997–2001, and are shown in the table.

Deaths from coronary heart disease[1], 1997 to 2001[2]

Year	*Jarrow parliamentary constituency*	*South Tyneside unitary* authority	*North East Government Office Region*	*United Kingdom*
1997	243	478	7,158	140,209
1998	206	428	7,097	138,110
1999	218	404	6,550	132,024
2000	212	384	6,161	124,063
2001	179	324	5,955	120,957

Notes:

Deaths selected using International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9) codes 410–414, and International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes 120–125. ICD-9 codes were used to classify these deaths from 1997 to 2000 in England and Wales and Northern Ireland, and from 1997 to 1999 inScotland. ICD-10 codes were used in subsequent years.

Years in which deaths occurred in England & Wales. Years in which deaths were registered in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Sources:

England and Wales—Office for National Statistics

Scotland—General Register Office for Scotland

Northern Ireland—General Register Office for Northern Ireland

The Government are committed to tackling the historical social and geographical inequalities of the impact of coronary heart disease (CHD). We are taking action now to remedy these inequalities through the implementation of the national service framework for CHD, which sets clear national standards for the prevention and treatment of CHD.

In the area of CHD prevention, one example of the local implementation of these initiatives is that National Health Service smoking cessation services in Gateshead and South Tyneside Health authority helped over 4,000 people to give up smoking for at least four weeks between April 2000 and March 2002. South Tyneside Primary Care Trust has also been invited by the New

Opportunities Fund to make an application for a Five-a-day grant to increase awareness of and access to fruit and vegetables.

In the area of CHD diagnosis, there has been considerable expansion of diagnostic angiography services locally over recent years, with a New Opportunities Fund financed laboratory established in Sunderland to supplement a new Gateshead laboratory.

In the field of primary care, at least 84 per cent, of patients who have suffered a heart attack are now being prescribed life-saving statins. A table showing the rate of increase of the prescription of statins in South Tyneside and nationally over the last three years, has been placed in the Library.

One of the aims of the Patient Choice initiative which has been in place since July last year is to reduce the impact of regional variations in secondary treatment provision for CHD patients. Under this initiative, CHD patients who have been waiting more than six months for a revascularisation procedure are offered the opportunity to be treated at a hospital or clinic of their choice, which may be either another NHS hospital or a hospital or clinic in the private sector. This and other associated initiatives are currently offering the possibility of shorter waits for treatment to patients in South Tyneside and many other areas, and local NHS service providers are keen to encourage eligible patients to take part.

There has been little progress made in changes to lower emissions in the last few years, except during the last year, when LPG vehicles have been added to the choice list as they become available from manufacturers. We hope to replace our pool car fleet with LPG vehicles and will be reviewing our choice list before the end of 2003 to include mor of these.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 25 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Anne France; [92283]

(2) why he has not replied to the letter to him dated 25 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Anne France. [94691]

Mr. Milburn: A reply was sent to my right hon. Friend on 10 February.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 2 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. Z. Daugavietis; [92284]

(2) why he has not replied to the letter to him dated 2 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. Z. Daugavietis; [94697]

(3) when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 2 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. Z. Daugavietis. [97085]

Mr. Milburn: A reply was sent to my right hon. Friend on 10 February.

Data Protection Act

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many subject access requests for information under the Data Protection Act 1998 were received by his Department in each of the last three years; and how many were *(a)* fulfilled in full within the statutory period, *(b)* fulfilled in full beyond the statutory period, *(c)* fulfilled in part and *(d)* have not been fulfilled, in each of the last three years. [92188]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer Tuesday 21 January 2003]*: The table below sets out the number of requests, on an annual basis, received since 1 March 2000, when the Act came into force. Figures in the last column represent requests that have been made where work is in progress or where more information from the data subject is awaited.

Requests fulfilled:

	Within statutory period	*Beyond statutory period*	*In part*	*Not fulfilled/ work in progress*
1 Mar 2000 to 31 Dec 2000	0	2	—	—
1 Jan 2001 to 31 Dec 2001	10	8	—	—
1 Jan 2002 to 31 Dec 2002	161	105	—	5

Note:
Includes the Department of Health, Medicines Control Agency, Medical Devices Agency, NHS Pensions Agency, NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency.

Of 105 requests fulfilled beyond the statutory period in 2002, five were from the NHS Pensions Agency, and 100 from the Department of Health.

The Department aims to respond to requests within the statutory period and allocates resources to meet anticipated numbers of requests. Requests over the past three years have averaged three or four per month on a steady upward trend. The number of complex requests relating to contact over many years with staff in different areas of the Department has also been increasing. Each of these requires substantial effort to collect and analyse the data requested.

In June 2002, 86 requests were received from hon. Members. In July, seven of nine requests were from hon. Members. This peak of demand stretched the resources available, even though additional staff were engaged quickly.

The delays reported by the NHS Pensions Agency were associated with a transfer of responsibility for subject access requests and are not expected to occur again.

Departmental Website

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the ease of use of the Department of Health website. [95690]

Mr. Lammy: A programme of research among users of the Department's website started in autumn 2001. This extensive work used a variety of methods, such as face to face and telephone interviews, group work and online surveys, to assess the needs of professional and lay users of the website.

The initial objective was to inform changes to the site design, notably to the home page and top-level section pages, which were implemented during 2002. These re-designs were supported by usability testing—observing users carrying out specified tasks.

Follow-up research was conducted late in 2002 to assess progress and further inform future development.

Based on the findings of both these research exercises, we are now progressing major improvements to the website, which will address the key needs of users; namely the site structure, the search engine and the consistency of design and navigation.

A group of users is being consulted as this work moves forward to ensure that the resulting changes will better enable the site to meet user requirements.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many times his Department's *(a)* website and *(b)* website search engine crashed in each of the last three years; and what the length of time of each outage was. [95691]

Mr. Lammy: Information on the Department of Health website outages has only been collected since hosting was taken over by a new internet service provider on 21 June 2002.

The figures for the total downtime per month and the percentage of uptime for the Department's website, www.doh.gov.uk, are shown in table 1. We cannot provide a figure for the number of individual outages for the Department's website.

The figures for the total number of outages and the maximum total downtime per month for the Department's search engine, http://search2.openobjects.com/kbroker/doh/search.isp, are shown in table 2.

Table 1: Website outage figures for www.doh.gov.uk (July 2002-January 2003)

Month/year	Total down time (mins)	Total uptime (percentage)
July 2002	137	99.7
August 2002	239	99.5
September 2002	759	98.3
October 2002	459	98.9
November 2002	203	99.6
December 2002	0	100
January 2003	0	100
Total	1,797	99.5

Table 2: Website outage figures for Department of Health search engine (July 2002 -January 2003)

Month/year	Total number of outages	Maximum total downtime (mins)
July 2002	1	60
August 2002	0	—
September 2002	0	—
October 2002	0	—
November 2002	0	—
December 2002	1	60
January 2003	0	—
Total	2	120

Diabetes

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, broken down by age. [96069]

Mr. Lammy: This information is not available in the form requested.

Dialysis Treatment

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have received dialysis treatment from the NHS in each of the last three years. [97308]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* Figures for the number of patients receiving hospital-based haemodialysis, home haemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis are available from Renal Survey data. Surveys were undertaken in 1993, 1995 and 1998.

	Number of hospital haemodialysis patients in England	Number of home haemodialysis patients in England	Number of peritoneal dialysis patients in England	Total number of dialysis patients in England
1993	3,899	806	4,340	9,045
1995	5,383	725	4,880	10,988
1998	7,788	516	5,101	13,405

A further survey has been commissioned to collect data in 2002.

Doctors

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of newly qualified doctors joined the NHS in each of the past 10 years. [96514]

Jacqui Smith: Pre-registration house officers (PRHOs) are doctors who, having graduated from medical school, must successfully complete a year of work in the national health service in order to achieve full registration with the General Medical Council.

The table shows the number of PRHOs in England at 30 September in the appropriate year and graduate output from medical school at 31 July for each of those years. We do not collect data on the number of junior doctors joining the NHS each year.

Between 1992 and 2002, the number of PRHOs has increased from 3,040 to 3,680; a rise of 640, or 21 per cent.

Medical return--First Registrable Medical Qualification—output during the year ended 31 July 1992 to 31 July 2002 and numbers of PRHO's at 30 September

Year	Total output England	PRHOs England
1992	2,790	3,040
1993	2,760	3,090
1994	2,870	3,020
1995	2,910	3,220
1996	2,980	3,220
1997	3,030	3,360
1998	3,260	3,450
1999	3,100	3,540
2000	3,370	3,640
2001	3,290	3,680
2002	3,280	[1]—

[1] Information not yet available.

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census (to nearest 10).

Emergency Readmissions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what figures are collected on the reasons for people over the age of 75 being admitted to hospital as an emergency readmission within *(a)* 14 days and *(b)* 28 days of their discharge from hospital. [95692]

Jacqui Smith: Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) data include information on the reason for an admission, including a readmission, to hospital. However, only overall readmission numbers and rates are identified and calculated. The reason for an admission for people readmitted following a recent discharge has not routinely been drawn from HES and analysed.

Food Supplements

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health at what level of potency caustic soda and similar chemicals will be permitted in food supplements under the draft Food Supplements (England) Regulations; and what assessment he has made of the safety of the inclusion of caustic soda and similar chemicals in food supplements. [96479]

Ms Blears: Neither the Food Supplements Directive nor the implementing Food Supplements (England) Regulations set levels at which the substances in the permitted lists may be used in the manufacture of food supplements.

The lists of permitted substances in the Food Supplements Directive were drawn directly from positive lists in existing European Union legislation, including that on infant formulae and weaning foods, and substances on the lists have already been assessed for safety and bioavailability by the EU Scientific Committee on Food.

As for other foods, it is the responsibility of manufacturers to ensure that food supplements comply with the food safety requirements of the Food Safety Act 1990. Calcium oxide, sodium hydroxide (caustic soda) and potassium hydroxide are permitted to be used in food at levels necessary for a technological function, such as regulation of acidity. They are used at low concentrations that do not affect the safety of the food.

General Practitioners

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the three month general practitioner vacancy rate figures are, broken down by primary care trust in England. [96176]

Jacqui Smith: The three month general practitioner vacancy rate published in the Department's February 2002 vacancy survey was 2.7 per cent. for England. The vacancy rate is estimated from results of a sample of 1,000 questionnaires sent to GP practices.

In previous years there has been no way to identify which primary care trust (PCT) a vacancy was in; especially since the last survey took place prior to the formation of the existing PCTs.

In view of this and the relatively small size of the sample, it is not possible to produce reliable estimates of the vacancy rate at PCT level.

Health Protection Agency

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that preparations for establishing the Health Protection Agency do not add significantly to the workload of the agencies responsible for responding to acts of bio-terrorism. [95694]

Ms Blears: We intend that the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will be responsible for a number of functions currently performed by a number of different bodies. The amalgamation of these responsibilities into a single agency is designed to strengthen specialist support for health protection and health emergency planning.

We are working closely with the various agencies concerned to ensure that the transfer of responsibilities to the HPA goes smoothly.

Kava-kava

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he proposes to bring into force the Kava-Kava in Food (England) Regulations 2002. [96060]

Ms Blears: The Kava-Kava in Food (England) Regulations 2002 came into force on 13 January 2003.

Macular Degeneration

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if his Department has started making arrangements to fast-track verteporfin PDT treatment for patients with wet age-related macular degeneration; [95686]

(2) whether he will guarantee continued provision of verteporfin PDT for patients with predominantly classic CNV associated with wet age-related macular degeneration; [95685]

(3) if he will provide funding for a clinical study into the *(a)* optimum treatment regimens, *(b)* long-term outcomes, *(c)* quality of life and *(d)* costs of verteporfin PDT for patients with predominantly classic CNV associated with wet age-related macular degeneration. [95678]

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department will fund a clinical study into the photodynamic treatment of age-related macular degeneration, with particular reference to subfoveal choroidal neovascularisation cases with visudyne. [95834]

Mr. Lammy: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is carrying out an appraisal of photodynamic therapy (PDT) as a treatment for age-related macular degeneration. It has not yet published any guidance to the National Health Service on this topic.

NICE prepared its final appraisal determination on PDT and circulated it to consultees on 16 January 2003 We understand this document has been appealed against. NICE will now consider any appeals before publishing its final guidance.

Medical Procedures

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many hospitals are capable of intraoperative cell salvage of blood supplies during surgery; [96031]

(2) what has been the impact of intraoperative cell salvage on blood supplies to hospital operating theatres. [96032]

Ms Blears: This information is not collected. The Department published Health Service Circular 2002/009, "Better Blood Transfusion—Appropriate Use of Blood", on 4 July 2002, available on www.doh.gov.uk/publications/coinh.html.

This circular asks national health service trusts and primary care trusts to review and explore the use of effective alternatives to donor blood and the appropriate use of autologous blood transfusion, pre-donation, peri-operative and post operative cell salvage by April 2003. An audit to review the implementation of this guidance will be carried out later this year.

Medium-Secure Units

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients in *(a)* NHS medium-secure units and *(b)* medium-secure units in the independent sector are awaiting discharge or transfer; what proportion of these patients have no place identified to which they can be discharged or transferred; and how many have been waiting for more than three months. [95903]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The latest available information, at 31 December 2001, indicates that the number of patients awaiting discharge or transfer from national health service medium-secure units was 93 and medium-secure units in the independent sector was 48. There is no current information on waiting times.

Mexico

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 477W, on Mexico, if he will make a statement on the usefulness of memorandums of understanding between the United Kingdom and foreign Governments. [96084]

Mr. Milburn: Memoranda of Understanding are helpful in providing a basis for a working relationship between two Governments with the aim of furthering knowledge and co-operation on health issues and ultimately contributing to the improvement of the health of their populations.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many times since 2001 he has taken flights on departmental duties in the UK; how many of these were *(a)* charter flights, *(b)* first or club class and *(c)* by helicopter; and who accompanied him on each trip. [95389]

Mr. Lammy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made two business class return flights and one single business class flight. He was accompanied by one private secretary and one special adviser on each occasion.

My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, has made four club class return flights. He was accompanied by one civil servant on each occasion.

The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) has made five business class return and three single business class flights. He was accompanied by one civil servant on seven occasions and travelled alone for one other.

The Under-Secretary of State for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) has made one first class return and one single charter flight. She was accompanied by one civil servant on each occasion.

All travel was undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Library.

MMR Vaccination

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of GPs reached the *(a)* 70 per cent., *(b)* 80 per cent. and *(c)* 90 per cent. target rate for the MMR vaccination last year; [96049]

(2) how many bonuses were and how much in bonuses was paid out last year to GPs for performing MMR vaccinations on new-born babies. [96050]

Ms Blears: MMR vaccination is recommended for all children shortly after their first birthday, with a reinforcing dose before school entry.

In 2001–02, the latest annual return, total payment to general practitioners providing general medical services was £3.145 billion, of which the sums attributable to childhood immunisation targets, including the first dose of MMR, were:

£53.4 million to some 22,430 GPs for the higher target.

£1.9 million to some 1,720 GPs for the lower target.

The percentage of unrestricted principals receiving a target payment for childhood immunisation in the quarter ending 31 March 2001 was 96 per cent. made up of:

7 per cent. meeting the 70 per cent. target.

89 per cent. meeting the 90 per cent. target.

There is no 80 per cent. target. All figures concern only those GPs providing general medical services. Personal medical service GPs have their pay and any targets determined through individual contracts with their primary care trust.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mobile phones were used by *(a)* Ministers and special advisers and *(b)* officials in his Department in each year since 1997; how many were (i) lost and (ii) stolen; and what their cost was. [95980]

Mr. Lammy: Historical data on the users and numbers of central Department of Health mobile phones are not retained. Detailed information is available only for the current financial year. In financial year 2002–03 there are currently 978 mobile phones in use, of which nine are used by Ministers and special advisers.

The costs of purchasing mobile phones for use by Ministers, special advisers and officials in the Department in each financial year since 1997 are shown in the table.

Financial year	*Costs (£)*
1997–98	9,578
1998–99	6,740
1999–2000	6,254
2000–01	5,063
2001–02	4,891
2002–03	[1]5,730

[1] To date

The Department takes very seriously the protection of all its assets, including mobile phones. All users are made aware of their obligation to safeguard Departmental property. We investigate all losses and our security procedures are kept under constant review. Departmental records do not differentiate between lost and stolen mobile phones.

Figures for the numbers of lost or stolen mobile phones for the financial years 1997–98 to 2002–03 are shown in the table.

Financial year	*Numbers lost/stolen*	*Replacement cost (£)*
1997–98	19	769
1998–99	19	691
1999–2000	26	557
2000–01	43	1,332
2001–02	37	987
2002–03	34	2,426

[1] To date

Costs for lost or stolen mobile phones in 2002–03 are higher than for previous years, as most of these phones were lost or stolen within the first two years of purchase and therefore incur higher replacement costs.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps his Department takes to ensure that medical devices which are due to be appraised by NICE have been assessed by clinicians; [95688]

(2) whether his Department provides extra funds for clinicians to assess new medical technologies before they are appraised by NICE. [95683]

Ms Blears: Manufacturers of new medical technologies are responsible for developing the clinical evidence base to demonstrate safety and efficacy for regulatory purposes and to promote their introduction into general clinical practice.

In selecting topics for appraisal by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, one factor which Ministers take into account is the adequacy of the evidence base to support an appraisal.

NHS Bodies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the combined allocated budgets are for *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06 for the Medicines Control Agency and the Medical Devices Agency (i) in cash terms and (ii) on a full resource budgeting basis. [95774]

Mr. Lammy: Subject to parliamentary approval, the Medicines Control Agency and the Medical Devices Agency will combine to form the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) with effect from 1 April 2003.

The new Agency will operate as a trading fund and its expenditure will be financed mainly by income from charges for the services it provides to the pharmaceutical industry and other customers. The Department will, however, purchase medical devices services from the MHRA and may also, from time to time, issue medium term loans to support capital expenditure or other developments.

The level of Departmental funding for medical devices services in 2003–04 and subsequent years has yet to be finalised. The Department's main estimate for 2003–04 will include provision for the necessary funding in the MHRA's first year.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the allocated budgets are for *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06 for (i) the combined internal directorates of the Department of Health, (ii) NHS Estates Agency, (iii) NHS Pensions Agency and (iv) NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency (A) in cash terms and (B) on a full resource budgeting basis. [95773]

Mr. Lammy: Budgets for financial years covered by the 2002 Spending Review have not yet been finalised for the Department's internal directorates, the NHS Pensions Agency or the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency. As a trading fund, most of the expenditure of NHS Estates falls outside the Department's budgets. The future budget for services the Department purchases from NHS Estates has also not yet been finalised.

NHS Dentistry

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were registered with an NHS dentist in *(a)* the East Worthing and Shoreham

constituency, *(b)* West Sussex and *(c)* the Surrey and Sussex Strategic Health Authority area in each year since 1997. [96101]

Ms Blears: The available information is for the period 1997 to 2001 for health authorities (HA). For 2002, the information is at primary care trust (PCT) level. These are shown in the tables together with the totals for Surrey and Sussex Strategic Health Authority (StHA).

Table 1 shows the number of registrations in East Surrey, West Surrey, East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex HA area at 30 September in each of the years 1997 to 2001.

Table 2 shows the number of registrations in Surrey and Sussex StHA area by PCT at 30 September 2002.

Table 1: General Dental Service: number of registrations[1] in East Surrey, West Surrey, East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex health authorities at 30 September 1997 to 2001

Thousand *Health authority*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Surrey and Sussex Strategic Health Authority	1,344	1,185	1,167	1,169	1,166
East Surrey	205	182	166	176	173
West Surrey	315	279	278	274	359
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	413	364	356	362	271
West Sussex	410	359	367	357	363

[1] The registration number for September 1997 is not comparable with the later figures because of the change in the registration periods.

Table 2: General Dental Service: number of registrations in Surrey and Sussex Strategic Health Authority by primary care trust at 30 September 2002

Primary care trust	*Thousand*
Surrey and Sussex StHA	1,151
Bexhill and Rother	35
Hastings and St. Leonards	49
Mid-Sussex	71
East Elmbridge and Mid-Surrey	99
East Surrey	72
Guildford and Waverley	88
North Surrey	86
Woking	88
Adur, Arun and Worthing	104
Western Sussex	97
Brighton and Hove City	120
Eastbourne Downs	78
Sussex Downs and Weald	77
Crawley	37
Horsham and Chanctonbury	49

Notes:

1. Registrations lapse if patients do not return to their dentists within 15 months. Registration rates will exclude patients who have not been to their GDS dentist within the past 15 months and patients who receive dental treatment from other NHS dental services.

2. During the period 1997 to 2002, the registration numbers are affected by the change in the registration periods for adults and children. Also, the figures do not include patients attending the Dental Access Centres, which opened during the period, and whose patients are not registered.

3. Registrations are included in the area of the dentist. The registration rates for some areas may be affected by some patients receiving their dental treatment in a different area from the one in which they live.

4. Patients wishing to register with a GDS dentist can obtain details of dentists accepting new patients in their area by contacting NHS Direct.

NHS Trusts (Accommodation Sales)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those hospital trusts which have sold accommodation on their sites to housing associations; and on what terms. [96094]

Mr. Lammy: We do not collect this information. The Department encourages the national health service to work with housing associations and other registered social landlords to provide a range of affordable, suitably located staff accommodation.

Trusts are encouraged to lease their residential accommodation to housing associations on condition that they maintain it and let to staff on agreed terms, often through legally binding nomination rights which benefit staff.

NICE

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list each appraisal and guidance issued by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and its cost to the NHS. [89651]

Ms Blears: Information of all appraisal guidance issued by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) with estimates of its cost to the NHS in England, distinguishing between one-off costs and annual recurrent costs has been placed in the Library. These estimates are based on those published by NICE itself; where the original estimate takes the form of a range, a mid-range value has been given.

Similar estimates for clinical guidelines and other forms of guidance from NICE are not available.

Opportunities for All

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that mainstream programmes and targeted initiatives have *(a)* a focus on disabled children and young people and *(b)* targets and indicators monitored as part of Opportunities for All. [96311]

Jacqui Smith: All relevant mainstream health and social care programmes give priority to disabled children.

In 1999 the Government published national objectives for children's social services, as part of the Quality Protects programme to improve children's services. This included specific objectives around

disabled children and young people. To help local authorities achieve these objectives, we have earmarked funding for disabled children of £60 million over three years from the children's services special grant.

As part of the development of the children's national service framework, which will set national standards for health and social care, we have prioritised services for disabled children and young people. An external working group has been established to focus on services for disabled children and make recommendations to Ministers on how they could be improved. The three cross-Government programmes for children: Sure Start; the Children's Fund; and Connexions all give priority to supporting disabled children and young people.

The indicators in "Opportunity for all" are used to monitor progress in relation to the Government's strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion. They have been selected to capture the multidimensional nature of poverty and to utilise the best available information. The indicators meet certain criteria, one of which is to be outcome focused rather than concentrating of inputs and process. All of the indicators are linked to departmental public service agreement targets, which are reviewed as part of spending review cycles.

Organ Donors

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment has been made of the increased numbers of potential donors who have joined the organ donor register as a result of being asked to do so by the inclusion of a leaflet with their electoral registration form; what plans he has to confer with the Home Secretary to expand his initiative further; and if he will make a statement. [96205]

Mr. Lammy: In 2000, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) wrote jointly to the chairmen of the association of electoral administrators and SOLACE'S electoral matters panel, inviting them to encourage their members to distribute organ donor leaflets via the electoral canvass.

The Home Secretary has no powers to direct electoral registrations officers to send out non-electoral material. However, the aim is to encourage councils to join this initiative, which demonstrates how effective a truly local appeal can be. The scheme has already proved successful in many areas and we believe that it owes its success to the fact that it is locally inspired and embraces the local community spirit.

Palliative Care

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are for palliative care consultants in each strategic health authority area in England. [96100]

Jacqui Smith: The three-month vacancy rate for palliative care consultants in England has dropped from 7.4 per cent. in March 2001 to 5.2 per cent. in March 2002.

The table shows three-month vacancy rates for palliative care consultants in each strategic health authority in England.

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 2002
Vacancies in NHS Trusts by DHSC and Strategic Health Authority for Palliative Medicine Consultants
three month vacancy rates numbers and staff in post

	Palliative medicine (excluding HS staff)			
	3 month vacancy rate %	*3 month vacancy number*	*Staff in post (whole-time equivalent)*	*Staff in post (headcount)*
England	5.2	7	118	152
Midlands and Eastern	0.0	0	27	31
Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Birmingham and the Black Country	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Coventry, Warwickshire, Hereford and Worcester	[1]	0	6	6
Essex	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Shropshire and Staffordshire	[2]	0	[2]	[2]
Trent	[1]	0	8	8
London	3.8	1	25	31
North Central London	[1]	1	[1]	[1]
North East London	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
North West London	[1]	0	9	11
South East London	[1]	0	6	8
South West London	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Northern	9.8	4	32	47
Cheshire and Merseyside	[1]0	0	5	8
County Durham & Tees Valley	[1]	3	[1]	[1]
Cumbria and Lancashire	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Greater Manchester	[1]	1	[1]	[1]
North and East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
Northumberland, Tyne and Wear	[1]	0	[1]	6
South Yorkshire	[1]	0	[1]	[1]
West Yorkshire	0.0	0	10	14

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 2002
Vacancies in NHS Trusts by DHSC and Strategic Health Authority for Palliative Medicine Consultants
three month vacancy rates numbers and staff in post

	Palliative medicine (excluding HS staff)			
	3 month vacancy rate %	*3 month vacancy number*	*Staff in post (whole-time equivalent)*	*Staff in post (headcount)*
South	5.7	2	33	43
Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire	[1]—	1	8	12
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	[1]—			
Kent and Medway	[1]—			
Somerset and Dorset	[1]—			
South West Peninsula	[1]—			
Surrey and Sussex				
Thames Valley				
Special HAs	[2]—	0	[2]—	[2]—

Three months vacancy:
[1] Three month vacancy information is as at 31 March 2002
[2] Three month vacancies which trust are actively trying to fill, which had lasted for three months (whole time equivalents)
[3] Three month vacancy rates are three month vacancies expressed as a percentage of three month vacancies plus staff in post
[4] Three month vacancy rates are calculated using staff in post from the Consultant Census, March 2002
[5] Percentages are rounded to one decimal place
[6] Figures where sum of staff in post and vacancies is less than 10
[7] Figures where sum of staff in post and vacancies is zero.
Staff in post:
[1] Staff in post data is from the Mini Consultant Census, March 2002
[2] Staff in post data excludes staff employed by Health Authorities, as vacancy information was only collected from Trusts, PCTs and Special Health Authorities
[3] Figures where staff in post is five or less and greater than zero.
[4] Figures where staff in post is zero.
General Notes:
[1] Vacancy and staff in post numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number
[2] Calculating the vacancy rates using the above data may not equal the actual vacancy rates.
[3] StHA figures are based on Trusts, and do not necessarily reflect the geographical provisional of healthcare
[4] Medical and dental figures exclude staff in training
Source:
Department of Health Vacancies Survey March 2002
Department of Health Consultant census March 2002

Parliamentary Questions

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will answer questions ref. 87472, 87577, 89363, 89355, 89359, 89362, 89354, 89393 from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. [96087]

Mr. Lammy: I refer the hon. Member to the replies that the Minister of State, Department of Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) gave on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 133W and column 134W, and to the replies that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) gave on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 126W, 29 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 903–04W and 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, columns 102–03W. Replies were sent on Tuesday 4 February and Wednesday 5 February to the remaining questions.

Performance Bonuses

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was paid out in bonus payments and to how many civil servants in 2001–02 related to performance in his Department. [96116]

Mr. Lammy: In the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002, the Department paid a total of £397,600 in performance bonus payments to 782 staff.

All bonus payments are performance related.

Primary Movement Exercise Programmes

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of primary movement exercise programmes. [93588]

Mr. Miliband: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Member to the reply I gave on 28 January, *Official Report*, column 780W.

Renal Patients

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evidence he has evaluated on the impact of the availability of choice of immuno suppressive agents on short and long-term outcomes for renal patients; what plans he has to allow the National Service Framework on Renal Services to enable access to choice and tailored treatment for each patient; and if he will make a statement. [97178]

Mr. Lammy: We have asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to establish the clinical and cost-effectiveness of immunosuppressive regimens with regard to initial maintenance, acute rejection therapy in renal transplantion.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many units in the UK routinely carry out asystolic kidney organ donor operations; what plans he has to increase the number of units who carry out such operations; and if he will make a statement; [96134]

(2) what research has been carried out to compare the cost of sustaining a patient on dialysis whilst waiting for a kidney organ transplant to the cost of increasing the number of asystolic kidney donor operations; and if he will make a statement. [96204]

Mr. Lammy: Successful transplantation of donor kidneys is by far the most clinically effective and cost-effective treatment for suitable patients with established renal failure. The average cost of maintaining a heamodialysis patient is estimated at £34,500 per annum, compared with £20,000 for the first year of a cadaveric kidney transplant and £6,500 per annum after the first year. Survival data from three transplants units show that the medium term outcomes of successful transplantation of non-heartbeating donor kidneys are as good as heartbeating donor transplants.

In 2001–02 and 2002–03, UK Transplant funded seven national health service trusts to increase the number of non-heartbeating donor transplants.

Renal Services Framework

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) whether he plans to include in the National Service Framework on Renal Services *(a)* patient care pathways, from dialysis to transplantation, *(b)* long-term follow up clinics and *(c)* screening of key indicators, to include blood pressure and blood lipids; and if he will make a statement; [96199]

(2) if he plans to include guidelines to ensure patient access to transplantation services for the National Service Framework on Renal Services; and if he will make a statement; [96132]

(3) when the National Service Framework on Renal Services will be published; whether resources will be committed to ensure its implementation; and if he will make a statement; [96133]

(4) what plans he has to include standards for increasing organ donor numbers in the renal National Service Framework; whether this will include raising awareness of options including living related Donors; and if he will make a statement. [96198]

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) whether the National Service Framework on Renal Services will include guidelines to ensure patient access to transplantation services; [96385]

(2) whether the National Service Framework on Renal Services will be published in 2003; and if he will make a statement on the resources to be committed to ensure its implementation; [96384]

(3) whether the National Service Framework on Renal Services will include standards for increasing organ donor numbers, with particular reference to the Awareness of Living Related Donors Scheme; [96383]

(4) whether the National Service Framework on Renal Services will include patient care pathways from dialysis to transplantation, including provision for long-term follow-up clinics and screening of key indicators; [96388]

(5) whether the National Service Framework on Renal Services will include *(a)* information on (i) improving long term graft outcomes, (ii) maximising rejection prevention and (iii) minimising side-effects associated with anti-rejection drugs and *(b)* standards on providing information to patients on (A) treatment options, (B) survival rates and (C) outcomes; [96386]

(6) whether the National Service Framework on Renal Services will enable access to a choice of immunosuppressive agents to allow tailored treatment for patients. [96387]

Mr. Lammy: The renal national service framework (NSF) will be published in due course. It will set national standards and provide a national direction for renal services that will need to be achieved over 10 years. There will be flexibility at local level to plan to meet local priorities and to use local innovation within the framework of the national standards.

The issues of increasing and raising awareness of organ donation and access to transplantation services are within the scope of the renal NSF and will be considered fully during the NSF development process. Consideration will also be given to the patient care pathway and to the prevention and treatment of chronic kidney disease.

Ritalin

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the level of prescribing of Ritalin to children diagnosed with manic depression. [96639]

Jacqui Smith: We do not collect information on the prescribing levels of drugs for particular disorders. Amphetamines and related drugs, e.g. Ritalin, are specifically contra-indicated for the treatment of depression. Ritalin is therefore not an accepted treatment for manic depression.

Social Services Inspectorate

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the proposal to include the Social Services Inspectorate within the Council for Health Improvement. [97041]

Jacqui Smith: The Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) will not be merging with the Commission for Health Improvement.

However from 2004 onwards, a new inspectorate for social care, the Commission for Social Care Inspection will be set up, subject to legislation. The new inspectorate will bring together the functions of the SSI and the social care functions of the National Care Standards Commission.

Surgical Instruments (Sterilisation)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the

Health Minister in the Scottish Executive and *(b)* the British Medical Association regarding the sterilisation of surgery instruments. [96051]

Ms Blears: Officials in the Department have regular working level contacts with Scottish Executive officials to discuss matters of shared interest, including decontamination and the sterilisation of surgical instruments. Neither Ministers nor officials have had recent discussions with the British Medical Association to discuss decontamination, although officials do have discussions about decontamination with the medical and surgical Royal Colleges from time to time.

Vehicle Fleet

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the annual rate is at which his Department renews its vehicle fleet, by *(a)* volume and percentage for each category of vehicle, *(b)* type of power unit and *(c)* type of fuel; and what progress has been made on the replacement of vehicles on a lower emissions basis in each of the last three years. [96561]

Mr. Lammy: The Department operates a fleet of 132 vehicles. Of this figure, 73 are petrol, 58 are diesel and one is liquid petroleum gas (LPG).

The fleet has recently changed from leasing to purchasing vehicles. The annual rate at which the Department renews its vehicles under the existing lease scheme is three years to a maximum of five. The rate at which it renews its purchased vehicles is four years. The vehicle choice is restricted by the Department for Work and Pensions' other Government Department contract, which we also use. The driver makes choices for new vehicles from an approved choice list.

We have vehicles ranging in engine size from 1400 cc. to no larger than 2400 cc. The lowest emissions figure is 157g/km. and the highest is 220g/km. The average emissions figure for the fleet is 168g/km.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Adult Day Centres

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the charging arrangements are for handicapped persons attending adult day centres in *(a)* the East Riding of Yorkshire and *(b)* England. [96705]

Jacqui Smith: I have been asked to reply.

The East Riding of Yorkshire Council charges a flat rate of £2 per day for persons attending adult day centres. I understand that this will cease from April 2003. Thereafter, charges will reflect each individual's ability to pay.

The Department issued statutory guidance, Fairer Charging Policies for Home Care and other non-residential Social Services, in November 2001, which councils in England are obliged to implement.

A copy of the guidance is available at *www.doh.gov.uk/scg/homecarecharges.*

Affordable Accommodation

Ms Karen Buck: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many units of affordable accommodation were secured via the planning process; and what proportion of all housing permissions this represented in each of the last five years in each local authority in London. [96898]

Mr. McNulty: Information is not available in the form requested. The number of affordable dwellings secured through the planning system for each London borough is shown in the following table:

Local authority	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Barking and Dagenham	106	56
Barnet	210	228
Bexley	0	4
Brent	330	290
Bromley	0	8
Camden	37	118
City of London	0	0
Croydon	169	127
Ealing	11	324
Enfield	327	25
Greenwich	299	260
Hackney	284	[1]
Hammersmith and Fulham	0	500
Haringey	91	85
Harrow	158	184
Havering	114	16
Hillingdon	22	101
Hounslow	100	75
Islington	0	75
Kensington and Chelsea	180	304
Kingston upon Thames	64	163
Lambeth	696	167
Lewisham	47	193
Merton	21	8
Newham	14	88
Redbridge	49	373
Richmond upon Thames	67	191
Southwark	53	133
Sutton	0	140
Tower Hamlets	0	1167
Waltham Forest	8	8
Wandsworth	65	516
Westminster	126	56

[1] figure not provided by local authority

Source:
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's annual Housing Statistical Appendices
completed by local authorities.

Information about the number of dwellings which all extant housing planning permissions could yield is not collected centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Prior to 2000–01 information about dwellings secured through planning policy was also not collected centrally.

Council Tax

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what guidance he gives to local authorities to reclaim council tax through *(a)* an attachment to earnings for those people who refuse to pay their council tax and *(b)* an attachment to pensions for those pensioners who refuse to pay their council tax; and what discussions he has had with the Department of Work and Pensions regarding the attachment to pensions for those pensioners who refuse to pay council tax. [97415]

Mr. McNulty: Since its establishment on 29 May 2002, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has issued no guidance on these matters. Previously the former Department of the Environment published in September 1993 "Council Tax Practice Note No 9—Recovery and Enforcement" which includes guidance on attachment of earnings for council tax debt. Since then the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's predecessors have issued three circular information letters in 1998, 1999 and 2000 to local authorities containing further advice on attachment of earnings.

The Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation publication "Council Tax Law and Practices" also contains advice on attachment of earnings for council tax debt. This is based on the Council Tax Practice note.

Pensions are not attachable for council tax debt. No discussions with the Department of Work and Pensions about this matter have been undertaken.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Diana Organ: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he intends to raise the £25,000 ceiling on disabled facilities grants; and if he will make a statement. [97246]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to raise the limit for mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant which was last raised from £20,000 to £25,000 in January 2002. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance)(England and Wales) Order 2002 gives local authorities a new wide ranging discretionary power which allows them to provide additional financial assistance for housing adaptations. This includes the ability to help with the purchase of a new property for the disabled person if this is a more cost-effective option than the adaptation of the existing property.

Fire Dispute

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he last met the Secretary of State for Scotland to discuss the progress of the fire dispute in Scotland. [95975]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister meets with the Secretary of State for Scotland on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues, including the fire dispute.

The Fire Service is a devolved matter in Scotland. My colleagues and I have been in frequent contact with colleagues in the Scottish Executive Justice Department. I last spoke to the Deputy Minister for Justice, Scottish Executive on Tuesday 4 February.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will not amend the Scotland Act 1998 as part of his proposed legislation on fire service pay and conditions. [95976]

Mr. Raynsford: The UK Government have no such plans. The Fire Service is a devolved matter in Scotland. The UK Government are committed, under the Sewel Convention, to legislate on devolved matters at Westminster only with the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. Scottish Ministers share the UK Government's view that this dispute can and should be resolved through UK-wide negotiations.

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what income has been received by the Department from firefighter employers as a result of the recent fire strikes; [96716]

(2) how much money has been transferred between the Department and the Ministry of Defence as a result of the fire strikes, broken down by category; [96724]

(3) what the budget shortfall incurred by the Department is to date as a result of the fire strikes; and what budget cuts will be made to compensate for this shortfall; [96715]

(4) what the total cost incurred by the Government as a result of the fire strikes has been. [96723]

Mr. Raynsford: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will pay money to the Ministry of Defence and receive income from firefighter employers on the basis of invoices for services provided and pay deducted as a result of the fire dispute. No money has been paid or received as yet.

It is estimated that the cost to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to the end of January of providing emergency cover for the fire dispute will be about £70 million. Each extra day the military remains ready to provide cover costs up to about £1 million. The figures are necessarily approximate estimates and will remain so until invoices are received and audited. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has a three year spending programme and will be aiming to balance its spending commitments within resources available in the light of events.

Fire Service

Mr. Watts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether the Bain report took into account past efficiency and modernisation measures that have been introduced by some fire authorities. [93421]

Mr. Raynsford: The Independent Review of the Fire Service described examples of modernisation already in place in some fire brigades, but stated that implementation was patchy. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister wants to see effective modernisation implemented across the whole fire service.

Mr. Watts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how he estimates the recommendations of the Bain report will change the quality of the fire service to the community. [93423]

Mr. Raynsford: The Independent Review of the Fire Service, led by Sir George Bain, set out proposals for the reform of the Fire Service. The Government believe that reform will create a Fire Service that is better, safer and will save more lives. The Government will respond in detail to the recommendations in the Independent Review in a Fire White Paper later this year.

Mr Watts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, (1) whether he estimates that all fire authorities will have the same opportunity to introduce modernisation procedures; [93424]

(2) how local fire authorities will be able to increase pay of firefighters in cases where they have already introduced many of the changes recommended in the Bain report. [93422]

Mr. Raynsford: The Independent Review of the Fire Service described examples of modernisation already in place in some Fire Brigades, but stated that implementation was patchy. Opportunities to introduce modernisation procedures will, therefore, vary.

The Government will respond in detail to the recommendations in the Independent Review in a Fire White Paper later this year.

As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister informed the House on 28 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 729, brigades should not be disadvantaged in any settlement if they have already implemented recognised modernisation procedures.

Fire Service (Shrewsbury)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the impact his plans for modernisation of the Fire Service would have on Shrewsbury fire station, with particular reference to manning levels. [93114]

Mr. Raynsford: The Independent Review of the Fire Service led by Sir George Bain set out proposals for the reform of the Fire Service. The Government believe that reform will create a Fire Service that is better, safer and will save more lives. The Government will respond in detail to the recommendations in the Independent Review in a Fire White Paper later this year.

The Independent Review recommended a new approach to fire cover, based on a thorough assessment of life threatening risks. Under this new approach, the deployment of firefighters would be for Fire Authorities and Chief Fire Officers to consult on locally, in the light of new advice which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will issue for consultation in the near future.

Housing (Pendle and Burnley)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many houses in *(a)* Pendle and *(b)* Burnley are (i) abandoned, (ii) empty and (iii) unfit. [96595]

Mr. McNulty: Figures on abandonment are not collected centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, preparatory work undertaken in Pendle and Burnley as part of the East Lancashire housing market renewal pathfinder will improve levels of data on a range of issues, including abandonment. Latest reported information on the total number of empty and unfit dwellings is presented as follows:

Numbers of vacant and unfit dwellings as at 1 April 2002

	Vacant dwellings	*Unfit dwellings*
Burnley	3,446	9,336
Pendle	2,093	4,290

Sources:
ODPM Housing Investment Programme HS Statistical Appendix 2002
Housing Corporation RSR returns 2002

Housing Corporation

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the administrative costs of the Housing Corporation were for 2001–02. [95621]

Mr. McNulty: The amount of expenditure incurred by the Housing Corporation on administration in 2001–02 was £34.1 million. The corporation's administrative budget in the current year was originally set at £34.16 million.

Housing Policy

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans there are to review housing policy to meet the needs of disabled children. [96313]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has already introduced a number of policies which will help to meet the needs of disabled children. On 10 February I announced a substantial increase in next year's budget for Disabled Facilities Grant to £99 million, an increase of £11 million over this year. Jointly with the Department of Health, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister also issued new draft guidance on how a housing adaptations service for disabled people can be more effectively delivered by local authorities.

Under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 local authorities now have a new discretionary power which will enable financial assistance to be given to help a disabled person purchase another home, where this is more cost-effective than adapting the existing home.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister also has a target to ensure that by 2010 all houses in the social sector are of a decent standard and to increase the proportion of vulnerable households in the private sector who live in decent housing.'Vulnerable' has been defined to include families with disabled children.

Recent changes to building regulations mean that new houses must now be designed to manage more easily the needs of a family which includes a disabled person.

The Supporting People programme, which goes live on 1 April 2003, will also help to ensure that the housing related support needs of households with disabled children are appropriately met.

Local Government Funding

Gregory Barker: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what plans he has to meet a cross-party delegation from East Sussex county council to discuss the Local Government Finance settlement for the county; [96261]

(2) which local authorities he met to discuss the local government funding formula *(a)* prior to and *(b)* since the announcement of the Local Government Finance settlement for 2003–04. [96255]

Mr. Raynsford: Since the beginning of the Formula Grant Review consultation period on 8 July, the following local authorities, groups and associations have been met as part of stated consultation periods:

Formula Grant Review Consultation (prior to the announcement of the provisional settlement on the 5 December)

Association of North East Councils
County Councils Network
F40
Northern Alliance
SIGOMA
Shire Districts Liaison Group
Sutton
Westminster City Council
Worcestershire County Council

Since the announcement of the Provisional Settlement on 5 December, the following authorities have been met:

ALG
Shire Unitaries
Combined Fire Authorities
Rural Services Partnership
Shire Districts
LGA
SIGOMA
Town and Country Finance Issues Group
Shire Counties
Greater Manchester Authorities
South West Regional Assembly of the LGA
South East Counties
Barnet
Bournemouth
Bristol
Brighton and Hove
Bromley
Cambridge
Cumbria
Derby
Devon
Dorset
East Sussex
Enfield
Essex
Forest Heath
Gateshead
Great Yarmouth
Haringey
Havering
Hertfordshire
Isle of Wight
Kensington and Chelsea
Kent
Kettering
Kingston upon Hull
Lancashire
Leicestershire
Manchester
Merton
Middlesborough
Northumberland
Nottingham
Poole
Plymouth
Preston city council
Richmond upon Thames
Rutland
Salford
Sheffield
South Thanet
South Somerset
Rural Services Partnership
Shire Districts
LGA
SIGOMA
Town and Country Finance Issues Group
Shire Counties
Greater Manchester Authorities
South West Regional Assembly of the LGA
South East Counties
Barnet
Bournemouth
Bristol
Brighton and Hove
Bromley
Cambridge
Cumbria
Derby
Devon
Dorset
East Sussex
Enfield
Essex
Forest Heath
Gateshead
Great Yarmouth
Haringey
Havering
Hertfordshire
Isle of Wight
Kensington and Chelsea
Kent
Kettering
Kingston upon Hull
Lancashire
Leicestershire
Manchester
Merton
Middlesborough
Northumberland
Nottingham
Poole
Plymouth
Preston city council
Richmond upon Thames

Rutland
Salford
Sheffield
South Thanet
South Somerset
Stafford
Stoke-on-Trent
Stratford on Avon
Worcester

No authorities have been met since the announcement of the Final Settlement on 5 February 2003 to discuss the local government funding formula.

East Sussex met with the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) on 14 January 2003 as part of the local government finance settlement consultation. There are currently no further plans to meet with them.

North West Regional Assembly

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether the North West Regional Assembly's Sandings inquiry into the view of the public in the North West on elected regional government has received central Government funding. [97227]

Mr. Raynsford: The North West Regional Assembly are not undertaking a soundings inquiry. As with other organisations in the region, the North West Regional Assembly has been invited to respond to the Government's soundings exercise. No specific funding has been provided for this purpose.

Parish Councillors

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what powers district monitoring officers have in respect of suspending parish councillors from their duties. [97200]

Mr. Leslie: Monitoring officers of district councils do not have any such powers, which under the Local Government Act 2000 lie with case tribunals formed by members of the Adjudication Panel, or may, by regulations be conferred on a council's standards committee.

Private Landlords

Lynne Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will publish the results of the consultation on selective licensing of private landlords. [94723]

Mr. McNulty: As announced in the Queen's Speech, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister aims to publish a draft Housing Bill this session. The provisions in the Bill will include powers for local authorities to introduce the selective licensing of private sector landlords targeted primarily at areas of low housing demand. The nature of these proposed powers follows on from the consultation exercise in late 2001.

The draft Bill will itself be subject to further public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny.

Regional Government

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the role of existing regional assemblies in the Government's soundings exercise on the future of elected regional government; and what *(a)* guidance he has issued to and *(b)* requirements he has placed upon regional assemblies to maintain their impartiality in the exercise. [97198]

Mr. Raynsford: On 2 December 2002, the Government issued a soundings paper inviting views, information and evidence on the level of interest in each region in holding a referendum about an elected assembly. This paper was sent to the eight regional chambers, as well as local authorities, MPs, MEPs and others in the English regions outside London.

The soundings paper advises all respondents that the information they provide will be strengthened if they can demonstrate that they have consulted widely. The paper also makes it clear that opinion polls, in order to be considered by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, must have been conducted in a way likely to generate a fair and representative outcome.

Regional chambers may use Government grant to develop their responses to the soundings exercise. But the funding agreements issued to the chambers or their accountable bodies make clear that Government grant cannot be used for political activities, such as campaigning for elected regional assemblies.

Right to Buy

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many tenants have used the Right to Buy scheme to purchase property in each local authority in each year since 1 May 1997. [96717]

Mr. McNulty: The information collected relates to the number of dwellings sold under the Right to Buy legislation.

Tables showing reported information on Right to Buy sales and other council house disposals by each local authority in England, along with national and regional summaries, for each year since 1979–80 are available in the Library of the House.

Sawmill Industrial Estate, Alnwick

Mr. Beith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to determine the planning application in respect of a supermarket on the Sawmill Industrial Estate, Alnwick. [96495]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister received the Inspector's report in respect of a planning application for a supermarket in Alnwick on 7 January 2003. The application is on the Willis Garage site which is adjacent to the Sawmill Industrial Estate. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister aims to make a decision as soon as possible.

Unfair Terms Regulations

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on how the DTLR publication Independent Tenant Advisers and Stock Transfers-A Good Practice Guide by Barbara Carlisle and Michael Wagstaff deals with the implications of the

Unfair Terms Regulations 1999 for the independent tenant adviser; and what the cost was of this document. [96567]

Mr. McNulty: Chapter 10 of the Independent Tenant Advisors and Stock Transfers good practice guidance provides guidance on how the Independent Tenant Advisor can work with the local authority to ensure tenants have the information they need about the proposed stock transfer and provide impartial advice on tenancy agreements, rent levels and future rent guarantees. However it does not make specific reference to the Unfair Terms Regulations 1999. The guide was produced as a free publication.

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what action has been taken by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to encourage all sections of the housing industry to comply with the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999. [96570]

Mr. McNulty: The Director General of Fair Trading and a number of other regulators are responsible for the enforcement of these regulations. The Office of Fair Trading published guidance on unfair terms in tenancy agreements for the private rented sector in November 2001. All sections of the housing industry are advised to take full account of their guidance and the need to comply with the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations in their contractual arrangements with consumers.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal Welfare

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what mechanisms have been put in place to ensure the effective registration of livestock hauliers and the inspection of their operations in relation to the welfare of the livestock. [97125]

Mr. Morley: The Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 (WATO), as amended, requires that any person transporting cattle, sheep, goats, pigs or horses on journeys of over eight hours by road, or by air, rail or sea must be specifically authorised. A specific authorisation is issued only after checks that the applicant is a fit and proper person to transport animals. A total of 947 specific authorisations have been issued in Great Britain to hauliers and other transporters since 1 October 1997. Full information about WATO is available on the internet at: www.defra.gov.uk

Compliance by livestock hauliers with WATO is generally monitored by enforcement agents at livestock markets, ports and during roadside vehicle checks. We are currently piloting a new agreement for animal health and welfare with enforcement agencies, which is intended to provide more consistent and improved enforcement.

For export journeys with farmed livestock, route plans showing the route and duration of the journey are checked before and after the journey for compliance with permitted maximum journey times and rest, feed and watering requirements. The European Commission are considering improvements to the monitoring of these rules and better communication between member states to ensure rapid reporting of problems.

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the reclassification of animals as sentient beings under European law and its implications for the welfare of animals. [97128]

Mr. Morley: In 1997 we successfully negotiated a Protocol to the Treaty of Rome that recognises animals as sentient beings. This requires the European Union and the member states to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, in formulating and implementing the Community's agriculture, transport, internal market and research policies.

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government are taking to end the use of *(a)* veal crates and *(b)* battery cages across Europe. [97131]

Mr. Morley: The Government are committed to improving animal welfare on an EU basis. EU Directive 99/74/EC bans the barren battery cage across Europe from 1 January 2012; Directive 97/2/EC bans veal crates in the EU from 31 December 2006.

Badgers

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many badger groups were relocated at *(a)* the cost of residents and *(b)* public expense in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [95944]

Mr. Morley: *(a)* One; and *(b)* None.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in what circumstances badgers can be removed from urban areas to prevent *(a)* danger to the badgers and *(b)* nuisance to householders; and what controls can be used to prevent badgers digging setts in residential areas. [95945]

Mr. Morley: Under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 it is an offence to take a badger except in certain circumstances. For instance, a person is not guilty of an offence if he takes a badger that has been disabled otherwise than by his action for the purpose of tending the animal. The licensing provisions in the Act enable English Nature to grant a licence, among other things, to take a specified number of badgers for the purpose of conservation of badgers. In addition, the Act enables Defra to grant a licence to take a badger for the purpose, among other things, of preventing serious damage to property.

Defra's Rural Development Service provides practical guidance on preventing problems arising from the presence of badgers in residential areas. Advice may be obtained from the National Wildlife Administration Unit, telephone number 0845 601 4523 (local rate). The RDS publishes a leaflet, "Badger Problems: Advice to Householders", available on request, or via the Department's web site.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what impact the 20 day livestock movement restrictions have had upon the control of the spread of bovine TB. [96956]

Mr. Morley: Any limitation on the movement of cattle, such as the 20 day livestock movement restrictions, reduces the opportunity for TB infection to be brought onto herds. However, limiting movement alone is not sufficient as a TB control measure. Defra has advised farmers that they must take responsibility for ensuring they are aware of the TB status of animals brought onto farms, and that they should buy only from herds with up-to-date TB tests.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent assessment she has made of the prospects for the development of a vaccine for bovine TB. [96957]

Mr. Morley: Over the last twelve months the Vaccine Scoping Study Sub-Committee of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG) has met regularly to consider the feasibility for pursuing a TB vaccination strategy for cattle or wildlife, and to advise on future research requirements. A report to Ministers is expected in the spring.

The ISG has cautioned that a TB vaccine is a potential policy option only in the longer term.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects the Scientific Committee overseeing the Krebs Trials into the spread of bovine TB *(a)* to complete its field work and *(b)* to publish its findings. [96958]

Mr. Morley: The Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG) has advised that the work associated with the badger culling trial should be completed and reported during 2006. This is a three to four month extension following the suspension of field operations during the Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak. However, the ISG are reviewing the effect of the FMD outbreak on the badger culling trial, and expect to provide further advice to Ministers on the likely completion date in the spring of this year.

Electricity Charges

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what changes in unit payments for electricity have resulted from the switch by her Department to purchasing renewable energy which is exempt from the Climate Change Levy. [96489]

Mr. Morley: For the year 2001–02, the actual average price was 4.88 p/kWh for green energy purchased for the Defra Estate and 4.21 p/kWh for Defra Laboratories. Actual average price for normal electricity was 5.87 p/kWn and 4.16 p/kWh respectively. This shows that there was a reduction in the average price paid of 3.94 per cent. for the Defra Estate and an increase of 0.20 per cent. for Defra Laboratories.

Environmental Protection

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to her answer of 31 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 1077W, on the Environment Agency, how many staff in each year were allocated to environmental protection matters; and how much of the budget in each year was allocated to environmental protection matters. [96519]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency's environmental protection function covers: water quality, waste regulation, integrated pollution control, integrated pollution prevention and control, radioactive substances regulation and land quality.

The Agency took up its statutory duties on 1 April 1996. The allocation of staff and budgets to environmental protection as at the year ending 31 March was as follows:

	Budget (£ million)	*Full-time equivalent staff*
1997	169.6	3,923
1998	182.1	3,852
1999	194.0	4,027
2000	204.6	4,369
2001	221.2	4,540
2002	222.8	4,504
2003	234.5	4,645(planned)

The staff figures are expressed as full-time equivalents. An allocation of full-and part-time costs according to function could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

European Water Directive

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) if she will make a statement on those aspects of the EU Water Framework Directive's Common Implementation Strategy Guidance which will be piloted in the UK; [R] [96619]

(2) what resources will be made available to ensure that the UK pilot river basin study of the Ribble is *(a)* comprehensive and *(b)* fully compatible with the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive's common implementation strategy. [R] [96618]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency has already confirmed that it will undertake a UK pilot river basin project on the Ribble to test out the CIS guidance on public participation. To date the Agency has committed a full-time project manager, operational staff in the North West Region and staff from its national Water Framework Directive Programme to help deliver the pilot river basin project. This work will inform and support subsequent implementation work the Agency will be required to carry out as "competent authority" for the Directive.

Fallen Stock (Burial Licences)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many licences have been issued in the last 12 months to enable farmers to bury fallen stock on their farms. [96011]

Mr. Morley: None. There are currently no requirements for farmers to obtain a licence to bury fallen stock on their farms.

Farm Animal Movement

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to end the 20-day standstill rule on movement of farm animals. [96010]

Mr. Morley: We announced in a Written Statement on 23 January that—subject to satisfactory further consultation with the livestock industry—we intend to reduce the standstill for cattle, sheep and goats to six days with effect from 4 March 2003. I refer the hon. Member to the Written Statement of 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 20–24WS.

A supporting document explaining our decision has been placed in the Library and published on the Defra website.

Flooding

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she last met the chairman and chief executive of the Environment Agency concerning flooding; and when she next plans to do so. [96125]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets with the Environment Agency regularly to discuss a range of issues. The last time she met Sir John Harman and Baroness Young to discuss flooding was on 15 January 2003. I also hold meetings with the Environment Agency and flooding is discussed regularly. Our last meeting was held on 9 December 2002 and I am due to meet with them again on 6 March 2003.

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many calls, broken down by constituency in Somerset, were received by the Environment Agency's *(a)* flooding hotline and *(b)* website in (i) December 2002 and (ii) January 2003. [96496]

Mr. Morley: It is not possible to provide the statistics requested broken down by constituency. The table below is an indication of the number of Floodline callers accessing the Recorded Message Service Boxes (areas) for the Somerset Region. Please note the callers may not necessarily have been calling from Somerset (i.e. people checking on holiday homes or about to visit the area from outside).

As it is impossible to determine the geographical location within the UK of someone seeking information from a website, we cannot provide details of individual web users.

Area covered by individual Recorded Message Service Box	*December 2002*	*January 2003*	*Calls to recorded message service box in Total*
The Somerset Coast	62	92	154
West Somerset Streams	36	81	117
The rivers Isle and Parrett	36	108	144
The rivers Yeo, Wriggle and Cam	55	146	201
The rivers Somerset Frome, Mells, Whatley and Nunney Brooks	36	69	105
The river Tone and Tributaries	51	300	351
The rivers Axe, Brue, Congresbury Yeo and Sheppy	35	94	129
The Somerset Moors	19	49	68

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* calls the Environment Agency's flooding hotline received and *(b)* hits the Environment Agency's flooding website received from 25 December 2002 to 7 January 2003. [96123]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency's Floodline service received 121,663 calls, and there were 117,637 individual users on their Flood Warning website between 25 December 2002 and 6 January 2003. The Agency's website suffered problems in its service between 1–6 January. This was primarily because of the excessive load during that period and in spite of previous testing to ensure that flood incident loads could be met. A number of technical changes have now been carried out to improve the site's performance.

Website/floodline call comparison—25 December 2002 to 7 January 20003

Date	*Individual users of agency website*	*Individual users of flood warning website*	*Total floodline calls*	*Recorded message service*	*Answered personally*
25 December 2002	638	302	236	230	6
26 December 2002	1,510	770	702	673	29
27 December 2002	2,324	1,128	994	899	95
28 December 2002	1,745	841	768	702	66
29 December 2002	4,192	3,000	4,101	3,735	366
30 December 2002	14,383	11,906	13,753	12,193	1,560
31 December 2002	16,646	14,581	9,957	8,891	1,066
1 January 2003[1]	15,246	12,514	19,968	17,881	2,087
2 January 2003[1]	32,654	23,350	32,603	28,644	3,959
3 January 2003[1]	30,847	14,861	14,666	12,573	2,093
4 January 2003[2]	8,795	8,795	8,507	6,915	1,592
5 January 2003[2]	8,286	8,286	7,748	6,396	1,352
6 January 2003	16,414	12,581	5,455	4,465	990
7 January 2003	12,234	4,722	2,205	1,886	319
Total	165,914	117,637	121,663	106,083	15,580

Foot and Mouth

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the largest single amount of compensation paid out to a claimant for smoke damage to their property was as a result of foot and mouth disease disposal methods. [96228]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The largest single amount of compensation paid out to a claimant for smoke damage as a result of foot and mouth disease disposal methods in England and Wales is £2,339.

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many people have received compensation for smoke damage as a result of foot and mouth disease disposal methods in England and Wales. [96235]

Mr. Morley: There have been payments made to 15 claimants for smoke damage as a result of foot and mouth disease disposal methods in England and Wales.

Forest Enterprise South West

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what grants are available to Forest Enterprise South West to put their forestry plans on the internet for local public consultation. [96234]

Mr. Morley: Forest Enterprise does not publish its forest design plans on the internet. However, the Forestry Commission maintains a "Register of New Planting and Felling", which it publishes on its website http://www.forestry.gov.uk/consultations. The register gives information on new planting and felling applications received from private woodland owners and information about Forest Enterprise design plans.

Indoor Air Pollution

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what research her Department has undertaken on sources of indoor air pollution. [96310]

Alun Michael: The Department has no responsibilities for the sources of air pollutants within buildings and has therefore not undertaken any research on this topic.

Internal Drainage Boards

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment her Department has made of how internal drainage boards are exercising their duty under the Land Drainage Act 1994 to further the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty and the conservation of flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features of special interest. [96400]

Mr. Morley: The Government currently assess the conservation performance of Internal Drainage Boards in a number of ways.

Firstly, each flood and coastal defence scheme currently submitted by an Internal Drainage Board (IDE) for Defra grant-aid is assessed not only for its economic and technical robustness, but also its environmental compliance. To assist in making a judgment on the acceptability of each submission, English Nature is asked for an opinion on the environmental compliance of all grant applications that are processed. The improved access to in-house conservation advice that several IDB consortia now have is a welcome step that is improving the ability to take advantage of the environmental opportunities presented by many flood management schemes.

Secondly, High Level Targets 9 and 10, which are set for all operating authorities, relate to conservation of the environment.

In addition to meeting statutory obligations when carrying out flood and coastal defence works, HLT 9 requires that IDBs must aim to avoid damage to environmental interest; ensure there is no net loss to habitats covered by Biodiversity Action Plans; and seek opportunities for environmental enhancement. IDBs are required to report annually to the Environment Agency on all losses and gains of habitats covered by Biodiversity Action Plans. The last report to be published by Defra was on 24 May 2002. I refer the hon. Member to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins), on 24 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 641–42W.

High Level Target 10 relates specifically to Water Level Management Plans (WLMPs), which are required for wetlands of recognised importance for nature conservation. The target was revised in January 2001 so that each operating authority, including all IDBs, must provide to Defra and the Environment Agency:

a definite timetable for completing any outstanding WLMPs;

and an outline timetable for preparing a programme for implementing and reviewing WLMPs.

In addition, each operating authority must have in place a detailed programme for implementing and reviewing WLMPs for European sites and Ramsar sites by 1 April 2002 and other SSSIs by 1 April 2003.

In line with these revisions, all operating authorities are required to make an annual report to Defra of their progress in implementing and reviewing WLMPs against their published programme. The last report to be published by Defra was in August 2002. I refer the hon. Member to the my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) on 29 October 2002, *Official Report*, columns 732–33W.

As the majority of WLMPs have now been written, the emphasis has now moved to implementation and it is pleasing to report that one of the largest applications for grant-aid to implement WLMP actions was made on behalf of an IDB consortia.

While it must be recognised that IDBs primarily provide a local land drainage service, it is also recognised that there is room for improving their environmental performance. Further steps to address this are one of the aspects under consideration in the Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review, on which I will shortly be making a statement.

Landfill Sites

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many landfill operators have submitted a conditioning plan to the Environmental Agency; and how many have applied to be classed as *(a)* hazardous, *(b)* non-hazardous and *(c)* inert. [96965]

Mr. Meacher: Information from the Environment Agency's conditioning plan exercise, covering England and Wales, is as follows:

Region	*Non-hazardous*	*Inert*	*Hazardous (post 2002)*	*Hazardous (post 2004)*
Anglian	43	60	47	9
Midlands	50	74	42	4
North East	89	58	39	11
North West	49	37	27	8
South West	39	46	16	1
Southern	30	35	13	1
Thames	31	49	19	0
Wales	23	30	15	3
Total	311	329	218	37

Market Towns Initiative

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what funding has been given to the Bury St. Edmunds constituency under the market towns initiative. [97386]

Alun Michael: None. Bury St. Edmunds itself is considerably above the 25,000 population size limit set for inclusion in the Market Towns Initiative, and none of the other towns in the Bury St. Edmunds constituency is currently included.

Mercury Contamination

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on mercury emissions from UK power stations. [97518]

Alun Michael: The following table shows total estimated UK emissions of mercury from all sources up to 2001 (the latest date for which figures are available). The estimated emission of mercury to air from UK power generation in 2001 was 1.65 tonnes, representing 19 per cent. of total UK mercury emissions. Total emissions have fallen by 72 per cent. (from 31.6 tonnes to 8.8 tonnes) since 1990. Mercury emissions from power stations have fallen by 80 per cent. (from 8.36 tonnes to 1.65 tonnes), over the same period.

UK emissions of mercury by UN/ECE Category (tonnes)

	1970	*1980*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2001 %*
Comb. in energy prod															
Public power	7.47	8.10	8.36	8.26	7.93	4.98	4.88	4.47	2.91	2.98	2.72	1.68	1.61	1.65	19%
Petroleum refining	0.09	0.09	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.05	1%
Other comb and trans.	0.49	0.17	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0%
Comb. in comm/inst/res															
Comm/inst	2.28	0.90	0.95	0.94	0.81	0.43	0.36	0.26	0.28	0.31	0.19	0.17	0.14	0.15	2%
Residential plant	3.93	1.93	1.04	1.16	1.00	1.15	1.01	0.75	0.77	0.66	0.60	0.60	0.53	0.59	7%
Agriculture/forestry/aquaculture	0.06	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0%
Combustion in industry															
Iron and steel comb	1.09	0.46	0.58	0.54	0.55	0.54	0.55	0.56	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.56	0.52	0.49	6%
Industry-non-ferrous metals	4.02	2.47	2.88	2.98	2.94	3.12	2.92	2.92	2.30	1.95	1.37	0.32	0.78	0.74	8%
Other ind. comb	5.64	2.34	2.17	2.20	2.45	2.31	2.25	2.11	1.90	1.82	1.70	1.40	0.99	1.30	15%
Production processes															
Iron and steel	0.56	0.30	0.44	0.41	0.41	0.41	0.42	0.44	0.44	0.45	0.42	0.44	0.51	0.28	3%
Non ferrous metals	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0%
Processes in industry	11.27	10.24	8.09	8.89	7.43	3.29	3.60	4.21	2.40	1.14	1.31	1.50	1.44	1.48	17%
Road transport	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0%
Other trans/mach	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0%
Waste															
Waste-incineration	7.36	7.58	6.41	6.38	6.21	3.16	2.94	2.82	2.39	1.77	1.81	1.84	1.82	1.68	19%
Landfill	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.56	0.52	0.48	0.45	0.41	0.41	0.41	0.40	0.40	0.39	0.39	4%
Total	44.90	35.20	31.60	32.40	30.30	20.00	19.50	19.00	14.50	12.20	11.20	9.00	8.80	8.80	100%

Source:
National Atmospheric Emissions Inventor

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the environmental impact of mercury emissions from UK power stations. [97519]

Alun Michael: Mercury emissions from UK power stations have fallen by some 80 per cent. (from 8.36 tonnes/annum to 1.65 tonnes/annum) since 1990.

The Environment Agency carried out dispersion modelling of the impact of mercury emissions from UK power stations in 1996. The impact as a result of the concentrations attributed to the power stations was found to be insignificant. The Environment Agency will however keep the question of emissions under review as alternative fuel sources became available/viable.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the accepted maximum levels of mercury in the environment are. [97520]

Alun Michael: There is no acceptable maximum level of mercury in the environment. To protect against direct human inhalation, the World Health Organisation (WHO), recommends a guideline level of 1 microgramme per cubic metre for inorganic mercury vapour in air. However due to the fact that mercury has been shown to bioaccumulate in its toxic, methylated form in the environment, particularly in the aquatic food chain, the WHO recommends that ambient levels of mercury in air should be kept as low as possible.

Environmental quality standards (EQSs) for mercury in the aquatic environment are set out in List I of the Dangerous Substances Directive (DSD) (76/464/EEC) and the Surface Water (Dangerous Substances) (Classification) Regulations (1989) as 1 nanogramme per litre for freshwater and 0.3 nanogrammes per litre for saltwater. Mercury discharges are also covered by daughter directives of the DSD (82/176/EEC and 84/156/EEC).

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which UK rivers or lakes are tested for contamination with mercury; and what the results of these surveys were in the last year for which information is available. [97521]

Mr. Morley: This information is not held centrally and will have to be collated by the Environment Agency. The Agency has advised that it should be able to provide a comprehensive answer during March. I will arrange for the information to be placed in the Library of the House, and will notify the hon. Member when it is available.

Pig Industry

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total Government marketing funding for the pig industry was in *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02 and *(c)* 2002–03. [96274]

Mr. Morley: While it is not Government policy to provide marketing funding for the pig industry, in 2000–01 a one-off payment of £2.65 million was made to the Meat and Livestock Commission (MLC) to help them advertise the "pork mark". This was a campaign to promote welfare friendly pork. No further payments were made in 2001–02 and 2002–03. Livestock and meat marketing, including the pig industry, is one of the functions of the MLC, established by the Agriculture Act 1967. The MLC has the general duty of promoting greater efficiency in the livestock products industry.

Responsible Pet Ownership

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the development of dog registration and education programmes for responsible pet ownership. [97134]

Mr. Morley: At present Defra has no funds available to implement the recommendations set out in the Dog Identification Group's "Report on the Permanent Identification of Dogs". However, the Government produce guidance, and encourage responsible dog ownership through leaflets. Information can be found on the Defra website.

The legislation relating to the welfare of captive and domestic animals is currently under review. As part of the review, I am looking to see how responsible pet ownership can be improved so that vendors, buyers and those who are considering buying pet animals are informed about the welfare needs of the animal.

Sudden Oak Death

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether it is her policy to compensate nursery businesses in respect of viburnum and rhododendron stock destroyed to control the spread of the sudden oak death fungal pathogen phytophthora ramorum. [95947]

Mr. Meacher: Compensation is not generally paid for destruction of plants in order to prevent or control the spread of plant pests or diseases. The Plant Health Act 1967 gives a discretion to pay compensation. A claim has recently been made by a grower in respect of action against plants infected with Phytophthora ramorum (the pathogen which is causing Sudden Oak Death in the United States of America). No final decision has been made on this claim. A case is currently before the European Court of Justice on the question of compensation for the destruction of diseased fish. The outcome of that case will be taken into account in reaching a final determination on the issue of compensation.

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at how many nurseries, broken down by county, viburnum and rhododendron stock has been destroyed to combat the sudden oak death fungal pathogen phytophthora ramorum. [95948]

Mr. Meacher: The table below provides the information requested for England and Wales. Action has also been taken in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Channel Isles.

Nurseries in England and Wales affected by Phytophthora ramorum

County	*Number*
Berkshire	2
Bridgend	1
Buckinghamshire	3
Cambridgeshire	3
Cheshire	14
Conwy	1
Cumbria	1
Derbyshire	4
Dorset	6
East Sussex	2
East Yorkshire	1
Essex	1
Gloucestershire	5
Greater London	3
Greater Manchester	4
Gwynedd	3
Hampshire	10
Hereford	1
Kent	3

Nurseries in England and Wales affected by Phytophthora ramorum

County	*Number*
Lancashire	8
Leicestershire	1
Lincolnshire	3
Monmouthshire	1
Norfolk	3
North Yorkshire	5
Northamptonshire	2
Northumberland	1
Nottinghamshire	2
Oxfordshire	1
Pembrokeshire	2
Powys	3
Shropshire	4
Somerset	2
South Yorkshire	2
Staffordshire	2
Suffolk	2
Surrey	12
Warwickshire	1
West Midlands	1
West Sussex	15
West Yorkshire	2
Wiltshire	1
Wirral	1
Worcestershire	3
Total	148

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures she is taking to combat the spread of the sudden oak death (phytophthora ramorum); and if she will make a statement. [95950]

Mr. Meacher: Defra's Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate (PHSI) are continuing to survey nurseries and garden centres for symptoms of the disease and are examining established plants and trees in areas close to nurseries and garden centres in which the disease has been found. Substantial resources have been diverted into this work and the associated research programme. Plants moved from other member states or imported from third countries are being monitored to ensure that they meet movement requirements and are not carrying the disease. Any plants found to have the disease are destroyed. The devolved authorities and the Forestry Commission are taking similar action. Research is underway at the Central Science Laboratory and at the Forest Research Agency to assess the risk presented by this disease to a wide range of plants, in particular our native tree species and other native plants. The findings of this research will be used to update the Pest Risk Assessment in order to keep under review the precautionary actions being taken against the spread of this disease.

Waste Directive

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which Department has responsibility for the transposition of the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive into UK law. [96412]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

DTI was the lead Department for the negotiations on this Directive and has now started to take forward transposition in close association with DEFRA and other parts of Government.

Waste Disposal

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what additional funding has been made available to the Environment Agency to enable it to *(a)* detect and *(b)* prosecute the (i) disposal and (ii) treatment of waste without a licence. [96466]

Mr. Meacher: No specific funds have been made available to detect and prosecute the disposal and treatment of waste without a waste management licence. The Department issues the Agency with a block grant for its environmental protection work (£121 million in 2002–03). It is for the Agency to decide how to prioritise work and expenditure within this, in discussion with the Department. Waste receives the second largest share of Grant In Aid funding.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many prosecutions by the Environment Agency of waste offences involving disposing or treating of waste without a licence there were in each year since 1997. [96468]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency keeps records of breaches to section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. The figures in the table show the total incidents of illegally depositing controlled waste on land. The figure for January 2001 to December 2001 shows incidents involving fly tipping only.

Figures are recorded on a financial year basis. In respect of calendar year 2001, Environment Agency records are more precise and the number represents the offenders prosecuted for the section 33(1)*(a)* offence of unlawfully depositing waste.

	Number of breaches
1996–97	241
1997–98	345
1998–99	367
1999–2000	342
2000–01	439
January to December 2001	234

The number of prosecutions by the Agency of offences committed under section 33(1)*(b)* of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 for illegally treating controlled waste have only been recorded since 1999. The figures in the following table represent the three complete financial years since then:

	Number of prosecutions
1999–2000	37
2000–01	61
2001–02	90

Water Framework Directive

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the role which Internal Drainage Boards will play in delivering the environmental objectives of the EC Water Framework Directive. [96399]

Mr. Morley: The functions of Internal Drainage Boards, including in relation to management of water levels in watercourses and flood defence, may be relevant to meeting the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.

The Government have proposed that the Environment Agency, in its role as competent authority, will given a duty to consult relevant bodies when preparing River Basin Management Plans. In order for the Secretary of State to be sure that the influence of other bodies with relevant functions are fully reflected in the measures and plans, statutory guidance to the Agency will also set out which bodies will need to be involved, and which functions need to be taken into account.

In river basins where Internal Drainage Boards operate, therefore, Boards will be consulted and their functions taken into account in order to achieve the environmental objectives set within each district.

Whales

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the Government's policies on commercial whaling and the proposal for a Southern Ocean whale sanctuary. [97132]

Mr. Morley: The Government are strongly opposed to all whaling other than subsistence whaling by indigenous people. They fully support the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling and works within the IWC to maintain this.

The Government support the maintenance of existing whale sanctuaries in the Southern and Indian Oceans and has cosponsored proposals made by others for the creation of new sanctuaries in the South Pacific and South Atlantic.

Woodland Grant Scheme

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the expenditure in England of the Woodland Grant Scheme was in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002 calendar years. [96827]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* The expenditure on all the activities grant aided under the Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme was as follows:

Year	*Total grants (£)*
2000	17,215,133
2001	16,517,760
2002	18,042,494

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received concerning the introduction of a single closing date for the next round of the Woodland Grant Scheme for new planting. [96828]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* I have received one representation and this expressed concern about the introduction of a single closing date for new planting applications as announced by the Forestry Commission on 16 December 2002.

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of applications for the Woodland Grant Scheme for new planting in each of the last three years were from private landowners who had no previous experience of woodland planting. [96831]

Mr. Morley: Previous experience is not a criterion for grant-aid. This information is not, therefore, routinely collected and could be made available only at disproportionate cost.

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what difficulties were experienced by *(a)* the Forestry Commission and *(b)* DEFRA staff with the two closing dates per year for the Woodland Grant Scheme, in each year since 2000. [96861]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission has found that any delays to the processing of grant applications made late in the year could result in applications not being approved in time for implementation during the current planting season. These delays can be for a number of reasons, including the resolution of issues between the Commission and the applicant and resolving items raised during the consultation process. Defra do not process the Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS), but process the associated Farm Woodland Premium Scheme (FWPS). Therefore any delays to a WGS application which has a parallel FWPS application can have a knock on effect within Defra.

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the difficulties with the 31 October deadline were for applicants for the Woodland Grant Scheme referred to by the Forestry Commission in its circular to interested parties dated 16th December 2002. [96862]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* Where there are delays in processing applications submitted late in the year, applicants may receive approval too late in the planting season to undertake the agreed work. A delay may be caused where applications are incomplete or require modification to meet the rules and standards of the Woodland Grant Scheme. Any objections arising from the consultation process have to be resolved, which can also add to the processing time.

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many applicants there were for the Woodland Grant Scheme round for which the closing date was 31 October 2002. [96867]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* 633 applications for new planting were received for the 31 October 2002 closing date.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 13 February 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service (Recruitment)

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action he is taking to increase *(a)* graduate recruits, *(b)* recruits from the private sector and *(c)* recruits from the voluntary sector into the senior civil service; and if he will make a statement. [97600]

Mr. Alexander: The Civil Service is committed to ensuring that it has the right skills and experience at all levels. The service does this both by developing its own staff and by bringing in talent from outside the service including the private and voluntary sectors. In 2001–02 there were 200 posts at SCS level filled by open competition, up from 107 in 1998. Of these 77 (39 per cent.) were filled by civil servants, 86 (43 per cent.) from the broader public sector and 37 (18 per cent.) from the private sector. In addition, the service makes use of expertise from the private and voluntary sector through a programme of interchange, including at SCS level.

The service does not target graduates specifically for recruitment into the senior civil service since we are looking for those who have demonstrated the relevant skills and experience for the particular job. However, graduate recruitment exercises are run at lower levels of the service, both through individual Departments' schemes and the centrally-run fast stream graduate trainee scheme.

TREASURY

Customs (Northern Ireland)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether Customs and Excise in Northern Ireland has received any additional Government funding since 1 April 2002. [97009]

John Healey: Since 1April 2002 additional funding has been made available to Customs to further enhance their efforts in Northern Ireland to help tackle oils fraud and to assure compliance with a range of other taxes including landfill tax, aggregates levy and the climate change levy.

United Kingdom GDP

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the total UK GDP was constituted by *(a)* business-to-business transactions and *(b)* business-to-consumer transactions in (i) 2000, (ii) 2001 and (iii) 2002. [97236]

Ruth Kelly *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. Jonathon Djanogly, dated 13 February 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning what percentage of total UK GDP was constituted by *(a)* business-to business transactions and *(b)* business-to-consumer transactions in (i) 2000, (ii) 2001 and (iii) 2002. (97236)

The National Accounts do not separately identify business-to-business transactions or business-to-consumer transactions.

In the National Accounts only business-to-business transactions on capital items are recorded in GDP. The concept that measures this in the National Accounts is business investment.

Business-to-business transactions, non capital items or intermediate expenditure as it is defined in National Accounts, do not add to GDP as the expenditure and incomes in the buying and selling industries cancel out. The ONS publishes estimates of total intermediate expenditure for the corporate sector, the latest figure available is for 2000.

The table below summarises the available data. Figures are expressed in billion at current prices or as percentages. First estimates for 2002 will be published on 26 February 2003.

	1999	*2000*	*2001*
Gross Domestic Product (billion)	902.5	950.4	990.9
Business Investment (billion)	108.2	109.8	112.5
Business Investment as a proportion of GDP (%)	12.0	11.6	11.3
Household expenditure (billion)	569.5	603.6	630.8
Household expenditure as a proportion of GDP (%)	63.1	63.5	63.7
Intermediate expenditure by the corporate sector (billion)	683.5	721.2	Not available

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list consultations his Department has conducted since 1997; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [97421]

Ruth Kelly: The Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Written Consultation applies to all formal national public consultation documents issued by Departments from 1 January 2001. From that date, full details of consultations conducted by HM Treasury are published on our public website, www.hm-treasury.gov.uk. Our website also lists consultations issued between May and December 2000. A list of consultations from 16 May 2000 to 5 February 2003, the dates launched and the closing dates are given below. Prior to May 2000 the information requested is not available.

Consultation subject	*Launch date*	*Closing date*
Proposed product specifications for Sandler "stakeholder" products.	5 February 2003	2 May 2003
Proposed revision of the Money Laundering Regulations 1993 to 2001	15 November 2002	14 February 2003
Simplifying the taxation of pensions: increasing choice and flexibility for all	17 December 2002	11 April 2003
Transfer of Audit Responsibility for the Special Health Authorities from the Audit Commission to the Comptroller and Auditor General	10 December 2002	4 February 2003

Consultation subject	Launch date	Closing date
Regulating Insurance Mediation	21 October 2002	31 January 2003
Implementation of the Insurers Reorganisation and Widing-Up Directive	15 November 2002	31 January 2003
Proposed sanctions for breach of the Regulation on Cross-Border payment in Euro	17 September 2002	17 December 2002
Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Directive amending Council Directive 91/308/EEC of 10 June 1991 on prevention of the use of the financial system for the purpose of money laundering	29 September 1999	31 December 2002
Modernising the arrangements for registration and transfer of British Government Stock	1 Novembwe 2002	24 January 2003
Modernising the settlement of Money Market Instruments	13 September 2002	6 November 2002
Beneficial Ownership of Unlisted Companies	23 July 2002	14 November 2002
Reform of Corporation Tax Consultation	5 September 2002	29 October 2002
Increased Statutory Powers for the Comptroller and the Auditor General (C&AG)	1 August 2002	24 October 2002
The Green Book: Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government	24 July 2002	18 October 2002
Economic instruments to improve household energy efficiency	16 July 2002	8 October 2002
Implementing the Fourth Motor Insurance Directive	24 April 2002	17 July 2002
Possible Changes to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme	17 April 2002	17 June 2002
Implementation of the E-Commerce Directive in Financial Services	7 March 2002	2 May 2002
Regulating Mortgages	28 February 2002	30 April 2002
Insider Dealing (Securities and Regulated markets) (Amendment) Order 200	25 February 2002	19 April 2002
Delivering Saving and Assets	27 November 2001	8 February 2002
Reforming Motorcycle Vehicle Excise Duty	27 November 2001	8 February 2002
Implementation of the E-Commerce Directive in Financial Services	14 December 2001	8 February 2002
Modernising the Taxation of the Haulage Industry	27 November 2001	8 February 2002
Promoting Sport in the Community	30 November 2001	1 February 2002
Financial Services and Markets Act 2000: Administration Orders for Insurers	5 November 2001	29 January 2002
Wanless Report: Securing our Future Health	27 November 2001	22 January 2002
Designs for Innovation	4 December 2001	18 January 2002
Changes to Credit Unions Legislation	15 October 2001	18 January 2002
Financial Services and Markets Act 2000: Communications by Actuaries Regulations 2001	17 October 2001	9 January 2002
Implementation of the Electronic Money Directive	16 October 2001	8 January 2002
Protection of the Euro against Counterfeiting Regulations 2001	15 October 2001	26 November 2001
Regulatory Regime for Bureaux de Change, Money Transmission Agents and Cheque Cashers (Money Service Business)	15 October 2001	5 November 2001
Consultative Documents: proposal on the Statute for a European Co-operative Society	27 July 2001	31 October 2001
Domestic and International Initiatives Concerning Conflict of Law Inssues Relating to Securities	18 July 2001	17 October 2001
Review of the Supply of Scientists and Engineers: Key Issues Consultation Paper (Sir Gareth Robert's Review)	21 June 2001	31 July 2001
New Proposals to Increase Saving and Asset Ownership for all	27 April 2001	31 July 2001
Enterprising communities: A tax incentive for community investment A Consultation document	1 March 2001	2 July 2001
Green Technology Challenge: Consultation Document	25 July 2001	28 September 2001
Large Business Taxation: The Government's Strategy and Corporate Tax Reforms	19 July 2001	1 October 2001
Review of Medium and Long-term Retail Savings	30 February 2001	11 May 2001
Small Business must improve its Investment Readiness—Small Business Service	2 April 2001	11 May 2001
Standards for Retail Financial Services	30 January 2001	30 April 2001
Long Term Care Insurance	21 December 2000	30 March 2001
Competition in Payment Systems	21 December 2000	20 March 2001
Disclosure of Confidential Information Rgulations 2001	2 April 2001	25 May 2001
Mutual Societies Order	2 April 2001	25 May 2001
Control of Business Transfers (Requirements on Applicants) Regulations 2001	2 April 2001	25 May 2001
The Transition to the New Ombudsman Scheme and the Investigation of Complaints against the Financial Services Authority	2 April 2001	25 May 2001
The Transition to the New Compensation Scheme	2 April 2001	25 May 2001
Rights of Action	7 December 2000	2 February 2001
Disclosure of Information by Prescribed Persons Regulations 2001	7 December 2000	2 February 2001
Service of Notices	7 December 2000	2 February 2001
Market Abuse: Prescribed Markets and Qualifying Investments Order	7 December 2000	2 February 2001
Recognition Requirements for Investment Exchanges and Clearing Houses	7 December 2000	2 February 2000
Regulated Activities—Second Consultation	26 October 2000	20 December 2000
Financial Promotion—Third Consultation	26 October 2000	20 December 2000
The Open Ended Investment Companies (Companies with Variable Capital) Regulations	28 January 2000	30 April 2000
Regulating Mortgages	26 October 2000	20 December 2001
Security for Occupational Pensions, Consultation Document	14 September 2000	31 January 2001
Consultation on the objectives of the Sustainability Fund under the Aggregates Levy Package	25 August 2000	29 September 2000
Individual Pension Accounts	11 July 2000	31 August 2000
The Myners Review of Institutional Investment for HM Treasury	16 May 2000	14 July 2000

Duty Diversion Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many convictions were secured in cases relating to diversion fraud between 1993 and 2002; and how many of these convictions are considered unsafe because of non-disclosure of relevant material at trial by customs officers. [97368]

John Healey: HM customs and excise does not collate figures for convictions for diversion frauds separately from other prosecutions, and therefore these figures are not readily available. In relation to diversions of goods that originated from London City Bond between 1995 and 1998 during the use of the informants there, I refer to my answers to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) on 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 455–457W).

Gold Reserves

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the investments that have been made since 6 July 1999 with the proceeds from sales of gold reserves; and what the value was on 10 February of those investments. [97296]

Ruth Kelly *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* The proceeds from the sale of part of the United Kingdom's gold holdings, between 6 July 1999 and 6 March 2002, were invested in interest-bearing foreign currency assets in broadly the same proportion as currently held in the net foreign currency reserves (40 per cent. dollars; 40 per cent. euros; 20 per cent. yen). Further information on the investment policy for the foreign currency reserves is detailed in the Exchange Equalisation Account Financial Accounts 2001–02 published on 16 January 2003 (HC 258 Session 2002–03).

Details of the currency breakdown of the United Kingdom's foreign currency reserves are published quarterly, with a lag of two months, on the Bank of England's website-bankofengland.co.uk. The latest data available are for the end September 2002.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what advice he took on investing the proceeds of sale of the gold reserves; and if he will publish that advice. [97297]

Ruth Kelly *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* The investment policy for the net foreign currency reserves is detailed in the Exchange Equalisation Account Financial Accounts 2001–02 published on 16 January 2003 (HC 258 Session 2002–03). Prior to the decision in 1999 to restructure the reserves portfolio the Bank of England provided advice on the portfolio risks associated with gold and other assets. These portfolio risk issues, and the broader rationale for the restructuring of the reserves portfolio, are discussed in HM Treasury's "Review of the Sale of Part of the UK Gold Reserves" (October 2002)- copies of this document have been placed in the House of Commons Library and it is also available on the Treasury's website-http://www. hm-treasury.gov.uk/media//9EFEF/ GoldReserves.PDF.

Income Tax

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue loss of *(a)* extending the basic income tax rate bracket to individuals with an annual income of (i) £38,000, (ii) £39,000, (iii) £40,000, (iv) £41,000, (v) £42,000, (vi) £43,000, (vii) £44,000, (viii) £45,000, (ix) £46,000, (x) £47,000, (xi) £48,000, (xii) £49,000 and (xiii) £50,000 and *(b)* having a starting income tax rate bracket of (i) £0-£2,500, (ii) £0-£3,000, (iii) £0-£3,500, (iv) £0-£4,000, (v) £0-£4,500 and (vi) £0-£5,000. [96995]

Dawn Primarolo: The full year revenue loss from making the changes in 2003–04 is set out in the table.

£ billion

	Starting rate limit on taxable incomes					
Basic rate limit on taxable incomes	*2,500*	*3,000*	*3,500*	*4,000*	*4,500*	*5,000*
38,000	-5.4	-7.0	-8.5	-9.9	-11.3	-12.6
39,000	-5.8	-7.4	-8.9	-10.3	-11.7	-13.0
40,000	-6.2	-7.7	-9.2	-10.7	-12.1	-13.4
41,000	-6.6	-8.1	-9.6	-11.0	-12.4	-13.8
42,000	-6.9	-8.4	-9.9	-11.4	-12.8	-14.1
43,000	-7.2	-8.8	-10.2	-11.7	-13.1	-14.4
44,000	-7.5	-9.1	-10.6	-12.0	-13.4	-14.7
45,000	-7.8	-9.4	-10.8	-12.3	-13.7	-15.0
46,000	-8.1	-9.6	-11.1	-12.6	-13.9	-15.3
47,000	-8.4	-9.9	-11.4	-12.8	-14.2	-15.6
48,000	-8.6	-10.2	-11.6	-13.1	-14.5	-15.8
49,000	-8.9	-10.4	-11.9	-13.3	-14.7	-16.1
50,000	-9.1	-10.6	-12.1	-13.6	-15.0	-16.3

The estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the November 2002 pre-Budget report. These estimates exclude any behavioural response to the tax change.

Inheritance Tax

Andrew Bennett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have applied for conditional exemption from inheritance tax in the last 12 months; and how this tax relief is being amended to take into account the implementation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. [96745]

Dawn Primarolo: Eight inheritance tax exemption claims concerning land have been received by the Inland Revenue in the last 12 months. Only one case involves "access land" for the purposes of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

As my hon. Friend knows from his longstanding interest in this topic, rights of access are not the only benefits secured for the public by undertakings under the conditional exemption scheme, and the access provided by such undertakings has never been restricted to the matters covered by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, where it applies. The Inland Revenue and their heritage advisers take full account of the Act's potential application in determining what undertakings they will regard as giving reasonable public access. They find that the conditional exemption scheme is able to secure greater and/or better quality opportunities for access than those afforded by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, and they will continue to seek such added benefits.

Israel

Richard Burden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what inquiries are being made by HM Customs and Excise to ascertain whether goods are on sale in British supermarkets which have been imported to the EU under preference according to the EU-Israel Association Agreement but which originate in settlements in the Occupied Territories; [97077]

(2) pursuant to the answer of 4 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 181W, on Israel, if he will list the imports where verification inquiries are being made by Customs and Excise. [97261]

John Healey: Details of verification inquiries could lead to the identification of individual importers and cannot be disclosed. Exemption 13 (Third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Conduct on Access to Government Information applies.

Customs and Excise have made no inquiries in supermarkets. They are targeting at the point of import goods where the Israel preference has been claimed but where there is reason to suspect that they may have originated in the Occupied Territories.

Landfill

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the costs to the public sector of *(a)* salaries and *(b)* administration arising from his proposed changes to the landfill tax credit scheme. [96150]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

The cost of running the transition scheme announced by my right hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury on Monday 3 February *Official Report*, column 5WS, is expected to be covered by the 2 per cent. of total funding currently used for the cost of administering landfill tax credit scheme. No estimate of the cost of running the new public expenditure programmes has yet been made.

UK Gold Holdings

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total amount of money realised from the sales of UK gold holdings from 6 July 1999 to 6 March 2002 and what would be the value of that gold at the morning fix on 10 February. [97295]

Ruth Kelly *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* The proceeds from the sale of 395 tonnes of gold over the period 6 July 1999 to 6 March 2002 were approximately $3.5 billion (around £2.1 billion at the exchange rate at close on 10 February 2003). The price of gold at the morning fix on 10 February 2003 was $371.75 per ounce (32,150.747 ounces = 1 tonne).

VAT Exemptions (Charities)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to extend VAT exemptions for recognised charities. [97907]

John Healey: Charities already benefit from a range of special VAT reliefs worth around 200 million a year. We regularly discuss taxation issues with the charitable sector, and within the bounds of long standing formal agreements with our European partners, we are ready to consider opportunities to modernise and update the VAT system where we can.

DEFENCE

Gibraltar

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the strategic importance of Gibraltar to military intervention in Iraq. [97282]

Mr. Ingram: Gibraltar contains a naval base and other support facilities which are available to support operations in the Mediterranean or middle east.

Afghan-Pakistan Border

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether *(a)* Lwara and *(b)* other US positions on the Afghan-Pakistan border have been (i) abandoned and (ii) occupied by al-Qaeda fighters. [96982]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* Coalition forces continue to maintain a presence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region to counter anti-coalition militants. The location of such forces is a tactical decision taken by the Commander on the ground and determined, among other things, by operational priorities.

Eastern and south-eastern Afghanistan is an area where groups opposed to the Coalition presence and the Transitional Authority of President Karzai continue to mount operations. It is not for the United Kingdom to comment on US Operations, however, US forces, in conjunction with other Coalition partners, not only provide support to the Transitional Authority in Kabul, but also act in the wider effort to tackle the limited threat to the security of Afghanistan posed by al-Qaeda, and other dissident remnants.

Anthrax Find

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will release information on the courses of MOD vessels on or before the 23 January from which the quantities of anthrax vaccine found on a Dorset beach could have come; and if he will make a statement. [97307]

Dr. Moonie: The possible source of the quantities of anthrax vaccine found on south coast beaches in January is the subject of an ongoing Special Investigation Branch investigation. To release information at this stage could prejudice that ongoing work. I will write to the hon. Member when the investigation is complete.

Army Reservists (NHS)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many and what category of NHS staff have been called up as Army reservists in the last four weeks. [89789]

Dr. Moonie: In the four weeks prior to 9 January, 33 NHS staff were called up as Army reservists for involvement in Operations in the Balkans, and in preparation for possible operations in the Gulf.

The NHS categories involved are:

Environmental Health Officer

Consultant Anaesthetics and Resuscitation Doctor

Nurse

Ophthalmic Nurse Specialist

Pharmacist

Directorate Manager of Anaesthetics Theatres and Intensive Care Unit

Misuse of Drugs Inspector

Consultant Haematologist and Physician

Senior Registrar

Consultant Surgeon

Consultant Gynaecologist.

Defence Diversification Agency

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the objectives of the Defence Diversification Agency. [95304]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence takes the issues of diversification very seriously and encourages the widest possible exploitation of defence technology by the civil sector. In order to facilitate this we established the Defence Diversification Agency (DDA) in 1999 and it continues with its original aims:

To encourage the wider use of defence science and technology in the civil sector.

To encourage the transfer to suitable civil technology into military programmes.

To assist the defence industry with their own diversification planning.

To deliver these objectives the DDA has established a network of technology brokers across the United Kingdom. Thus far 18 offices have been opened with further ones planned.

Each office is staffed with a Technology Diversification Manager whose role is to seek business opportunities working in partnership with local business support and enterprise groups.

Defence Establishments (Closures)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the Ministry of Defence establishments that have been designated for closure; [95403]

(2) how many Ministry of Defence establishments were closed in 2002. [95402]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Depleted Uranium

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the expenditure was on MOD research into depleted uranium munitions in each year since 1997 and what percentage of the departmental budget this represented in each case. [97284]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* Approximate figures are set out in the table. All figures are at outturn prices and include VAT.

Financial year	*Expenditure (£)*	*Percentage of defence budget*
1997–98	120,000	0.00057
1998–99	140,000	0.00062
1999–2000	85,000	0.00037
2000–01	105,000	0.00045
2001–02	135,000	0.00056
2002–03	[1]1,680,000	0.007

[1] Budgeted

Additionally, some further research was carried out on Challenger II and other anti-armour weapons. The DU element of this was not separately identified at the time.

Eurofighter

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on the Eurofighter in each year from 1997–98 to 2008–09; and if he will make a statement. [95780]

Mr. Ingram: Total expenditure by the Ministry of Defence on acquisition of the Eurofighter Typhoon, on a cash basis and at outturn prices, was as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	410
1998–99	570
1999–2000	580
2000–01	760
2001–02	840
2002–03	800

Note:
The figure for 2002–03 is an estimate.

Figures for future years are being withheld in accordance with Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information that relates to confidentiality of internal discussions and advice.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Eurofighter aircraft he plans to purchase; and if he will make a statement. [95781]

Mr. Ingram: We plan to purchase 232 Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft.

Human Centrifuge

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 859W, on human centrifuge, which company, other than AMST, is bidding for the High G RAF human centrifuge project. [97325]

Mr. Ingram: Wyle Laboratories Inc., of El Segundo, USA, are the other company that have received an invitation to tender for the High G RAF human centrifuge project as recorded in the MOD Defence Contracts Bulletin (Vol. 1 No.5) dated 15 January 2003.

Iraq

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many reservists working in the NHS have been called up to serve in Iraq; and whether the hospital trusts concerned have been informed; [93031]

(2) how many reservists are working in the NHS *(a)* as doctors, *(b)* as nurses, *(c)* as paramedics and *(d)* in professions allied to medicine. [93029]

Dr. Moonie: Reservists are not usually required to provide details of any civilian employment to the Ministry of Defence until such time as they are called-out. Historically, therefore, no central records have been maintained by the MOD of the numbers of reservists working in the NHS as doctors, nurses, paramedics and other professionals allied to medicine. Although the MOD encourages reservists to declare their reserve status to civilian employers, there is no legal requirement to do so unless specified in individual contracts of employment. The call-out papers sent to reservists require them to advise the MOD of their civilian employer, and to pass to their employer documents relating to their call-out, including a form for the employer to return to the MOD acknowledging the call-out.

Information is not available centrally on the civilian employment of medical reservists called-out for service in the event of military action against Iraq. However, some medical reservists who have been issued with call-out papers had previously declared their civilian employment. As at 6 February, 345 medical reservists in the Volunteer Reserve Forces had been sent call-out papers, and of these, 194 are understood to be working in the NHS. In addition, 182 medical ex-regular Royal Air Force personnel with a reserve liability have been sent call-out papers but information on their civilian employment is not currently available.

NHS hospital trusts would be informed by reservists of their call-out when they receive their call-out papers. The MOD will work with the Department of Health to minimise disruption to the NHS as far as possible.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps are being taken to protect the health of the indigenous population of Iraq in the theatre of operations. [95915]

Dr. Moonie: In the event of military operations, we would as always, take great care to minimise civilian casualties. This Government take very seriously their responsibility to act within the framework of international law regulating international conflict. Saddam Hussein of course has no such scruples, as he demonstrated when he used chemical weapons against his own people.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence *(a)* what role is planned for British field hospitals in Iraq and *(b)* what preparations have been made for such hospitals to receive civilian casualties of all nationalities in the event of hostilities in Iraq. [97769]

Dr. Moonie: The purpose of British field hospitals is to provide hospital equivalent support to United Kingdom forces and their military allies and to meet the requirements of The Hague and Geneva Conventions in the provision of medical support for wounded prisoners of war. They are therefore equipped and manned to support this role.

There has been no decision to take military action against Iraq. Saddam Hussein might still comply with the demands of the international community although time is running out. If the use of military force is sanctioned, this Government will take its responsibility to act within the framework of international law regulating international conflict very seriously which includes obligations pertaining to civilian populations.

Missile Defence

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research NATO is carrying out on *(a)* theatre missile defence and *(b)* ballistic missile defence of Europe. [96947]

Mr. Hoon: NATO has decided to conduct two feasibility studies related to missile defence. The first was launched in July 2001 and addressed Active Layered Tactical Ballistic Missile Defence. The study is nearing completion.

The second feasibility study is related to protection of Alliance territory, forces and population centres, but is still in the preparatory stage and is unlikely to commence before the end of 2003.

NATO

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what the annual cost of British membership in NATO was in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 2000; and what percentage of the Department's budget was paid to NATO in each those years. [93941]

Mr. Hoon: The United Kingdom's direct contributions to NATO's Security Investment Programme and Military Budget are paid directly from the UK Defence Budget. The Defence Budget also pays a very small amount to the NATO Civil Budget (the main portion is paid by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

I am unable to provide the financial details for 1990 as this information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The information for 1991, 1995 and 2000 is shown in the table.

Year	*UK payment to NATO (£ million)*	*Defence budget (£ million)*	*Percentage of Defence budget*
1991	199.6	23,637	0.92
1995	110.8	21,439	0.52
2000	105.8	23,548	0.45

Night Vision Equipment

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what personal night vision equipment is in service with *(a)* infantry, *(b)* Royal Marine units, *(c)* RAF and *(d)* Fleet Air Arm airerew. [96937]

Mr. Ingram: As at 7 February 2003, the personal night vision equipment in service with the Infantry, Royal Marines and RAF is set out in the following table. This is a snapshot in time as the figures change on a daily basis. Information is not held centrally for the Fleet Air Ann aircrew, but I will write to the hon. Member when I have the information and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Description	Infantry	Royal Marines	RAF
Thermal Imager—short range surveillance (LION)	47	15	0
Thermal Imager—medium range surveillance (SOPHIE)	0	63	1
Thermal Imager. Can be tripod mounted (OTIS)	57	0	0
Thermal Imager. Can be tripod mounted (SPYGLASS)	391	49	61
Weapon sight thermal imager (TADS)	0	8	0
Light weight hand held or head mounted ER device and image intensifier (GPNVG)	1,345	13	386
Mono goggle IR device. Hand held or head mounted. Image intensifier (MNVG)	70	0	0
Head mounted image intensifier (HNVG)	1	5	20
Mono goggle IR device hand held or head mounted. (HMNVS)	286	433	0
Light weight head mounted image intensifier (LUCIE)	46	12	0
Weapon sight. Can be hand held. Image intensifier (CWS)	10,828	679	1,137
Weapon sight. CWS with afocal lens (Maxikite)	153	126	0
Small Arms Night Sight. Weapon sight. Image intensified (SANS)	0	156	0
Sniper Night Sight weapon sight. Image intensifier (SNS)	0	24	0
Head Mounted Night Optic. Goggle (HMNO)	0	84	0

Operation Southern Watch

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether all the RAF's Tornado GR4s are capable of supporting Operation Southern Watch duties; and if he will make a statement. [97194]

Mr. Ingram: All RAF Tornado GR4s within the Actual Operating Fleet are capable of supporting Operation Southern Watch.

Operation Telic

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which RAF units will be participating in Operation Telic; and if he will make a statement. [97195]

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, if he will list the RAF *(a)* units and *(b)* assets to be deployed to the Gulf region; what the last three operational tours of each was; and what units are earmarked to replace those currently being deployed.

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 11 February 2003]*: A list of the RAF units from which assets have currently been assigned to Operation TELIC as in the following table. Approximately 100 fixed-wing and 27 rotary-wing aircraft have been assigned to Operation Telic.

Unit	Last three operational tours		
11 Squadron RAF Regiment	Resinate South	Silkman	Maidenly
34 Squadron RAF Regiment	Fingal	Resinate South	
120 Squadron (Nimrod MR2)	Veritas/Oracle	Resinate South	Harmala
201 Squadron (Nimrod MR2)	Veritas/Oracle	Resinate South	Harmala
206 Squadron (Nimrod MR2)	Veritas/Oracle	Resinate South	Harmala
3(F) Squadron (Harrier GR7)	Palliser	Deliberate Forge	Bolton
16 Squadron RAF Regiment (note 1)	Fresco	Falkland Islands	
1 Squadron RAF Regiment (note 1)	Resinate South	Fingal	Veritas/Hacton
51 Squadron RAF Regiment (note 1)	Resinate South		
1 Tactical Survive to Operate (note 1)	Resinate South	Resinate South	
3 Tactical Survive to Operate (note 1)	Resinate South		
4 Tactical Survive to Operate (note 1)	Resinate South		
10 Squadron (VC10)	Oracle	Fingal	Jacana
101 Squadron (VC10)	Oracle	Fingal	Jacana
216 Squadron (Tristar)	Oracle	Fingal	Jacana
32 (The Royal) Squadron (HS 125)	Oracle	Fingal	Jacana
8 Squadron (E-3D)	Oracle	Allied Force	Joint Guardian
23 Squadron (E-3D)	Oracle	Allied Force	Joint Guardian
1(F) Squadron (Harrier GR7)	Magellan	Allied Force	Deliberate Forge
IV Squadron (Harrier GR7)	Deliberate Forge	Vulcan	Warden
24 Squadron (C130)	Oracle	Fingal	Bessemer
30 Squadron (C130)	Oracle	Fingal	Bessemer
47 Squadron (C130)	Oracle	Fingal	Bessemer
70 Squadron (C130)	Oracle	Fingal	Bessemer
99 Squadron (C17)	Oracle	Fingal	Bessemer
II Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
IX(B) Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
13 Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
31 Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
617 Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
12 Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
14 Squadron (Tornado GR4)	Resinate South	Resinate South	Resinate South
54 Squadron (Jaguar GR3)	Resinate North	Resinate North	Resinate North
6 Squadron (Jaguar GR3)	Resinate North	Resinate North	Resinate North
41 Squadron (Jaguar GR3)	Resinate North	Resinate North	Resinate North

Unit	Last three operational tours		
11 Squadron (Tornado F3)	Veritas	Resinate South	Falkland Islands
25 Squadron (Tornado F3)	Resinate South	Falkland Islands	Veritas
43 Squadron (Tornado F3)	Falkland Islands	Veritas	Resinate South
111 Squadron (Tornado F3)	Resinate South	Veritas	Falkland Islands
(Helicopter) RAF Odiham (note 2)	Jacana	Oculus	Banner
(Helicopter) RAF Benson (note 2)	Oculus	Agricola	Barwood

Notes:
1. Where less than three operations are shown the unit has not completed any further operational tours.
2. Helicopter units are identified by station, not Squadron.

At present it is premature to speculate about the duration of any military deployments or about the rotation or replacement of the forces involved. No United Kingdom forces have been committed to any military action against Iraq and there is still time for Saddam to comply fully with UNSCR 1441 and avoid disarmament by force.

Royal Navy Ships

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether further reductions in Royal Navy *(a)* warships and *(b)* submarines are envisaged in consequence of the new chapter of the Strategic Defence Review. [94544]

Mr. Hoon: As I said when announcing its publication, the New Chapter provided a "mandate for accelerating the modernisation and evolution of the armed forces" (18 July 2002, *Official Report*, column 461). The Defence White Paper, which I intend to publish later this year, will explain our plans to use the additional resources made available in Spending Review 2002 for further investment in the capabilities to enable the Royal Navy to meet the challenges posed by the changed strategic context.

Tank Procurement

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the expenditure by his Department on tank procurement in each year from 1990–91 to 2008–09 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [95778]

Mr. Ingram: Expenditure on tank procurement during the period 1990 to 2002 is shown in the table.

£ million

	Direct procurement expenditure
1990–94	—
1994–95	31
1995–96	73
1996–97	12
1997–98	36
1998–99	352
1999–2000	412
2000–01	282
2001–02	281
2002 to present	—

Planned expenditure on tank procurement over the period 2003–09 has yet to be decided. As part of our evaluation of the Future Rapid Effect System (FRES), we are investigating the possibility of including a direct fire (light tank) variant. FRES is still in its Concept Phase and has yet to go through the first stage of the formal approval process (Initial Gate).

Universities' Royal Naval Units

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role and structure of the Universities' Royal Naval Units. [92959]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Vacant Ministry Buildings

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of Ministry of Defence owned buildings are vacant; and if he will make a statement. [95786]

Dr. Moonie: The information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Working Week

Hugh Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many hours were worked in the average week in *(a)* the Army, *(b)* the Navy and *(c)* the Air Force in each of the past five years. [97924]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Member and I will place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Air Quality

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make it her policy to implement recommendations for low emission zones made by the National Society for Clean Air. [97017]

Alun Michael: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Transport wrote to the National Society for Clean Air last May, on behalf of himself and the then Minister for Environment, agreeing, in principal, the merits of Government support for their recommendation for a low emission zone national standard. I understand the Society has still to finalise their proposals and are about to undertake further consultation. We have asked the Society to let us know the outcome to allow consideration of the potential social and economic impacts of a final standard before formally agreeing to endorse it.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the local authorities in England which have completed Ambient Air Quality *(a)* plans and *(b)* assessments; and what measures she is taking to assist local authorities to adopt ambient air quality plans. [98008]

Alun Michael: Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Environment Act 1995 to designate air quality management areas where it is likely that the air quality objectives, as prescribed in regulations, will not be met by the relevant deadline.

Over 100 authorities have now declared air quality management areas. Following the designation of an air quality management area, the local authority has a statutory duty to undertake a further review and assessment within 12 months from when the air quality management area came into effect. The local authority also has to produce an action plan within 12–18 months setting out the measures it intends to implement to work towards meeting the air quality objectives in that area.

Those local authorities in England which have produced air quality action plans and consulted the Secretary of State on them are listed as follows:

Westminster City Council
London borough of Croydon
London borough of Camden
London borough of Southwark
London borough of Greenwich
London borough of Barnet
London borough of Richmond upon Thames
London borough of Lambeth
London borough of Merton
London borough of Islington
London borough of Enfield
London borough of Waltham Forest
London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea
London borough of Ealing
Corporation of London
South Lakeland
Dartford
Fenland
North Warwickshire
Thurrock
Wycombe
Tonbridge and Malling
Doncaster
Warrington
Derby
Colchester
Leeds

Those local authorities in England which have produced further assessments under section 84 of the 1995 Act and consulted the Secretary of State are listed as follows:

Babergh DC
Barnsley MBC
Bath and NE Somerset
Bristol City Council
Bromsgrove
City of Westminster
Colchester BC
Corporation of London
Dartford BC
Derby City Council
Doncaster MBC
Erewash BC
Fenland DC
Gravesham BC
Herefordshire
Hertsmere
London borough of Barnet
London borough of Camden
London borough of Croydon
London borough of Ealing
London borough of Enfield
London borough of Lewisham
London borough of Richmond
London borough of Waltham Forest
Leeds City Council
Maidstone BC
Manchester City Council
Medway
North Warwickshire
Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Rochdale
Rotherham
Rushmoor
Salisbury
South Gloucestershire
South Lakeland
St. Edmundsbury
Stockport
Stroud
Tewkesbury
Thurrock
Tonbridge and Mailing
Trafford MBC
Warrington
Wigan
Wokingham
Wycombe
York

In England, the Revenue Support Grant Settlement provides running cost resources for local air quality management duties under the 1995 Act. We also have a Supplementary Credit Approvals (SCAs) programme to support local authorities' capital costs and we have targeted the SCAs at those authorities who have to undertake further assessments and those with action

plans. Local authorities can also bid for funds through the local transport plan regime to support local traffic measures in their action plans.

Illegal Meat Imports

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many people coming into the UK have been apprehended at the port of entry in each of the last five years for illegal importation of meat products. [96021]

Mr. Morley: Since we started keeping records centrally in April 2001, we have been notified of 5,818 people who have had products of animal origin seized and notices served. However, we have not been notified of anyone being arrested at the port of entry for the illegal importation of meat products.

Sheep Dip

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what information she has collated on adverse health effects reported following use of sheep dip by farmers. [95844]

Mr. Morley: In October 2002 the Government published a Report on an Analytical Study of data collected under the UK's Veterinary Medicines Suspected Adverse Reaction Surveillance Scheme (SARSS) on reports of suspected adverse reactions to OP sheep dips. This Report is available in the Library of the House and on the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD)'s website *(www.vmd.gov.uk)*.

The Report's main conclusions were that:

The strength of internal association shown between reports of ill health and both the extent and current status of dipping activities underlines the importance of the Government funded epidemiological and mechanistic research studies currently underway;

the variable quality of the data submitted to the SARSS, together with the inherent nature of data from a passive monitoring system, prevented firmer conclusions being drawn; and

while no novel patterns of symptoms were detected, some symproms (notably myalgia and depression) were prominent features of OP related suspected adverse reaction reports.

This report has been considered by the Veterinary Products Committee (VPC), the independent advisory committee of experts established to provide advice to Government on the safety, quality and efficacy of veterinary medicines. The VPC has advised that the report's findings do not support any additional regulatory action being taken on OP sheep dips.

Final findings from the Government's £1.4 million targeted research programme on OPs are expected in 2006.

Animal Diseases (EU Finance)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to the answer of 19 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 40W, on animal diseases (EU finance), on what date the claims were submitted to the European Commission and by what means. [97916]

Mr. Morley: In order to claim EU contributions to expenditure in 2003, we were required to submit programmes for that year by 1 June 2002. Northern Ireland officials wrote to the Commission on 14 June 2002, submitting their programmes for TB and Brucella. Defra wrote to the Commission on 22 October 2002 submitting programmes for TSE testing. The Commission confirmed on 11 November 2002 that it was not then legally possible for payments to be made.

Animal Welfare

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government have taken to limit the maximum journey time for livestock throughout Europe. [97136]

Mr. Morley: The rules governing animal welfare during transport, including maximum permitted journey times, are set down in directive 91/628/EEC, as amended. They are implemented in GB by the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997, as amended. We have consistently pressed the European Commission to bring forward proposals to amend and update these rules. In September 2002, the Secretary of State supported calls for shorter journey times for animals going to slaughter.

In the wider European context, we have played a leading role in revising the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Animals During International Transport.

Badgers

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what evidence her Department evaluated in advance of the slaughter of badgers at Saltdean. [95331]

Mr. Morley: Before granting a licence under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, for the capture and humane killing of badgers occupying one sett, to prevent serious damage to property in Saltdean, we evaluated evidence that included reports following site visits by wildlife advisers from the Department's Rural Development Service, and advice given by the Central Science Laboratory. In this case we also consulted English Nature, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Federation of Badger Groups.

Capital Projects

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will place the evaluations for Capital Modernisation Fund projects in her Department and undertaken by the Forestry Commission since 1998 in the Library; and if she will make a statement. [97030]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission is undertaking two projects through the Capital Modernisation Fund. The first relates to Community Forestry and the second involves the modernisation of the Commission's holiday cabin sites in England.

However, both projects are still in progress and full evaluation reports are not, therefore, available at this time.

Cetaceans

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the estimated number of dolphins in *(a)* 2003 and *(b)* 1993 within the British Isles. [96921]

Mr. Morley: Obtaining population estimates for cetaceans is difficult. There is a wide margin of error within abundance estimates and the geographical limits of most biological populations of dolphin species are not known.

To date, major surveys of cetacean distribution or abundance have not been carried out at regular intervals. The table, which has been placed in the Library, gives figures from the 2002 report of the Advisory Committee on Ecosystems of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), illustrating the latest information on the populations and abundance of cetaceans that occur in UK waters. The populations are given in terms of ICES areas or geographical locality. A map showing the ICES areas has been placed in the Library of the House.

A consortium of international researchers, co-ordinated by the Sea Mammal Research Unit, is planning to carry out a survey of the distribution and abundance of small cetaceans in 2004–05. It is intended that all UK waters will be included in the survey area. International funding is being sought in support of this work.

Reliable estimates for dolphin abundance in British waters in 1993 are not available.

Correspondence

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Workington dated 10 December 2001, sent on to her Department in March 2002, concerning Mr. Williams, a constituent. [92879]

Mr. Meacher: The correspondence referred to was received in the Department for the first time in December 2002 when the hon. Member sent a copy. I replied on 12 February 2003.

Dairy Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assistance and support she is able to provide to dairy farmers in the north-west; and what recent discussions she has had with *(a)* representatives from the dairy industry and *(b)* supermarkets regarding the price of milk. [94918]

Mr. Morley: Dairy farmers in the north-west, in common with the rest of the country, benefit indirectly from the Dairy CAP, which involves expenditure of nearly two billion euros across the Community. Despite this considerable expenditure, the farmgate price of milk remains below the level at which many dairy farmers can make the investment required to sustain their businesses. This clearly shows the current Dairy CAP is failing farmers and is in need of reform. The UK Government do not regard the Commission proposals for dairy reform in the context of the Mid Term Review to go far enough to address those concerns.

The prices negotiated between farmers and purchases, or processors and retailers, are private commercial matters in which the Government cannot get involved. We have not therefore met with representatives of the dairy industry specifically to discuss this issue. However, Ministers frequently meet with representatives from all parts of the dairy sector in the course of their duties, to discuss the overall market situation, and we are well aware of concerns about prices.

We believe that a sustainable future for dairy farming is best secured through the action we have already announced in response to the recommendations of the Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming and our Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food, which we published on 12 December 2002. My noble Friend, Lord Whitty has convened a number of meetings of an informal dairy supply chain group, which has addressed some of these issues. In addition, at its next meeting on 28 February 2003 this group will discuss how the industry might address any lessons that emerge from the on-going study by KPMG on the structure of the UK dairy sector and milk pricing, which was commissioned by the Milk Development Council, as well as the Commission's proposals for reform of the Dairy CAP.

Departmental Budgets

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the budgets are for 2002–03 for each of the advisory bodies, stakeholders groups, executive agencies, executive non-departmental public bodies, advisory non-departmental public bodies, public corporations and tribunals sponsored by her Department, as listed on pages 87–89 of the Defra Departmental Report 2002; and if she will make a statement. [93713]

Alun Michael: The information requested on the executive agencies and for most of the executive non-departmental public bodies and public corporations is given in the table. Equivalent information on the other bodies is not held centrally, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost:

	£000
Central Science Laboratory	2,233
Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science	9,443
Pesticides Safety Directorate	-2,449
Rural Payments Agency	493,595
Veterinary Laboratories Agency	9,089
Veterinary Medicines Directorate	-398
Apple and Pear Research Council	105
British Potato Council	6,747
Countryside Agency	95,439
English Nature	71,038
Environment Agency	330,569
Food From Britain	5,428
Home-Grown Cereals Authority	11,364
Horticultural Development Council	571
Horticulture Research International	7,297
Meat and Livestock Commission	27,873
Milk Development Council	7,464
National Forest Company	1,824
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew	22,159
Sea Fish Industry Authority	1,449
Wine Standards Board	448
British Waterways Board	123,250
Covent Garden Market Authority	1,957

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list consultations her Department has conducted since it was established; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [97433]

Alun Michael: Information on written consultation exercises undertaken by Defra is in the public domain and can be obtained from the Department's website at pawww.defra.gov.uk. in the section entitled 'Consultations'. This includes information on the opening and closing dates for all consultations.

European Water Directive

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans her Department has to develop and implement a communications strategy for the EU Water Framework Directive. [96617]

Mr. Morley: Defra's stakeholder group will be meeting regularly to discuss implementation issues and develop agreed approaches to communicating the key messages of the directive. The Environment Agency is also developing a public participation strategy for the implementation of the directive through river basin management plans. This will draw on a pilot river basin project in the Ribble basin.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to pilot the Common Implementation Strategy Guidance on Wetlands in the EU Water Framework Directive. [96620]

Mr. Morley: A drafting group led by Italy with UK participation is due to submit draft guidance on wetlands for adoption by an EC Water Directors group by May 2003. We will then be able to take a view on whether and in what way the guidance might be piloted in England, alongside other piloting work which will be under way.

Flood Defences (Hampton Bishop)

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Environment Agency is taking to ensure that the Welsh Environment Agency repairs the flood defence barrier by the Bunch of Carrots pub at Hampton Bishop, Herefordshire. [95656]

Mr. Morley: Operational responsibility for flood measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing. This Department provides grants for flood and coastal defence capital works and associated studies, which meet essential technical, economic and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score.

I understand that EA Wales is preparing a submission to Defra for approval of grant aid on a proposed scheme to strengthen and improve approximately 1 km of the existing embankment along the River Wye at Hampton Bishop, Herefordshire. The EA has identified this length as having a potential weakness in extreme flood conditions. Additionally the agency, in co-operation with Herefordshire county council, has put into place an emergency response procedure for Hampton Bishop. This would include the evacuation of residents in the event of the agency issuing a severe flood warning for the location.

Flooding

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* local drainage boards whose information about flood risks has been entered into the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database. [89638]

Margaret Beckett: No information about flood risk from local authorities or local drainage boards has yet been entered into the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database. At present priority is being given to entering Environment Agency data, information on flood risk from local authorities and drainage boards is being collected and will be input in the next phase.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much grant aid has been paid to the Environment Agency and its flood defence committees for flood defence in England in each of the past five financial years; how much will be allocated to them this financial year; and how much has been allocated under the Government's Spending Review 2002 for the next three financial years. [90816]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency (EA) receives the bulk of its funding for management of flood risk through levies on local authorities which are largely reimbursed by central Government through the ODPM's funding stream to local authorities. Defra provides grant aid to the flood and coastal defence operating authorities (EA, local authorities and internal drainage boards) to support their capital works and related studies in the management of risk from flooding and coastal erosion. In the case of the EA, additional contributions are made to support national initiatives such as the flood warning public awareness campaign, the national flood and coastal defence database and catchment flood management plans. Figures in cash terms for Defra grant allocated in the current and five past years are:

Year	*Grant (£ million)*
1997–98 (actual)[1]	43.0
1998–99 (actual)	33.8
1999–2000 (actual)	33.0
2000–2001 (actual)	41.9
2001–02 (actual)	61.5
2002–03 (forecast)	70.0
2003–04 (forecast)[2]	69.0

[1] The initial allocations for 1997–98 was increased significantly in year by redistribution of funds from elsewhere in the Department.
[2] Spending provision of £114 million for all authorities for 2003–04 proved insufficient to meet investment needs and Defra has increased this to £136 million. However, a number of unusually large local authority projects have meant the EA allocation has had to remain at much the same level as for 2002–03.

Allocations are decided annually and the EA's for 2004–05 and 2005–06 have not yet been set. However indicative figures, which will be subject to change, at £80 million and £110 million respectively.

Forest Enterprise (England) (Grant Provision)

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) whether the increase in grant to Forest Enterprise (England) has been above, below or at inflation level for the past five years; [96232]

(2) what the grant was to Forest Enterprise (England) in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000, *(e)* 2001 and *(f)* 2002; [96224]

(3) what the proposed grant to Forest Enterprise (England) is in 2003. [96225]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* Prior to devolution in 1999, all Forestry Commission and Forest Enterprise financial records and accounts were maintained on a GB-wide basis. It has not, therefore, been possible to identify the relevant figures for the years 1997–98 and 1998–99. The net cash costs of Forest Enterprise (England) for the last three years, together with the forecast for the current financial year and budget for 2003–04, are given in the following table.

	£,000
Year	
1999–2000	3,381
2000–01	13,183
2001–02	13,007
2002–03[1]	25,950
2003–04[2]	19,500

[1] Forecast
[2] Budget

The net cash expenditure of Forest Enterprise is funded from the Forestry Commission's annual vote and is not linked to inflation. The funding takes account of various factors such as changes in activities, steeply declining timber prices and variations in capital income and expenditure, particularly through successful bids to the Capital Modernisation Fund.

GM Crops

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the notification of *(a)* genetically modified oilseed rape (GT73) by the Dutch Government and *(b)* genetically modified maize (NK603) by the Spanish Government; and what representations she has made to those Governments and the European Commission. [94934]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 4 February 2003]:* The dossiers for these two applications were received from the European Commission on 24 January 2003 with favourable opinions from the Dutch and Spanish competent authorities respectively. Under the provisions of Directive 2001/18 on the release of GMOs to the environment, the UK has 60 days from the date of receipt in which to consider the dossiers and forward comments or reasoned objections. Both are applications for consent to import the specific GM grain commodities for processing and use as food and as animal feed or as an ingredient in food and in animal feed products. The dossiers will be assessed by the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations, taking advice from the relevant expert advisory committees on environmental, human and animal health aspects. In these cases advice will be needed from the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes and the Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs. We will also take due account of comments made by members of the UK public in response to public consultations that are being organised by the Commission.

Janet Hughes (Costs Claim)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make it her policy not to enforce her Department's claim for costs against Janet Hughes of Churchstoke, Montgomery. [95340]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 3 February 2003]:* Janet Hughes was ordered by the Court to pay Defra's legal costs following an unsuccessful judicial review claim. The Department has a responsibility to protect public expenditure. The possibility of having to pay costs for unsuccessful litigation is something of which Ms Hughes should have been made fully aware by her legal advisers at the time. My Department gave her a number of opportunities to put forward payment proposals, which she has refused to do until now. I am considering the proposal she has now made.

Parrett Catchment Project

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what jobs have been declared by the chairman of the Parrett catchment project. [95191]

Mr. Morley: As the Parrett Catchment Project is an independent body, no such declaration has to be made to the Department by the chair.

Public Service Agreement

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to her answer of 3 February 2003, *Official Report*, column 25W, on the public service agreement, how the savings will be measured; and if she will make a statement. [97289]

Alun Michael: Defra budgets have been fixed on the basis that target efficiency gains will be achieved. Business areas will therefore be required to identify ways of achieving the same outcomes within these budget constraints. In order to ensure these efficiency gains are captured and measured, business areas will be required to produce an efficiency plan as part of the business planning process. These plans will be monitored centrally.

Radioactive Waste

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what quality

control programme is in place for the stocks of high activity radioactive waste in store at *(a)* Sellafield, *(b)* Dounreay, *(c)* Harwell and *(d)* nuclear power plant sites. [95263]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

The Quality Control arrangements in place for High Level Waste at the Sellafield Site are designed and implemented to ensure safe and reliable operations and product storage.

The Quality Management System of Thorp and the High Level Waste Plant's Vitrification Lines is independently certified to the international quality standard ISO 9002:1994. Staff involved in the management and control of high activity waste are suitably qualified and experienced. Routine staff assessment and training is performed to ensure that the appropriate level of expertise is maintained. Waste operations at Sellafield are regulated by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) under the Nuclear Installations Act 1965.

The storage of high-level waste liquors at Dounreay is subject to a strict monitoring and surveillance regime by UKAEA, and is also regulated by the NII under the conditions of the Nuclear Installations Act 1965.

In addition, all Dounreay operations, including the management of wastes, meet the requirements of the international quality standard ISO 9001/2000 and the environmental management standard ISO 14001.

There are no high activity wastes at Harwell.

Returnable Bottles

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the effect of the use of returnable bottles on reducing the amount of domestic and commercial waste in the UK; and if she will make a statement. [94590]

Mr. Meacher: We believe there are overall environmental and commercial benefits in a deposit and return system for bottles. A deposits system would involve the public directly in waste collection and this would help to change the culture of waste collection and recycling.

We are currently investigating deposit systems used in other European countries. Some of these countries have reported very high administrative costs, which could make these schemes a more expensive way of recycling products than other collection methods. Some countries have reported benefits from such systems, particularly in terms of higher recycling rates, but sometimes these occur in the countries which have high packaging waste recycling targets and it is not clear that deposit systems on their own would deliver high recycling rates in a cost-effective way.

We would therefore need to consider both the costs and benefits of a deposit scheme. We would also have to examine how deposit systems could complement and add to other means of encouraging waste minimization and recycling, such as the packaging regulations.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress has been made by the Government since 1997 in strengthening the legislative protection afforded to sites of special scientific interest. [97135]

Mr. Morley: The legislative protection afforded to sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) in England was significantly strengthened by Part III of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000. The Act became law on 30 January 2001. The amendments introduced include:

provisions that enable English Nature to exercise greater control over activities that may affect SSSIs by refusing, modifying or applying conditions to consents as appropriate;

a power for English Nature to secure the management of a SSSI;

improved procedures for notification and denotification of SSSIs;

various rights of appeal to owners and occupiers of land who are affected by the Act's provisions;

increased powers of entry to land for English Nature and extended powers of compulsory purchase;

increased penalties for damage to a SSSI by owners and occupiers and new offences for damage to a SSSI by other people, including public bodies;

a new power for English Nature to make byelaws to protect SSSIs;

new duties on public bodies and statutory bodies in respect of SSSIs; and,

restrictions on public bodies and statutory bodies when they carry out or authorise activities which affect a SSSI.

Sudden Oak Death

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will assess the risk of infection by the sudden oak death fungal pathogen Phytophthora ramorum in *(a)* quercus species and *(b)* fagus species. [95949]

Mr. Meacher: The Pest Risk Assessment for Phytophthora ramorum shows that various quercus species, including Quercus rubra (American red oak) and Quercus ilex (Mediterranean holly oak), have been shown to be particularly susceptible to the disease. In initial results of trials under laboratory conditions, Quercus robur (English oak) has shown less susceptibility. Fagus sylvatica (European beech) is also classed as being susceptible to the disease. This research work is continuing. I have placed a copy of the latest revision of the Summary Pest Risk Analysis, which is under continual review and includes the risk assessment, in the Library of the House.

Warm Front Grants

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much money in total has been allocated to Warm Front. [88019]

Mr. Morley: Between June 2000 and March 2002 some £270 million was spent under the Warm Front scheme. The Warm Front budget for the current year is £163 million. Defra allocations for future years are still under discussion.

Waste Management

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what additional funding will be made available to local authorities and community organisations for sustainable waste management projects to replace project funding under the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme; when these funds will become available; and by what mechanism these funds will be distributed. [97051]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 12 February 2003]:* The Landfill Tax Credit Scheme (LTCS) transition scheme announced by my right hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury on 3 February 2003 is now open for applications from those projects that consider they meet the criteria set out in the statement. Funding is available to meet all eligible applications. The regulator of LTCS, Entrust, will also administer this scheme and further information is available on the Entrust website at www.entrust.org.uk In implementing this transitional funding arrangement, the Government are putting in place a straightforward process for making decisions on funding to ensure minimum delay and uncertainty for on-going projects. Also, by establishing this transitional funding period the Government are providing a reasonable period for projects to manage the consequences of the decision announced in the Pre-Budget Report.

Decisions on the mechanisms to be used to distribute funds under the new public expenditure programmes, aimed at delivering sustainable waste management objectives, have yet to be made. An announcement on this is expected next month.

Water Framework Directive

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to consult on the creation of formal links between river basin management planning and land use planning during the process of implementing the Water Framework Directive. [95670]

Mr. Morley: The relationship between the Water Framework Directive and the planning system was one of the issues on which respondents were invited to give their views in the recent second consultation exercise on implementation of the directive and will be discussed in Defra's water stakeholder group.

Woodland Grant Scheme

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what evaluation she has made of the impact on *(a)* the rural economy, *(b)* rural employment and *(c)* skills retention of possible changes in the level of winter tree planting as a result of the revision of the closing dates for the Woodland Grant Scheme; [96809]

(2) what evaluation she has made of the impact on the nursery tree production sector of the introduction of a single closing date for the Woodland Grant Scheme for new planting. [96824]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* A significant area of the land to be planted in the 2003–04 season has already been approved for grant aid, and the Forestry Commission is not expecting a substantial reduction in applications in 2003. In addition, planting under Challenge and other schemes is not affected by the closing dates. Overall, the Commission has assessed that the changes to the closing dates would have minimal impact on the rural economy, rural employment, skills retention and the forest nursery trade.

TRANSPORT

Air Travel Security

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what plans he has to require airlines to ask all passengers to prove their identity; [97905]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department concerning the imposition of a requirement on airlines to ask all passengers to prove their identity. [97906]

Mr. Jamieson: The UK National Aviation Security Programme does not specifically require airlines to ask passengers to prove their identity, and while all measures are kept under review, there is no present intention that it should do so. The primary measures which underpin security in this area is that all passengers, all items of hand baggage and all items of hold baggage must be screened, and that airlines must ensure that the person who checks in hold baggage is the same person who subsequently boards the aircraft. We do not specify how airlines should achieve this, instead allowing them flexibility. On international flights where passports are carried, airlines usually use these to confirm identity. On domestic flights, and those to the Republic of Ireland where there is no need to carry a passport, airlines adopt a variety of methods to ensure that those who check hold baggage then travel with it.

Air Travel Reserve Fund

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the financial status of the Air Travel Reserve Fund; and if he will list which types of air tickets are *(a)* covered and *(b)* not covered by the Air Travel Reserve Fund and set out the (i) nature of such cover which may be available and (ii) the number and value of tickets sold in each category in each year from 1997. [97938]

Mr. Jamieson: The Air Travel Reserve Fund was wound up in 1986 and its functions were transferred to the Air Travel Trust Fund (ATTF). The ATTF provides a back-up facility to the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing (ATOL) scheme, should a bond held by an ATOL holder be insufficient to meet customer claims in the event of that company's financial failure. Taken together, the ATOL scheme and the ATTF cover air tickets sold by an ATOL holder, either as part of a package or on a seat-only basis. Air tickets sold directly by airlines or their ticketing agents are not covered, but some purchasers may be protected when a credit card is used. In the event of failure of an ATOL holder, the Civil Aviation Authority will ensure that those abroad at the time will be able to continue their holidays and return home, and will reimburse those who have paid for their holiday but have yet to travel.

The Air Travel Trust Fund (ATTF) has a current deficit of approximately £9 million, but is able to meet its liabilities on the basis of a Government guaranteed overdraft facility.

The number of tickets sold in each category in each year since 1997 is set out in the following table:

million

	Total sales	*ATOL/ATTF protected sales*
1997	39.7	23.5
1998	44.1	25.0
1999	47.3	26.4
2000	51.7	28.0
2001	53.8	29.1

Notes:
1. The totals in the centre column are estimates of the number of UK-originating return journeys made by people domiciled in the UK. The totals in the right-hand column are actual journeys made under the protection of ATOL. The number of journeys is a proxy for the number of tickets sold.
2. Figures for 2002 are not yet available.
3. Data on the total value of the tickets sold in each category are not available.

Source:
CAA.

Aircraft (Palace of Westminster)

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport from what time in the morning aircraft are permitted to fly into Heathrow over the Palace of Westminster. [97075]

Mr. Jamieson: Aircraft are permitted to fly over the Palace of Westminster, along with other parts of central London whenever Heathrow is open to receive flights.

Airport Security

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to increase security at BAA airports; and what discussions he has had with BAA and CAA on this issue and the funding of enhanced security. [97233]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* Following the attacks in the USA in September 2001, heightened aviation security measures were introduced at all UK airports, including those owned by BAA plc, and for all airlines operating from the UK. Security at UK airports remains at an enhanced level, and is kept under continuous review.

It has long been central to UK aviation policy that users should pay the full costs of air travel, and that this should include the costs of whatever level of security is deemed appropriate. There are no plans to change this approach.

Arriva Northern

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment his Department has made of the *(a)* economic and *(b)* other effects of the Arriva Northern strike. [96713]

Mr. Spellar: None. Industrial relations are matters primarily between the train operators as employers and the trade unions representing their employees.

Capita

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 622W, on Capita, if he will give the *(a)* start and finish date, *(b)* value, *(c)* evaluation mechanism for successful delivery and *(d)* penalty charges for failure to deliver for each contract; whether penalty charges have been incurred; what the service level agreements were; what the contract numbers were; and if he will make a statement. [97335]

Mr. Jamieson: The information requested is given in the following table.

My Department currently has nine contracts with Capita. The National Traffic Census contract awarded to a Capita subsidiary (and various other companies) was omitted from my earlier answer in error.

The Department's evaluation mechanism for successful delivery of a contract is based on value for money, taking into consideration cost, quality and delivery for each individual tender.

Where potential loss to the Department can be quantified/assessed in advance, it may be covered by a liquidated damages clause. This is intended to cover only actual quantifiable losses by the Department.

The Driving Standards Agency contract for the provision of a computer system for the booking of the Practical Driving Test and associated services is the only current contract with Capita containing a liquidated damages clause. Liquidated damages were sought from, and later agreed with, Capita in 1999 following late delivery of the fully functional Driver Test Control element of the system.

Details of individual service level agreements are not provided to protect commercial confidentiality.

Department/Agency	*Title/purpose*	*Start date*	*End date*	*Value (see notes[1,2,3])*	*Contract number*
(Central) Department	External Recruitment Service for the recruitment of staff at all grades below the senior civil service	12 November 2001	11 November 2004	[3]45,000 (to date)	PPAD 9/1/70
	National Road Traffic Census (Cumbria Region) for 2002–04	1 January 2002	31 December 2004	[1]121,240	PPAD 9/63/60
Driving Standards Agency	Design, build, installation and operation of a computer system for the booking of the Practical Driving Test and associated services, and the supply and maintenance of the Agency's IT/IS infrastructure	8 August 1997	7 August 2004	[1]9,800,000	No specific number allocated

Department/Agency	Title/purpose	Start date	End date	Value (see notes[1,2,3])	Contract number
Highways Agency	Consultancy Services Framework for the provision of Human Resources advice and professional services	13 February 2001	20 August 2003	[2]383,000	HA 114/2/342
	Consultancy Framework for the provision of construction and design services	June 2001	June 2006	[3]1,100,000 (to date)	HA 13/005/1339
	Provision of safety engineering professional services	25 January 2002	31 January 2004	[1]429,000	2/414
	Traffic monitoring services	16 February 2000	11 February 2004	[1]846,385	2/311
	Framework Agreement for audit and measurement services	15 August 2002	12 August 2005	[2]3,200,000	2/416
	Design and supervision of A66 Stainburn to Great Clifton Bypass trunk road contract	5 February 2001	4 February 2008	[1]363,000	AB840

[1] Value of contract over its duration.
[2] Maximum estimated value of orders placed over the life of the framework agreement.
[3] Estimated value of framework agreement not quantified. Figures reflect actual value of orders placed to date on contract.

Capital Modernisation Fund

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library the evaluations for the Capital Modernisation Fund projects relating to *(a)* London Underground, *(b)* priority bus routes, *(c)* rural transport, *(d)* networking of DSA test centres, *(e)* automatic number plate readers, *(f)* DLR City airport extension, *(g)* Transport Police communications, *(h)* VI motion sensors, *(i)* automated traffic management and *(j)* home zones; and if he will make a statement. [97025]

Mr. Jamieson: Capital Modernisation Fund funds for the London Underground were included in an overall grant to London Transport in 2000–01 in respect of preparations for the proposed modernisation of the London Underground network. The London Transport Annual Report for 2000–01 sets outs the Government funding for London Transport and how it was utilised.

The evaluation for the 'Automatic Number Plate Readers' Capital Modernisation Fund project has been completed and a copy will be placed in the Library.

The remaining Capital Modernisation Fund projects relating to my Department have not yet been completed and hence evaluations not carried out. Once evaluations have been undertaken they will be placed in the Library as appropriate.

Computer Hacking

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many cases of computer *(a)* hacking, *(b)* fraud and *(c)* theft his Department recorded in 2001–02; and on how many occasions computer systems have been illegally accessed by computer hackers (i) within and (ii) outside his Department. [97565]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was established on 29 May 2002. During the period 29 May 2002 to 31 December 2002 there were: *(a)* no recorded cases of computer hacking, *(b)* no recorded cases of computer fraud, and *(c)* one reported case of computer theft. The Department's predecessors during the period 1 January 2001 to 28th May 2002 were the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. During that period there were: *(a)* no recorded cases of computer hacking, *(b)* no recorded cases of computer fraud, and *(c)* five reported cases of computer theft.

Congestion Charge

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will estimate the cost of the congestion charge to the Department on the basis of motor vehicles supplied to *(a)* himself, *(b)* Ministers of State, *(c)* Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, *(d)* Special Advisers and *(e)* departmental officials. [95298]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government Car and Despatch Agency will meet the costs of the congestion charge for the vehicles it supplies to Departments. It will recover the costs of these charges from Departments. The cost will depend on the number of days that the cars are used within the congestion zone boundary on official business.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 6 February 2003, ref. 95029, if he will establish a dedicated hotline so that the public can inform his Department of their experiences gained from road user charging schemes in London and Durham. [97382]

Mr. Jamieson: This is a matter for the relevant charging authority.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 6 February 2003, ref. 95029, by what means he intends to obtain information about experiences gained from road user charging schemes in London and Durham. [97383]

Mr. Jamieson: As well as views sent direct to Ministers we will carefully consider all the various monitoring and evaluation reports being planned. In Durham an agreement between the County Council and DfT requires detailed monitoring of the scheme including the effects on traffic, the impact on the peninsular etc. In London TfL will be monitoring and assessing traffic, public transport, social, environmental and economic indicators. I also understand that the Association of London Government and Westminster Council and others will be assessing the schemes.

Cycling

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if his Department will take steps to *(a)* raise awareness among all road users of the purpose of advanced stop lines (ASLs) for cyclists, *(b)* educate all road users on their correct use and *(c)* publicise the legally enforceable nature of those facilities; and what steps he will take to ensure that ASLs are enforced. [97941]

Mr. Jamieson: Advanced stop lines are dealt with in rules 55 and 154 of the Highway Code. The Traffic Signs Regulations 2002 and DfT Circular 02/2003 clarify that all vehicles are required to stop at the first stop line unless they have already proceeded beyond it or are a pedal cycle proceeding in the cycle lane. This information is already available on the Department's Traffic Signs website and will be included in a leaflet we are publishing about new signs and changes in the meaning of existing signs. Enforcement is the responsibility of the police.

Delivery Unit

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) which announcements made by his Department since June 2001 were cleared in advance with the Delivery Unit; [94350]

(2) if he will list the reports he has made since June 2001 to the Delivery Unit: [94354]

(3) which Ministers and officials from his Department have visited areas outside London accompanied by members of the Delivery Unit; [94352]

(4) when the Permanent Secretary in his Department last met members of the Delivery Unit; [94359]

(5) what targets have been set for his Department by the Delivery Unit since June 2001; and what progress has been made in meeting such targets; [94362]

(6) when Ministers from his Department last met members of the Delivery Unit; and on how many occasions since its establishment Ministers have met members of the Unit; [94357]

(7) how many reports his Department has been commissioned to produce by the Delivery Unit in the next *(a)* 12 and *(b)* 24 months; [94346]

(8) how many officials in his Department have been assigned to do specific work *(a)* with and *(b)* for the Delivery Unit since June 2001; [94348]

(9) when Ministers from his Department last met *(a)* the Prime Minister and *(b)* his officials to discuss targets set by the Delivery Unit; and what plans there are for further meetings. [94358]

Mr. Jamieson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is responsible for meeting the Department's Public Service Agreement targets set out Cm 5571, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House.

The Delivery Unit was established to strengthen the capacity of Whitehall to deliver the Government's key objectives. It works closely with us to help us deliver our PSA targets, and we are in regular contact with members of the Unit.

Information about internal meetings is not disclosed under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Disabled Parking

Paul Holmes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to review the criteria for awarding Blue Parking Badges to disabled people; what assessment he has made of the exclusion of Thalidomide sufferers from the awarding of Blue Parking Badges; and if he will make a statement. [97922]

Mr. Jamieson: A review of the Blue Badge Scheme has recently been concluded. The review considered all aspects of the scheme, including the eligibility criteria. Following initial discussions with the main stakeholders, a discussion paper was drawn up and comments were invited through a major public consultation exercise. Formal representations were made by the Thalidomide Trust and their views were given due consideration during the review process.

The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC, the Department's statutory advisers on the transport needs of disabled people) were asked to look at the responses received and to submit their recommendations to Ministers. I announced in the House on 18 December 2002 that the Government would be taking forward the majority of these recommendations as soon as possible.

Eligibility for the Blue Badge will remain unchanged. This means that it will continue to be available to those disabled people who are unable or virtually unable to walk and to those with severe upper limb disabilities. Many people whose disability is the result of Thalidomide already qualify under one or other of these criteria.

Industrial Action/Illness

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many working days have been lost in his Department and its predecessors due to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01, (v) 2001–02 and (vi) 2002–03. [97845]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was established following machinery of Government changes in May 2002.

No working days have been lost due to industrial action during the specified periods.

In respect of sickness absence, the most recent 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil service' was published by the Cabinet office and announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002. Copies were placed in the Libraries of the House. This covered the calendar year 2001 for the predecessor Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions and its executive agencies. Previous reports go back to 1996. Figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

Level Crossings

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the trunk roads in England that are crossed by a rail level crossing. [97785]

Mr. Jamieson: There are 10 trunk roads in England that are crossed by a rail level crossing:

A5 Gobowen (Oswestry);
A27 Beddingham;
A47 Wisbech;
A49 Onibury;
A63 Thorpe Willoughby;
A249 Sheerness;
A259 Star Crossing;
A259 Brooklands (Thrift) Crossing;
A259 Guldeford Crossing; and
A483 Maesbury.

M25

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answers of 17 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 684W, and 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 41W, on the M25, what his policy is on the provision for inspection by hon. Members of the full data and analysis produced by those Government-funded reports, the summary of which the Government publish; and for what reason hon. Members were unable to inspect the full data and analysis of the initial assessment by the Transport Research Laboratory of the Controlled Motorway Project on the M25 between 1997 and January 2003. [97777]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department's policy covering this issue, which was introduced on 30 November 2002, is that final project reports arising from commissioned projects are made available, except in those cases where the Department has not secured the rights to publish. Any information that addresses issues of national security, commercial or personal confidentiality will be excluded. Notices, strategies and the Executive Summaries of final research project reports will be published on the DfT website at: www.dft.gov.uk Full research reports may also be published on the website or will be available through contacts identified on the website.

The full report on the assessment of the controlled motorway project on the M25 is expected to be placed in the Libraries of the House in late autumn 2003, as stated in my answer of 17 December 2002 to the hon. Member. As such it is not possible to make this available until that date.

A previous report was made available on request following my answer of 20 January 2003 to the hon. Member. Other reports and data which have not been published can be made available and I have asked the Highways Agency to contact the hon. Member as there is a considerable volume of data involved.

Motorway Signs

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his Department's policy and practice is on the use of electronic information signs on motorways. [95551]

Mr. Spellar: Variable Message Signs, on England's motorway and other trunk road network, are used to assist the police with local incident management and to advise drivers of strategic long distance diversions. Long distance diversions are selected from recommended strategies agreed with all involved parties.

Variable Message Signs are currently operated under a policy and procedures document jointly agreed by the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Highways Agency.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will display alternative route information on electronic information signs on motorways, whenever a motorway closure occurs. [95552]

Mr. Spellar: The new National Traffic Control Centre (a 10-year private finance initiative contract awarded by the Highways Agency in 2001 to Traffic Information Services) will, from early 2004, offer real time advice to motorists using variable message signs sited at strategic positions around the motorways and other trunk road network.

Alternative route advice will be given when both *(a)* a suitable route with sufficient capacity to take extra traffic is available, and *(b)* when signs are available to convey the information.

Online Sales/Purchases

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what *(a)* products, *(b)* goods and *(c)* services were (i) bought and (ii) sold online by his Department in each of the last five years. [97441]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department buys the following commodities online:

Commodity	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*2003*
Travel Tickets	—	—	—	Yes	Yes
IT Equipment	—	—	—	Yes	Yes
IT Consumables	—	—	—	Yes	Yes
Stationery	—	—	—	Yes	Yes
Books	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Periodicals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The Department sells the following services online:

Service	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*2003*
Driving Theory Test	—	—	Yes	Yes	Yes

Rail Services (Bedfordshire)

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 105–06W, on Sandy-Bedford rail link, what estimate he has made of the levels of *(a)* lottery grant, *(b)* landfill grant and *(c)* other public money that would need to be made available to (i) bring into operation and (ii) maintain (A) the Sandy-Bedford Rail link and (B) the Bedford-Milton Keynes canal link. [97667]

Mr. Jamieson: The London to South Midlands Multi-modal Study issued its report on 4 February 2003. Copies will shortly be placed in the Libraries of the

House. The regional planning bodies in the study area will now consider the recommendations, over the next few months. They will be consulting key stakeholders and the general public on the measures identified.

Railways (External Consultants)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the total value was of *(a)* technical and financial contracts, *(b)* technical consultants used on a call-off basis and *(c)* financial consultants used on a call-off basis by (i) the Rail Delivery Directorate, (ii) the Railways Restructuring Directorate and (iii) other directorates within his Department carrying out work relating to the railways, in each year since 1992. [93231]

Mr. Jamieson: The following table gives expenditure by this Department and its predecessors on all rail consultancies since 1992–93.

	£ million[1,2]
1992–93	6
1993–94	12
1994–95	17
1995–96	13
1996–97	9
1997–98	2
1998–99	10
1999–2000	7
2000–01	6
2001–02	15
2002–03[3]	24

[1] Rounded to nearest million
[2] Cash prices
[3] Estimate

It is believed that only a very small proportion of this expenditure relates to call-off contracts. The figures include expenditure on contracts for legal and other advice. The majority of the increase in expenditure in 2001–02 and 2002–03 is due to the costs of advice relating to Railtrack's administration.

Road Freight

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the amount of freight he expects to travel by road rather than rail as a result of the withdrawal of *(a)* freight facilities grants and *(b)* track access grants. [97340]

Mr. Jamieson: Freight facilities grants and track access grants have not been withdrawn. New applications have been suspended temporarily by the Strategic Rail Authority. Grants already agreed will continue to be honoured. Expenditure on freight grants is expected to be in the order of £40 million in 2003–04.

Road Schemes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the road schemes *(a)* approved and *(b)* provisionally approved in (i) the targeted programme of improvements, (ii) multi-modal studies and (iii) the local transport settlements between 1997 to 2002, where the primary objective is economic regeneration. [97479]

Mr. Jamieson: The information is in the following table. We have, in total, added 72 schemes to the targeted programme of improvements and approved or provisionally approved 87 local transport schemes between 1997 and 2002, many of which will also promote economic regeneration although that may not be the primary objective.

All major road schemes where the primary objective is economic regeneration—targeted programme of improvements—accepted and provisionally accepted LTP road schemes

	Road schemes
North East	
Trunk	
A66	Long Newton Junction
Local	
Darlington	Darlington Eastern Transport Corridor
Middlesbrough	North Middlesbrough Accessibility Improvements
Durham	A19 Dawdon Link Road
Durham	Seaham Town Centre Link Road
North West	
Trunk	
M60	J 5–8 (formerly M63 J 6–9 Widening)
M62	Junction 6 Improvement
A74(M)	Carlisle—Guardsmill upgrading to motorway
A500	Basford, Hough, Shavington Bypass
A595	Parton—Lillyhall Improvement
A5117/A550	Deeside Park Junctions Improvement
Local	
Cumbria	Carlisle Northern Development Route
Yorks/Humber	
Trunk	
A1033	Hedon Road Improvement, Hull
Local	
Barnsley	Coalfields Link Road Phases 2 and 3
West Yorks—Leeds	East Leeds Link Road
South Yorks—Barnsley	Cudworth Bp
South Yorks—Sheffield	Sheffield IRR Phase 2
West Yorks—Wakefield	Hemsworth—A1 Link
West Yorks—Wakefield	Glasshoughton Link Road
East Midlands	
Trunk	
A46	Newark-Lincoln Improvement (03/04)
Local	
Nottinghamshire	A617 Mansfield Ashfield Reg. Route
Derbyshire	Markham Employment Growth Zone (MEGZ)
Northamptonshire	A43 Corby Link Road
West Midlands	
Trunk	
A5	Weeford-Fazeley Improvement
A500	City Road/Stoke Road Junctions
Local	
Staffordshire	Biddulph Bp
Birmingham	A3 8 Selly Oak Link Road
Staffordshire	Rugeley Bp
Stoke	Hanley-Bentilee Link
WM—Birmingham	A3 8 Northfield Regeneration Scheme
WM—Sandwell	Cradley Heath Town Centre
Eastern	
Trunk	
A11	Roudham Heath-Attleborough Dualling
A11	Fiveways to Thetford Improvement
A120	Stansted-Braintree
Local	
Luton	East Luton Corridor
Norfolk	Nar-Ouse Regeneration Project—King's Lynn
Thurrock	West Thurrock Riverside Regeneration Scheme

All major road schemes where the primary objective is economic regeneration—targeted programme of improvements—accepted and provisionally accepted LTP road schemes

	Road schemes
South East	
Trunk	
M25	J 12–15 Widening
A2	Bean-Cobham Widening Phase 1
A2	Bean-Cobham Widening Phase 2
A2/A282	Dartford Improvement
A27	Polegate Bypass (open)
A34	Chieveley/M4 J13 Improvement
A249	Iwade—Queenborough Improvement
Local	
Kent	East Kent Access Phase 1
Milton Keynes	Bletchley Link
South West	
Trunk	
A30	Bodmin-Indian Queens Improvement
Local	
Cornwall	A39 Camelford Bp
Poole	Poole Harbour Bridge

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Communications Bill

Michael Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport during the Committee Stage of the Communications Bill, how many *(a)* clauses and *(b)* schedules were (i) fully debated, (ii) partly debated and (iii) not debated. [97789]

Dr. Howells: In its debates on the Communications Bill, Standing Committee E sat for 65 hours over 26 sittings. The original programme resolution for the Committee's proceedings was agreed by the Programming Sub-Committee at its meeting on 9 December 2002. This was approved without division at the beginning of the Committee's first session on 10 December 2002.

On two occasions during the Bill's passage through Committee, Programming Sub-Committee resolutions to move knives were agreed. This enabled hon. Members to focus on clauses of the Bill that they felt merited more detailed discussion. As a result of the agreed programme, the knives led to 101 clauses and five Schedules being moved forthwith by the Chair. It is worth noting, however, that, just because a clause was not reached by the Committee, it does not mean that substantive points on that clause were not raised and debated in full during earlier debates.

Domestic Violence

Margaret Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps she is taking to increase awareness of domestic violence in the British media. [97747]

Dr. Howells: None.

National Lottery

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the level of ticket sales of the National Lottery. [R] [97514]

Mr. Caborn: The National Lottery Commission have stated that ticket sales, since the start of the lottery to 9 February 2003, are £40.8 billion.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of National Lottery charitable contributions have been spent on cancer-related groups. [97513]

Mr. Caborn: The Community Fund has made 188 grants to the value of £13,516,037 to organisations directly involved in work relating to cancer. The Fund has awarded a further £23,651,116 to hospices whose client group will include people with cancer.

In total, therefore, £37,167,153 or 1.51 per cent. of total Community Fund grants (£2,458 million) has been awarded to projects relating to the care of those with some form of cancer.

In addition, £84 million is available from the New Opportunities Fund for projects that provide effective palliative care and support and information services for children and adults suffering from cancer and other life threatening conditions.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the operation of the National Lottery franchise. [97515]

Mr. Caborn: Since the launch of the National Lottery, £13.9 billion has been raised for the good causes. Camelot was awarded the second licence as operator of the National Lottery in January 2002. The National Lottery Commission continues to have the duty to ensure that the National Lottery is properly run and that players are protected, while maximising the money raised for the good causes. We published a consultation document last year about the way in which the Lottery might be run and regulated in future; and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State intends to announce our conclusions in due course.

Tourism

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the estimated marketing budget of the British Tourist Board is for the promotion of tourism in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* England. [97908]

Dr. Howells: The British Tourist Authority is a cross-border body whose purpose is to market Britain overseas as an attractive tourist destination. It does not hypothecate funds for particular nations or regions of Britain, but promotes Britain as a whole in a way which maximises the impact of its campaigns in individual markets overseas.

Union Anniversary

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the union of England and Scotland in 2007. [94269]

Dr. Howells: The UK Government have no plans at present to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Union of Scotland and England.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Child Care

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what percentage of children living in poverty live outside the 20 per cent. most disadvantaged wards; and how many of them have access to child care places. [87967]

Maria Eagle: In 1999, 34 per cent. of children aged 0–4 living in households in receipt of means tested benefits lived in wards other than the most disadvantaged 20 per cent. We do not collect data on access to child care places specifically for this group of children. Local authorities' 2002–03 early years development and child care plans showed that, in April 2001, 12.3 places were available per hundred children aged 0–14 (or 0–16 with special educational needs) in wards other than the 20 per cent. most disadvantaged wards, higher than the 7.6 places per hundred children in the 20 per cent. most disadvantaged wards. Each early years development and child care plan includes targets to increase by March 2004 the number of child care places available both outside and within the 20 per cent. most disadvantaged wards.

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what recent representations he has received from child care organisations regarding the provision of child care to lone parents. [91061]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* We receive representations from time to time on issues relating to child care and its role in enabling parents—particularly lone parents—to work, learn and study; and we discuss these matters as part of our ongoing partnership with child care organisations.

As part of the recent interdepartmental review of child care, chaired by my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State responsible for Sure Start there was wide-ranging consultation with organisations with an interest in the issue.

In addition, the National Council for One Parent Families is a member of the Sure Start Voluntary Sector Forum chaired by my noble Friend.

Child Minders

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many full-time child minders there were in England in each year since 1997. [89311]

Maria Eagle: The available figures on the number of registered child minders are as follows.

Number of child minders for children under eight—England—1997–2001

As at 31 March	*Total*
1997	98,500
1998	94,700
1999	82,200
2000	75,600
2001	72,300

Note:
These figures have been rounded to the nearest 100.

These figures were published in Statistical Bulletin 08/01 "Children's Day Care Facilities at 31 March 2001", a copy of which is available from the Library. An electronic copy of the bulletin is available on the Department's website www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics.

During the period 1997 to 2001 total child care places have increased. The returns from local authorities have shown year on year increases in the numbers of day nurseries, out of school clubs and holiday schemes. However, the numbers of playgroups and child minders have been declining. Many playgroups are converting to full day care and this means that they are re-classified as day nurseries rather than playgroups. The Department is encouraging this conversion by offering assistance to playgroups to extend their services to full day care in order to meet more parents' needs.

Higher Education Funding

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what percentage of funding to higher education institutions comes from *(a)* student contributions, *(b)* LEA funding and *(c)* foreign student fees across (i) all higher education institutions and (ii) each individual university in England. [83937]

Margaret Hodge: The information is in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library. Fee income from local authorities and individual students cannot be separately identified but are included in the "Student Loans Company/Local Education Authority/Student Awards Agency for Scotland/Department for Education Learning Northern Ireland" and "Other" categories respectively. As well as individual student tuition fee contributions, the "Other" category will include fee income from Research Councils, other Government Departments, overseas organisations, and UK industry and commerce.

SCOTLAND

Air Quality

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) which local authorities in Scotland have completed ambient air quality *(a)* assessment and *(b)* plans; [96460]

(2) what measures she is taking to assist local authorities in Scotland in adopting ambient air quality plans. [96461]

Mrs. Liddell: Both local government and air quality are devolved matters, and are the responsibility of the Scottish Executive.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what annual emission of *(a)* NOx, *(b)* SOx and *(c)* CO2 was recorded for each Scottish airport in the last available year, classified by (i) aviation emissions, (ii) volume for each category of ground vehicle, (iii) type of power unit and (iv) type of fuel; [96465]

(2) what measures she is taking to encourage the British Airports Authority to introduce low emission vehicles in its Scottish airports; and what the outcome has been. [96464]

Mrs. Liddell: The management of BAA's vehicle fleet is an operational matter for the company. I understand that BAA has an air quality strategy which includes a commitment to assessing cleaner alternative fuels such as ULSD and LPG. The Government and the devolved administrations have in place a wide range of policies and programmes aimed at reducing gaseous emissions from vehicle fleets but there are no policies and programmes targeted specifically at airport operators.

There is no official data collected on emissions of the specified substances from aircraft and ground vehicles at airports.

Paper Suppliers

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland who the suppliers are of her Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91912]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department obtains its paper and paper products from the following suppliers: Glenmore Business Paper, Banner Business Supplies and Astron Document Services.

Child Poverty

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to reduce child poverty in Scotland; and if she will make a statement. [94066]

Mrs. McGuire: The Government are taking a number of measures to tackle poverty in Scotland, including the National Minimum Wage; the New Deal and the new Tax Credits. We are committed to abolishing child poverty in a generation and to halving it by 2010. The action taken by the Government to tackle poverty and social exclusion is outlined in our fourth "Opportunity for All" report. Progress is monitored against a wide range of indicators. The Scottish Executive also produce a Social Justice Annual Report.

Hedgehogs (Outer Hebrides)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions she has had with representatives of Scottish National Heritage regarding hedgehog numbers in the Outer Hebrides; and if she will make a statement. [96194]

Mrs. Liddell: Nature conservation matters are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and Scottish Natural Heritage gives advice to Scottish Executive Ministers.

Poverty

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what her latest estimate is of how many *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* children and *(c)* other people are living in poverty in each constituency in Scotland. [94067]

Mrs. McGuire: Poverty is a complex multi-dimensional problem. "Opportunity for All" sets out the Government's strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion and presents the latest information on the indicators used to monitor progress. The Scottish Executive's strategy is contained in their Social Justice Annual Report. The data sources which the Government and the Executive use for income analysis are the Family Resources Survey and Households Below Average Income. The sample sizes are not large enough to allow analysis below the all-Scotland level.

Sewel Convention

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on how many occasions the Sewel convention has been invoked since the inception of the Scottish Parliament; and on how many occasions the convention was invoked at the initiative of *(a)* the Scottish Executive and *(b)* the UK Government. [97830]

Mrs. Liddell: The Memorandum of Understanding indicates there will be consultation with the Scottish Executive on policy proposals affecting devolved matters whether or not they involve legislative change. In practice, this means that there is ongoing dialogue between the Scottish Executive and Government Departments, including the Scotland Office. For this reason it is impossible to determine at whose initiative discussions about the use of the Sewell convention begin, as they usually take place in the context of wider and on-going discussions.

As a matter of principle, either the Government or the Scottish Executive can take the initiative in establishing whether Sewel consent is needed. It is for the Scottish Executive to indicate the view of the Scottish Parliament and to take whatever steps are appropriate to ascertain that view. The Scottish Parliament has agreed to 39 Sewell motions since its inception.

Telephone Helplines

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many telephone helplines are sponsored by her Department; and which of these helplines are charged at *(a)* national rate, *(b)* premium rate and *(c)* local rate. [95709]

Mrs. Liddell: No telephone helplines are sponsored by my Department.

Union Anniversary

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the union of England and Scotland in 2007. [94271]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scottish Executive has established an advisory group on which my Department is represented, initially to review the plans to

commemorate the Union of the Crowns, but in due course, to consider other important historical dates such as the Union of Parliaments.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to host celebrations on the anniversary of the Union of the Crowns. [95505]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department is represented on the advisory group established by the First Minister to review plans to commemorate the Union of the Crowns. We will await their recommendations before deciding the role Ministers might play.

Vehicle Fleet

Mr. Donohoe To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what progress has been made, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel, in each of the past three years, in renewal of her Department's vehicle fleet on a lower emission basis; [96432]

(2) what the annual rate has been at which her Department renewed its vehicle fleet by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each (i) category of vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel over the last three years. [96431]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department does not have a vehicle fleet.

PRIVY COUNCIL

Mileage Allowance

Norman Baker: To ask the President of the Council what total number of miles was claimed by hon. Members under the mileage allowance scheme in each year since 1997, broken down by journeys to and from *(a)* their constituency and London, *(b)* their homes and London and *(c)* other places; and what the total cost was in each year since 1997. [96470]

Mr. Robin Cook: I regret that information is not available in the form requested, and could be prepared only at disproportionate cost.

However, the Department of Finance and Administration records the total payments made each year for Members' car mileage. Figures are available for payments made in respect of car travel undertaken in each of the last three financial years. The totals are as follows:

£ million

Year	
1999–2000	3.85
2000–01	4.1
2001–02	3.85

Note:
These figures exclude car journeys undertaken as part of European travel.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Animal Experiments

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the banning of the use of wild caught primates in experiments. [97130]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: In addition to the stringent requirements in the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 regarding the use of non-human primates, the use of wild-caught non-human primates in scientific experiments is subject to supplementary additional considerations.

We announced in 1997 that we cannot foresee any circumstances under which we would be prepared to issue licences under the 1986 Act for programmes of work involving the use of Great Apes (chimpanzees, pygmy chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans), and that exceptional justification would be required for the licensed use of other types of non-human primates taken from the wild.

The 1986 Act provides that non-human primates, whether captive bred or wild-caught, can only be used when no other species are suitable for the purposes of the programme to be specified in the licence, or that it is not practicable to obtain animals of any other species that are suitable for those purposes. For the use of wild-caught primates to be exceptionally authorised, there must be no appropriate alternative, no suitable captive-bred animals available and the likely benefits of the programme of work would have to fully justify their use.

In respect of applications to use wild-caught non-human primates, the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate and the Animal Procedures Committee provide advice on a case by case basis on whether and on what terms such use should be licensed. Application of these stringent criteria has meant that first time use of wild-caught non-human primates in scientific procedures has not been licensed in the UK for some years.

Ashfield Young Offenders Institution

Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the *(a)* young offenders and *(b)* remand inmates housed at Ashfield are from Wales; to which young offenders institutions they will go; and how far those institutions are from Wales. [96911]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 10 February 2003]:* On 6 February 2003, the total population of Ashfield was 219. Of this 219, four (or two per cent.) were unsentenced juveniles who came from Wales. 87 (or 40 per cent.) were sentenced juvenile prisoners whose area of origin was Wales.

The allocation of juvenile prisoners to Ashfield is under review. Whatever the outcome of the review, every effort will be made to ensure that the allocated location is appropriate to the individual prisoner's needs. This will include keeping the distance from the allocated establishment to their home area to a minimum, and that all necessary child protection issues are taken into consideration at the time of allocation.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers with HIV/AIDS have been refused support as a result of not claiming asylum on arrival at UK ports of entry since 8 January. [97093]

Beverley Hughes: Information of this nature is not collected about asylum claimants.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that asylum claimants are made aware of the consequences of a failure to claim asylum at ports of entry immediately on arrival in the UK. [97094]

Beverley Hughes: In order to provide advance publicity of the implementation of Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 I made a Ministerial Statement on 28 November 2002, with a press release being issued on the same day. The press release was also issued to the foreign media in the United Kingdom and to the media in countries where we receive a high number of asylum applicants. A further press release was issued on 7 January 2003 and this resulted in further in-depth and comprehensive media coverage within the United Kingdom.

In addition, since 10 December 2002, posters advertising the change in policy have been displayed in arrival halls at major ports and airports. Further copies have also been displayed in the voluntary sector offices such as Migrant Helpline and the Refugee Arrivals Project.

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum in this country have been received from *(a)* single Afghan males, *(b)* Afghan females and *(c)* Afghan families since November 2001. [97226]

Beverley Hughes: The numbers of Afghan single male, female and family asylum applications since November 2001 are not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The total number of applications from Afghans (excluding dependants) since November 2001 is given in the table.

Asylum applications[1] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, by month, nationals of Afghanistan

	Applications		
	Total	*Port*	*In Country*
2001			
November	680	135	545
December	705	145	560
2002			
January	860	195	660
February	770	150	620
March	720	165	560
April	875	115	765
May	750	115	635
June	500	135	365
July	565	170	395
August	445	90	355
September	540	155	390
Total	7,420	1,570	5,850

[1] Provisional figures rounded to nearest five, with '*' = 1 or 2

Information on asylum applications by age and sex are published annually. In 2001, excluding dependants, there were 8,450 asylum applications from Afghan males, and 550 from Afghan females. The 2001 Asylum Statistics Bulletin is available from the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html. The 2002 Bulletin will be available later this year.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people were *(a)* removed and *(b)* deported from the UK in each year since 1990; and how many of each category were asylum seekers; [97944]

(2) how many asylum seekers were forcibly removed or deported from the UK in each year since 1990. [97943]

Beverley Hughes: Data on the number of persons removed from the United Kingdom in each year from 1990 to 2001 are given in the attached table. With the exception of those persons leaving under the Assisted Voluntary Returns Programmes run by the International Organisation for Migration all removals are as a result of action taken by the Immigration service and as such can be regarded as enforced.

A breakdown of total removals in 2002 is not yet available but is due to be published on the Home Office web-site later in the year in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin "Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2002".

www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html

The latest available data show that 7,780 principal asylum applicants and 1,825 dependants were removed in the period January to September 2002. Data for October to December 2002 are due to be published at the end of February on the Home Office website.

Persons removed from the United Kingdom and those subject to enforcement action[1] 1990 to 2001 (United Kingdom)

Number of persons

	1990	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Type of removal						
Persons refused entry at port and subsequently removed	19,180	18,270	14,950	16,740	17,220	19,150
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	N/a	N/a	960	1,240	1,350	1,880
Of whom: non-asylum cases[3]	N/a	N/a	13,990	15,500	15,870	17,270
Principal asylum applicants leaving under Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes[6]	—	—	—	—	—	—
Persons removed as a result of enforcement action[4,5]	4,280	5,800	6,210	6,080	5,210	5,080
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	N/a	N/a	390	580	870	1,290
Of whom: non-asylum cases	N/a	N/a	5,820	5,500	4,340	3,790
Of which:						
Deportation action [8, 9]	1,940	2,620	2,580	2,280	1,920	1,920
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	2,20
Of whom: non-asylum cases	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	1,700
Total persons removed[4]	23,460	24,070	21,160	22,820	22,430	24,230
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	N/a	N/a	1,350	1,820	2,220	3,170
Of whom: non-asylum cases[3]	N/a	N/a	19,820	21,000	20,210	21,060

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000 (R)*	*2001 (P)*
Type of removal						
Persons refused entry at port and subsequently removed	21,200	24,535	27,605	31,295	38,275	37,865
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	2,700	4,105	3,540	4,860	5,440	4,175
Of whom: non-asylum cases[3]	18,510	20,430	24,065	26,435	32,835	33,690
Principal asylum applicants leaving under Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes[6]	—	—	—	50	550	980
Persons removed as a result of enforcement action[4,5]	5,460	6,610	7,315	6,440	7,820	10,290
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	2,130	3,060	3,450	2,755	2,990	4,130
Of whom: non-asylum cases	3,340	3,3,550	3,865	3,680	4,830	6,160
Of which:						
Deportation action[8,9]	2,000	2,070	1,730	1,210	1,280	450
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	400	455	350	140	145	85
Of whom: non-asylum cases	1,600	1,615	1,380	1,075	1,140	365
Total persons removed[4]	26,660	31,145	34,920	37,780	46,645	49,135
Of whom: principal asylum applicants[2]	4,820	7,165	6,990	7,665	8,980	9,285
Of whom: non-asylum cases[3]	21,840	23,980	27,930	30,120	37,665	39,850

[1] Under section 3.5, 3.6 or 33.1 of the immigration Act 1971, or under section 10 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.
[2] Persons who had sought asylum at some stage, excluding dependants. Removal figures exclude 1,495 dependants of asylum seekers removed in the period April to December 2001; data on dependants removed have only been collected since April 2001.
[3] Figures up to March 2001 may include a small number of dependants of port prineipal asylum applicants removed.
[4] Including persons known to have departed 'voluntarily' after enforcement action had been initiated against them.
[5] Excludes Assisted Voluntary Returns. Figures exclude 185 accompanying dependants leaving between April 2000 and March 2001.
[6] Persons leaving under Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes run by the international Organisation for Migration. May include some on-entry cases and some cases where enforcement action has been initiated.
[7] Illegal entrants detected and persons issued with a notice of intention to deport, recommended for deportation by a court or proceeded against under Section 10.
[8] Deportation figures may be under-recorded in 1999 and 2000. 2001 figure may exclude some persons recommended for deportation by a court.
[9] Figures for 2001 have been estimated.

Child Protection

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many National Hi-Tech Crime Unit staff will *(a)* be dedicated to the policing of internet chatrooms, *(b)* have the priority of protection of children on the internet and *(c)* have specific training in dealing with child protection law; and what the framework for liaison between the internet crime squad child protection team and other police units will be. [96758]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 12 February 2003]:* We set up the National Hi-Tech Crime Unit (NHTCU) as part of the National Crime Squad to combat national and transnational hi-tech crime within or which impacts upon the UK.This includes investigation of hacking, virus writing, extortion, fraud, drug trafficking and organised paedophilia.

Their organised paedophilia targets include paedophile rings operating within the internet who display a hierarchical structure, a high level of technical ability, the use of strong encryption, a knowledge of law enforcement techniques and international in nature. It also includes those persons profiting from the commercial exploitation of on line child abuse, through the provision of pay for view child pornography.

This specific technical role augments the policing provision for child protection by the National Crime Squad, National Criminal Intelligence Service and forces.

(a) Officers from the NHTCU are not routinely deployed to monitor internet chatrooms. This activity may occur in response to specific intelligence concerning a paedophile ring operating within a chatroom environment, or as part of an existing investigation.

(b) Approximately 25 per cent of NHTCU resources are engaged in the investigation of child abuse on-line. This equates to ten members of law enforcement and support staff encompassing intelligence, investigation and forensic examination roles.

(c) NHTCU investigators have received training from clinical psychologists in relation to the investigation of offences of child abuse on line. Any child identified at risk during the course of an investigation is immediately referred to the child protection team in the force where a victim lives.

The NHTCU does not have a specific child protection team, however, it is represented on both the national police strategic and tactical tasking and co-ordinating groups who receive intelligence concerning child abuse on line. Through these for a the NHTCU are linked to the 43 police forces in England and Wales, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, and international law enforcement.

Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have, as a result of breaching a community order, been deprived of any benefit to which they are entitled, or had the amount of such benefit reduced, pursuant to sections 62 to 66 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000; and when the sections will come into force in relation to all courts in England and Wales. [91013]

Malcolm Wicks: I have been asked to reply.

The community sentence and benefits measures aim to encourage greater compliance with community orders. Therefore sanctions only apply when people receiving the relevant benefit do not comply with their orders. The provisions were introduced in four pilot areas from 15 October 2001. A full and independent evaluation is being conducted which will inform any decision on future national implementation.

As at 15 January 2003, the cost to the Department of administering the Community Sentences and Benefits pilots running in four Probation Service areas was £403,736, of which approximately £262,000 relates to one-off start-up costs, including changes to the national computer systems.

Information on the total money withheld as a result of benefit sanctions following a breach of community order is not available. Information of the number of people who have lost benefit as a result of breaching their community orders, and the average weekly loss of benefit, is in the table. The figures for the average loss of weekly benefit should be used only as a guide to loss of benefit for individual offenders.

Benefit	*Number of individuals*	*Average weekly loss of benefit (£)*
Income Support	230	15.28
Jobseeker's Allowance	320	[1]48.29
Total	550	—

[1] After having a sanction imposed, 90 people have made successful hardship claims. This reduces the amount of benefit they have lost If these hardship claims are taken into account the average overall reduction in benefit is £33.19 per person per week.

Notes:
1. Data are based on clerical returns received at the DWP Information Centre by 13 January 2003, and relate to the period from 15 October 2001 to 6 December 2002.

2. Average weekly loss of benefit has been calculated on an individual recipient basis using the Jobseeker's Allowance payment system (JSAPS) and the income support computer system (ISCS).
3. There are four probation service pilot areas, Derbyshire, Hertfordshire, Teesside and West Midlands.
Source:
DWP Information Centre: CS Stats forms 1 and 2 (Withdrawal of Benefits Pilot).

Correspondence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reasons the hon. Member for Yeovil has yet to receive a reply to his letter of 1 December 2002 to the Chief Executive of the Immigration and Nationality Department in relation to the Home Office Reference S1153646; and if he will make a statement. [97363]

Beverley Hughes: The Immigration and Nationality Directorate has no trace of receiving the hon. Member's letter. On 11 February 2003 he was asked that if he wished to supply a copy of his original letter, a reply would be sent to him as soon as possible. In any event, on 31 January 2003, in reply to a later letter dated 18 December 2002, he was informed that a decision had been reached in this case.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Board

Mr. Keith Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total budget for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board is for the financial year 2002–03; how much has been paid in compensation in each month of this financial year to date; and how much has been offered in compensation in each month but not yet paid out. [94438]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* Under the regime of resource accounting introduced by the Government in April 2001, Departments now account for their expenditure in terms of when resources are consumed, rather than when cash is paid. Thus, the Department now budgets for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme in terms of the amount of compensation committed in any particular year rather than simply the amount of cash expended in that year.

In 2002–03 the resource budget for compensation payable under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme was £183.264 million. An additional budget for scheme administration costs was £29.82 million.

The amount of money paid in compensation by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority in each month of 2002–03 to date is:

£ million

Month	*Compensation Paid*
April	27.2
May	27.4
June	18.3
July	15.5
August	18.5
September	14.3
October	15.7
November	22.5
December	15.3

Some £54 million of these payments related to awards offered in 2001–02 which score against the resource budget for that year.

It is not readily possible to say how much was offered in each month of the current financial year but not yet paid out because, for example, some applicants decide to appeal against the award offered. However, as at 31 December 2002, some £2.4 million worth of awards was due to be paid within 28 days, awards on offer amounted to £26.3 million, and other contingent liabilities amounted to £6.9 million.

Criminal Justice Policy Unit

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statistics are to be collected by the Criminal Justice Policy Unit; in what form; and how frequently information so obtained will be published. [94326]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Justice Joint Planning Unit has been reformed into the Criminal Justice Local Performance and Delivery Unit, and the Criminal Justice Strategic Planning and Analysis Unit. Neither unit collects statistics, but they will collate and disseminate statistics on performance-related issues to local criminal justice boards. The local criminal justice boards will publish information on their performance in their annual reports to their communities.

Deportations

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 701W, on deportations, if he will list, of the 634 who were deported during 2002 on completion of a custodial sentence, the offences they were convicted for and which country of origin they were returned to. [96017]

Beverley Hughes: The additional information requested is not available.

Firearms

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ban the import and sale of *(a)* replica, *(b)* blank-firing and *(c)* deactivated guns. [96906]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: We propose to introduce a new offence of possessing an imitation firearm in a public place without lawful authority or reasonable excuse. The police will be able to arrest anybody committing such an offence and to seize the articles involved. Any blank-firing or imitation pistol which can be readily converted to fire live ammunition is already regarded as a prohibited weapon. We have no plans to ban the sale or importation of guns which are not readily converted.

Independent Appellate Tribunal Judgment

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department received notification from the Independent Appellate Tribunal of its decision to reject the Home Office's appeal to the Tribunal in the case of Mrs. T. B. (TH/22817/2001;

B1010649); when he intends to notify Mrs. T. B.'s representatives of the arrangements for her to collect her visa; and if he will make a statement. [97677]

Beverley Hughes: The Home Office received the Immigration Appellate Tribunal's decision to refuse to grant the Secretary of State's application for Leave to Appeal to the Tribunal on 29 November 2002. The Home Office has now notified the High Commission in Islamabad of the outcome of the appeal. It is now the responsibility of the Entry Clearance Officer to notify Mrs. Begum of any decision to grant in the spirit of the Adjudicator's determination.

I apologise for the delay in notifying the High Commission. This was caused by an administrative error.

Murder Cases

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the report from Sussex police in 2002 on the problems with securing murder verdicts for parents or carers accused of murdering their children due to joint enterprise considerations. [96025]

Hilary Benn: I believe the hon. Member is referring to the report produced by Sussex police for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) as part of their recent conference 'which of you did it?' I understand that copies of the Conference Report, including the paper from Sussex police will be available from the NSPCC in the next few weeks and I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Library.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the law for consideration of joint enterprise when pursuing murder cases against parents or carers accused of murdering their own children. [96026]

Hilary Benn: We accept that the law needs to be strengthened so that people jointly accused cannot evade justice by protecting each other. We are considering a number of possibilities in the light of recent work by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Law Commission. These possibilities include procedural measures at court but we are also considering whether changes are needed to the substantive law.

Over-lenient Sentences

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to extend the power to appeal against over-lenient sentences to sentences for burglary. [97298]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 11 February 2003]:* We are not looking to legislate for this since primary legislation would not be required, but we are willing to consider whether it would be desirable to add burglary to the Unduly Lenient Sentencing scheme by way of an Order. I have asked my officials to look further into the matter.

This issue has been raised as an amendment in the Courts Bill during Committee Stage, and was debated on 11 February 2003.

Prisoner Suicides

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many suicides have taken place in prisons in the Greater London area in each of the last three years. [96245]

Hilary Benn: The following table covers the 31 apparently self-inflicted deaths in the last three years.

	2000	*2001*	*2002*	*Total*
Belmarsh	1	0	1	2
Brixton	2	2	2	6
Feltham	1	1	0	2
Holloway	1	1	1	3
Latchmere House	0	0	0	0
Pentonville	1	3	1	5
Wandsworth	7	1	2	10
Wormwood Scrubs	1	1	1	3
Total	14	9	8	31

The general prison population contains a large number of prisoners with a combination of psychiatric disorders, alcohol and drug dependency, family background and relationship problems, histories of self-harm and previous abuse, all of which raise their risk of suicide and self-harm. Good care and support from staff saves many lives but such instances go largely unreported. The Prison Service's approach, in close partnership with other agencies such as the Youth Justice Board, and outside organisations such as Samaritans, is to better identify and support those who seem at greatest risk, with an approach that focuses on staff/prisoner relationships and the physical environment.

The Prison Service is currently developing a new suicide prevention and self-harm reduction policy through a programme of projects that aim to improve pre-reception, reception and induction arrangements; the exchange of information; the care of prisoners; detoxification; prisoners supporting each other, and learning from investigations into deaths in custody.

Prisoners

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are *(a)* female and *(b)* male of pensionable age; and what percentage of the total prison population each sex represents. [96020]

Hilary Benn: On 31 December 2002, there were 26 females and 692 males of pensionable age (0.04 per cent. and 0.99 per cent. of the total male and female prison population respectively).

Prisons

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total *(a)* operational capacity and *(b)* population of prisons in England and Wales was in each year since 1973. [95862]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is in the following table. The table shows annual figures for population level and useable operational capacity at Prison Service establishments in England and Wales, from 1973 to 2002, where such figures are available.

Total certified normal accommodation and population in Prison Service establishments from 1973–2002

	Population	*Useable operational capacity*
2002	70,800	71,500
2001	66,300	69,400
2000	64,600	69,000
1999	64,800	68,100
1998	65,300	67,800
1997	61,100	61,800
1996	55,300	56,500
1995	51,000	54,200
1994	48,600	51,800
1993	44,600	49,500
1992	44,700	48,800
1991	44,800	48,700
1990	45,000	—
1989	48,500	—
1988	48,900	—
1987	48,400	—
1986	46,800	—
1985	46,200	—
1984	43,300	—
1983	43,500	—
1982	43,700	—
1981	43,300	—
1980	42,300	—
1979	42,200	—
1978	41,800	—
1977	41,600	—
1976	41,400	—
1975	39,800	—
1974	36,900	—
1973	36,800	—

Notes:

1. All figures rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Population and useable operational capacity figures are annual averages. CNA figures are as at 30 June of each year. CNA figures pre-1980 are available only for the December of each year.
3. In-use CNA: the uncrowded capacity of the estate after adjusting for accommodation out of use.
4. Population figures exclude the numbers of prisoners held in police cells during that year. The averages are based on data for the last day of each month.
5. Useable operational capacity: the measure used for long-term estate planning purposes. The maximum number of prisoners the estate could normally hold is up to 2,000 less than the totals certified operational capacity.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women held in prisons in England and Wales are serving a life sentence for sexual offences. [96247]

Hilary Benn: The number of male prisoners serving life sentences for sexual offences on 30 November 2002 was 550. There were no female prisoners serving life sentences for sexual offences on 30 November 2002.

Student Visas

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy to remove from the UK students who do not comply with the immigration rules for students visas, particularly with regard to attendance records; and how many students have been removed from the UK in the last 12 months for failing to comply with any requirements based on attendance records. [97678]

Beverley Hughes: Students are required, under paragraph 57(ii) of the Immigration Rules (HC395), to attend classes regularly for a minimum of 15 hours' organised daytime study per week, unless circumstances such as illness prevent them from doing so.Where a student comes to the attention of the immigration authorities for low or non-attendance, without good reason, their leave would be subject to curtailment and they would be subsequently removed.

A student is permitted to work for a maximum of 20 hours per week in term time, or full time vacation work. Where a student is found to be working but there are doubts about the quantity and quality of study, and it appears that his or her main purpose in being in the United Kingdom is to work rather than to study, administrative removal action may be taken on the grounds that they are not observing a condition attached to their leave.

If it can be established that a person entered the United Kingdom as a student but had no intention of studying, he or she can be treated as an illegal entrant, having gained leave to enter by deception.

Information on the number of student removals is not available.

Terrorist Attacks

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps have been taken by his Department to ensure the integration and training of *(a)* the armed forces, *(b)* the emergency services and *(c)* volunteer organisations in evacuation procedures in the event of an NBC terrorist attack on London. [96260]

Mr. Raynsford: I have been asked to reply.

I chair the London Resilience Cabinet Committee which overseas work to strengthen London's preparedness against terrorism. The London Resilience Committee reports to DOP(IT)(R)—which works to build the UK's resilience and ability to manage the consequences of major emergencies—and to the Civil Contingencies Committee which meets in times of crisis to mange the response. Since May 2002, a new strategic emergency planning regime has been in place in London, headed by the London Resilience Forum which I also chair, with the Mayor of London as my Deputy. Evacuation procedures are being fully considered in this context. Government departments and representatives of the emergency services, the military and key agencies are represented within these arrangements.

The integration of volunteer organisations in response to civil emergencies of all kinds is co-ordinated through local authority emergency planning officers in accordance with the arrangements set out in the publication "Dealing With Disaster".

Vehicle Fleets

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the annual rate is at which his Department and its agencies renew their vehicle fleets, by *(a)* volume and percentage for each category of vehicle, *(b)* type of power unit and *(c)* type of fuel. [96559]

Hilary Benn: The policy guidelines for vehicle replacement are:

Vehicle	*Guidelines*
Petrol cars/light vans	85,000 miles or five years
Diesel cars/light vans	120,000 miles or five years
Vans and minibuses	90,000 miles or seven years
Goods vehicles-7.5 tonnes	200,000 miles or 10 years
Goods vehicles-10 tonnes	300,000 miles or 10 years and over
Goods vehicles-16 tonnes	400,000 miles or 10 years and over
Articulated units-38 tonnes	500,000 miles or 10 years

The fleet profile by type and percentage as at November 2002:

Vehicle	*Percentage*
Cars/car derived vans	42
Off road vehicles	3
Vans/minibuses	32
Commercial vehicles	9
Miscellaneous vehicles (e.g. training vehicles)	8
Specialist vehicles (e.g. secure and perimeter vehicles)	6

Currently 79 per cent. of the fleet is diesel powered, 20.5 per cent. are fuelled by petrol and 0.5 per cent. are alternatively powered. Home Office environmental policy on vehicle replacement is that wherever possible vehicles purchased will encompass either dual fuel technology (e.g. liquid petroleum gas (LPG)/petrol) or be high-pressure direct injection diesel with particulate filters.

Young Offenders

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list information and communications technology courses available for young offenders serving sentences in young offenders institutions in England and Wales broken down by young offender institution; how many young offenders are enrolled on such courses; and how many computers are available to be used for education and training in young offenders institutions in England and Wales per young offender. [96170]

Hilary Benn: E-learning is part of the prison core curriculum and as such is available to all young offenders serving sentences in young offender institutions (YOIs) in England and Wales. All establishments offer a variety of qualifications including computer literacy and information technology (CLAIT) at levels 1 to 3, information technology key skills and the European Computer Driving Licence. Information on how many young offenders are enrolled in an information and communications technology (ICT) course at any one time is not currently available.

At present we estimate that around 690 computers are available in YOIs for educational purposes. We will increase this number, giving more young offenders the opportunity to gain important skills that can help them to find a job on release.

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures are being taken by his Department to reduce the average distance of young offenders held in young offender institutions from their youth offending teams. [96171]

Hilary Benn: The juvenile secure estate is made up of Prison Service young offender institutions, local authority secure children's homes and privately-operated secure training centres. The Youth Justice Board commissions and purchases the places, and places individual offenders. Distance from home is a key factor in placement decisions.

In December 2002, 71 per cent. of young people in custody were within 50 miles of home. The Board's target is 90 per cent. in 2003–04. To achieve that the Board is currently reviewing the profile of the custodial estate and the catchment areas of establishments within it, taking account of the greater flexibility provided by the recent opening of 64 more secure training centre places.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Iraq

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what role there is for the Conflict Prevention Fund in Contingency Preparations for humanitarian operations in the aftermath of possible military action in Iraq. [97080]

Clare Short: No decision has been taken to launch military action against Iraq. The purpose of the Global Conflict Prevention Pool is to improve the effectiveness of the UK contribution to conflict prevention by reducing the number of people whose lives are affected by conflict, and reducing the potential sources of conflict. The Global Conflict Prevention Pool would not, therefore, be used to fund humanitarian operations following any military action against Iraq.

Capita

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to his answer of 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 459W, on Capita, if he will give the *(a)* start and finish date, *(b)* value, *(c)* evaluation mechanism for successful delivery and *(d)* penalty charges for failure to deliver for each contract; whether penalty charges have been incurred; what the service level agreements were; what the contract numbers were; and if he will make a statement. [97336]

Clare Short: The contract details are set out in the following table. The contracts were completed successfully against the terms of reference. No penalty charges were incurred. There were no service level agreements for these contracts.

Contract number	Project title	Value (£)	Start date	End date
19984472	Ethiopia Police: Development Assistance	1,103,035	15 February 1998	28 May 2000
19972812	Assistance with RAB Overview Training	34,377	19 May 1997	1 September 1997
19961105	Efficiency Scrutiny of Accounts Department	34,050	26 August 1996	14 November 1996
20024018	Recruitment Consultants for Support to Ethiopian Civil Service Reform Programme	51,250	8 July 2002	8 January 2003
20012466	Recruitment Consultants for Pillar IV of the UNMIK Administration	180,000	28 May 2001	27 May 2002

Democratic Republic of Congo

Ann McKechin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will place in the Library information received by her Department from the third report of the UN Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources in the DRC; and if she will request copies of all material collected in relation to allegations made in the report which she has found to be *(a)* inaccurate and *(b)* unsubstantiated. [97099]

Clare Short: We have yet to receive from the UN panel of experts the additional information sought corroborating the allegations made in the panel report against British companies and nationals in respect of the illegal exploitation of resources in the DRC. Once this information is received I will consider whether it is suitable for placing in the Library, taking into account any further action that may be needed in relation to the allegations.

EU Aid Budget

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if he will estimate how much money the United Kingdom transfers to the European Union as a contribution to the European Commission's Annual Aid Budget each year. [96899]

Clare Short: The following table gives figures for UK payments to the EC budget for aid and International Development for the past three years from DFID and other Government Departments. Further information is available in the latest edition of "Statistics on International Development" [pp. 126 Table 8]. A copy of this may be found in the Library of the House.

Amounts paid to the European Union for International Development

Thousand

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
EC Attribution[1]	522,660	582,140	626,755
European Development Fund	212,893	121,376	91,463
European Investment Bank	2,805	4,033	3,847
Departments other than DFID	18,545	19,470	27,130
Total	756,903	727,019	749,195

[1] This is an estimate for the amount paid by DFID towards the EC aid and development program for each financial year

Source:

DFID Statistics on international development 1997–98 to 2001–02

Kyrgyzstan

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with her counterparts in *(a)* the United States of America, *(b)* the European Union and *(c)* Russia to encourage them to give aid to Kyrgyzstan; and if she will make a statement. [97166]

Clare Short: There have been no direct discussions with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Commission or Russia on aid to Kyrgyzstan. The United States already provides development assistance to Kyrgyzstan: around US$35 million in 2002. Up to 1999 the EU Tacis programme, to which the UK contributes, provided grant assistance of Euro 53 million to Kyrgyzstan, with a further Euro 16 million being allocated for the period 2000–03.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent meetings she has had with non-governmental organisations and international aid organisations regarding Kyrgyzstan; and if she will make a statement. [97167]

Clare Short: Officials from my Department and the DFID office in Bishkek meet with international NGOs and local Kyrgyz NGOs, on a regular basis: some of the NGOs are actively involved in DFID projects in Kyrgyzstan.

The DFID office in Bishkek takes a leading role in donor coordination in Kyrgyzstan. Representatives of the donor community, which includes the international aid organisations, attend monthly coordination meetings. My Department has several collaborative projects with the World bank. Closer links are being established with the Asian Development Bank with a view to working with them also in Kyrgyzstan.

St. Helena

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in respect of developing air links with St. Helena; and if she will make a statement. [97160]

Clare Short: The St. Helena Government, with our agreement, has decided to seek proposals for private sector participation. A prospectus is being prepared as a basis for inviting responses from interested parties.

MINISTER FOR WOMEN

Public Appointments

21. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Minister for Women what measures she is introducing to increase the number of women applying for public appointments. [97613]

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend, the Minister for State at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and I led a national outreach programme, that finished only in

December 2002, to encourage more women to apply for public appointments. We have now published an excellent practical guide that enables others to take forward this approach.

Social Enterprises

Mr. Mole: To ask the Minister for Women what measures her Department takes to support social enterprise by women. [97615]

Ms Hewitt: Women already play an important part in social enterprises and DTI supports them through a wide range of activities. This will be strengthened through the implementation of the Government's three-year strategy for social enterprise, which I launched in July 2002.

WALES

Air Quality Plans

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which local authorities in Wales have completed Ambient Air Quality *(a)* plans and *(b)* assessments. [96459]

Peter Hain: That is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Cardiff International Airport

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what annual emission of *(a)* NOx, *(b)* SOx and *(c)* CO_2 was recorded for Cardiff International Airport in the last available year, classified by (i) aviation emissions, (ii) volume for each category of ground vehicle, (iii) type of power unit and (iv) type of fuel. [96454]

Peter Hain: This information is not held centrally and is a matter for the airport operator.

Flood Defences (Hampton Bishop)

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action the Welsh Environment Agency is taking to repair the weakness in the flood defence barrier by the Bunch of Carrots pub at Hampton Bishop, Herefordshire. [95654]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

Operational responsibility for flood measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing. This Department provides grants for flood and coastal defence capital works and associated studies, which meet essential technical, economic and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score.

I understand that EA Wales is preparing a submission to Defra for approval of grant aid on a proposed scheme to strengthen and improve approximately 1 km of the existing embankment along the River Wye at Hampton Bishop, Herefordshire. The EA has identified this length as having a potential weakness in extreme flood conditions. Additionally the Agency, in co-operation with Herefordshire county council, has put into place an Emergency Response Procedure for Hampton Bishop. This would include the evacuation of residents in the event of the Agency issuing a Severe Flood Warning for the location.

Gwydyr House

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales who owns the headquarters of his Department at Gwydyr House in Whitehall, London; what his estimate is of *(a)* the capital value of this building and *(b)* the annual estimated rental cost; and if he will make a statement. [89951]

Peter Hain: My Department owns Gwydyr House.

(a) £1.7 million

(b) No recent estimate has been made of the annual rental cost.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the overseas visits of Welsh Office Ministers in each year from 1997–98 to 2002–03, setting out the *(a)* destination, *(b)* timing, *(c)* total cost and *(d)* reason for visit; and if he will make a statement. [90098]

Peter Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Postal Votes

Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the number of postal votes applied for in Wales for the forthcoming elections to the National Assembly, broken down by *(a)* Assembly constituency and *(b)* local authority area. [91830]

Peter Hain: The figures are not held centrally. However, I know that a number of local authorities have taken positive steps to publicise the availability of postal votes. This has led to an increase in applications, which I welcome.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90530]

Peter Hain: The number of days lost due to sickness absence in my Department in 2002 was 206.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many working days were lost due to illness in his Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90747]

Peter Hain: My Department came into existence on 1 July 1999. The number of working days lost due to illness in my Department in *(a)* 2002 was 206 and *(b)* 2001 was 277, 2000 were 231 and 1999, from July to December, was 120.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93496]

Peter Hain: The Wales Office does not have any agencies or non-departmental public bodies. Since its establishment on 1 July 1999, there has been no reported absenteeism. The rate of sickness averages between 7.5 days in 1999 to 5.5 days in 2002 per staff year.

The Civil Service is committed to reducing sickness absence by 20 per cent. by 2010 (to 8.3 days per staff year). Wales Office average of sick leave is already below this target.

Vehicle Fleets

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he is taking to encourage Cardiff International Airport Ltd. to introduce low emission vehicles in its operations; and what the outcome has been. [96455]

Peter Hain: That is primarily a matter for the National Assembly for Wales and I will draw his question to their attention because I attach real importance to reducing vehicle emission.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Manufacturing

11. **Mr. Djanogly:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what efforts her Department is making to improve productivity growth rates in the manufacturing sector. [97629]

Alan Johnson: The Government's Manufacturing Strategy, published in May last year, identified seven key areas of activity for Government and industry that are crucial for manufacturing success. We are taking action in all of those areas to help British manufacturers improve productivity in very difficult global conditions.

Social Enterprises

12. **Tony Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the contributions that social enterprises can make to public service provision. [97630]

Mr. Timms: Social enterprises are already successfully delivering public services and we believe that they have the potential to play a far greater role. We are currently considering a number of ways in which their role may be increased.

Broadband

14. **Mr. Liddell-Grainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the help she gives rural businesses which have no access to broadband. [97632]

Mr. Timms: Broadband is available throughout the UK by satellite. Schemes funded through the UK Broadband Fund are helping rural small businesses to access broadband services. For example, the Remote Area Broadband Inclusion Trial (RABBIT) will subsidise some 2,000 small businesses' access to broadband for the first year.

Workplace Bullying

15. **Linda Perham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what she is doing to tackle bullying in the workplace. [97633]

Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to addressing the problems caused by bullying in the workplace.

We believe that the best place for bullying to be tackled is where it happens—in the workplace itself. This means changing the culture in the workplace to one where bullying is unacceptable. The DTI is promoting best practice and workplace initiatives to tackle bullying through developing partnership between employers and employees.

The Government have established the Partnership Fund, which has launched a number of projects specifically focused on bullying and others that include its eradication as part of an overall culture change. We are also working with the HSE to develop a Relationship Management Standard which will provide a benchmark for employers to evaluate and improve workplace practices.

A net of legislation is already in place to protect workers from the most serious kinds of bullying, for instance in cases of discrimination or harassment. The Government publish guidance booklets on how this legislation can be used, and ACAS provide a nationwide telephone advice line offering assistance to employers and employees on bullying and other employment issues.

The Employment Act 2002 will take the safety net of legislation further by providing improved employment conditions for an additional six million employees who currently do not have access to adequate internal procedures to deal with discipline and grievance cases.

Supermarket Ownership

16. **Mr. Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the effects on primary producers of the pattern of ownership of supermarkets. [97634]

Ms Hewitt: The Office of Fair Trading considers the effects on suppliers when reviewing any change in ownership or control of a business, including supermarkets.

ACT (Benefits Payment)

17. **Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with *(a)* the Post Office and *(b)* the Department for Work and Pensions about preparedness for the introduction of full Automated Credit Transfer for benefits payments from April. [97635]

Mr. Timms: Ministers and officials of the Department of Trade and Industry are working closely with colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions and the Post Office on all aspects of the migration of benefits and pensions to direct payment and the introduction of universal banking services.

Aon Health Services

Jeff Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the value is of the contract recently awarded to Aon Health Services for carrying out health assessments for compensation for services under the Government's vibration white finger compensation scheme. [97095]

Mr. Wilson: The contract for the Vibration White Finger (VWF) services medical assessment, awarded to Aon Health Solutions, is valued at around £6 million, based on the current projected volume of claimants.

Car Manufacturing

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many motor cars were manufactured in the United Kingdom during each of the last five years. [97539]

Alan Johnson: The information requested is as follows:

Number of cars produced in the United Kingdom, 1998–2002

Thousands

Year	*Number of cars*
1998	1,748
1999	1,787
2000	1,641
2001	1,492
2002	1,628

Source:
National Statistics

Disablement Benefit (Access)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has received regarding the ability of disabled people to access their benefit entitlement at post offices by using a plastic swipe card and a numeric keypad. [97631]

Mr. Timms: The Department receives representations on a wide range of issues concerning the post office network. The Government and the Post Office are working to provide a high quality range of services for all our customers, including those who wish to use the Post Office card account. It is the responsibility of Post Office Ltd. as the service provider, to ensure that disabled people can access their benefits at post offices using a plastic swipe card and a numeric pad.

Earnings

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the gap between the average earnings of men and women is in *(a)* South East Scotland, *(b)* the Scottish Borders, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* the UK. [97662]

Alan Johnson: In 2002 the gap between the average gross weekly earnings of men and women was 24 per cent. in Scotland and nearly 25 per cent. in Great Britain. (UK figures are not available). South East Scotland is not a unitary authority but for the purpose of this request, I have created data by adding Borders, East Lothian, Edinburgh and Midlothian local authorities which shows that there is an approximate 37 per cent. gap between men and women's average gross weekly earnings.

Sample represented for Scottish Borders is too small.

Source:
Labour Market New Earnings Survey 2002

Essential Medicines (Poorer Countries' Access)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps she has taken to ensure poorer countries are able to access essential medicines since the World Trade Organisation failed to resolve the issue; and if she will make a statement. [97529]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 12 February 2003]*: The Government continues to work with the EU and all other WTO members to try and reach agreement on the important issue of TRIPS and Public Health. We see the recently declared EU moratorium (on taking to Dispute Settlement any country exporting copies of patented medicines to other developing countries in need) as purely a stop-gap solution.

Access to medicines goes much wider than this aspect of intellectual property. The Government is committed to working holistically to solve issues of delivery, research and funding as well. For example, the Government has since 1997 committed £1.5 billion to strengthening healthcare systems in developing countries. The Government has also committed $200 million over five years to the Global Trust Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. In addition the 2002 budget set up a new tax credit available to companies who set up health-related research and development to fight HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria in developing countries.

In addition a UK working group set up by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development produced a report last November on Increasing Access to Essential Medicines in the Developing World (www.dfid.gov.uk). The Government continues to work with all members of this group to implement the recommendations as widely as possible.

EU Enlargement

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the opportunities for UK businesses arising from EU enlargement. [97619]

Ms Hewitt: UK business has already benefited from the removal of trade barriers with the fast growing economies of central and eastern Europe and this can be expected to continue with the expansion of the EU to create the largest single market in the world. The Department's officials are completing more detailed analysis, which we intend to publish as soon as possible.

Stephen Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* assessment and *(b)* analysis her Department has conducted on the opportunities for UK businesses from EU enlargement. [96810]

Mr. Wilson: UK business has already benefited from the removal of trade barriers with the fast growing economies of central and eastern Europe and this can be expected to continue with the expansion of the EU to create the largest single market in the world. The department's officials are completing more detailed analysis which we intend to publish as soon as possible.

Gas NVQ

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice CORGI gave to *(a)* the HSE and *(b)* Ministers in March 2002 on the introduction of a new NVQ industry qualification for gas engineers. [91401]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: In March 2002, the Council for Registered Gas Installers (CORGI) gave advice solely to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). On 21 March the CORGI Chief Executive wrote to advise HSE about how it proposed to deal with Transco's application for renewal of its registration from 1 April 2002. CORGI stated their view that the Rules for Registration needed to be applied equitably to all CORGI registered businesses and that to make an exception to these in the case of Transco would have been inappropriate. CORGI gave no advice to Ministers at that time.

CORGI advised that they had decided to re-register Transco with effect from 1 April 2002 but only for work undertaken by the 325 engineers then holding either unexpired certificates of competence issued under the Health and Safety Commission's Approved Code of Practice (AcoP) or certificates under the Nationally Accredited Certification Scheme (ACS). Throughout the remainder of the year the registration progressively covered the work of additional engineers as they completed training and assessment under the newly-introduced National Vocational Qualification which is aligned, for gas safety issues, with the ACS. As at 16 January 2003 the registration covered a total of 2,707 engineers holding valid certificates of competence for emergency service work.

Manufacturing

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many manufacturing businesses operated with five employees or fewer in each year since 1997; and if she will make a statement. [97949]

Mr. Wilson: Table 1 shows estimates of the number of businesses in the manufacturing sector with four employees or fewer for the time period start-1997 to start-2001. It is not possible to provide figures for the number of businesses with five employees, as this breakdown is not available.

Table 1 Manufacturing sector: number of businesses with 0–4 employees: United Kingdom

	Number
Start-1997	252,380
Start-1998	262,265
Start-1999	264,230
Start-2000	265,870
Start-2001	226,460

Source:
Small Business Service

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people and what percentage of the work force in Pendle *(a)* were employed in manufacturing industry in 1977 and *(b)* are employed in manufacturing. [97369]

Alan Johnson: In 1977 the total work force in Pendle numbered 32,201 of which 21,031 (65.3 per cent.) were employed in manufacturing.

In 2001 the total workforce in Pendle numbered 30,700 of which 11,400 (37 per cent.) were employed in manufacturing.

Post Office (Banking Services)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will ensure that the Post Office card account is given equal promotion and advertising as high street banking options. [95442]

Mr. Timms: The Post Office card account is one of a range of accounts which people will be able from this year to receive benefit payments into. Our aim is that people should be able to choose the option that suits them best. Information about all the options is being supplied to benefit, pension and tax credit customers by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Inland Revenue. Post Office Ltd. will also be making its own material available to customers.

Post Offices (Portsmouth, South)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the financial loss to post offices in Portsmouth, South as a result of the change in the payment of benefits from over-the-counter to direct bank transfer; and if she will make a statement. [97273]

Mr. Timms: No such assessment has been made. The migration of benefit payment to ACT begins this year and the Post Office's strategy is to respond to that challenge with a range of banking and other services. How the migration of benefit payments affects the revenue of post offices will depend on a number of factors, not least how benefit recipients and other post office customers respond to change. The income from the various contracts Post Office Ltd. has with the spending Departments and various financial institutions, and the remuneration of sub-postmasters for banking services, is a commercial matter between the parties.

Public Liability

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many businesses have ceased trading in the last 12 months citing a rise in public liability premiums from their insurers. [96823]

Mr. Wilson: Firms generally cease trading as the result of a combination of factors, including increases in costs. It is therefore very hard to estimate the effect of insurance premium increases on the number of businesses that have ceased trading. The Government's current review of employers' liability insurance aims to examine the impact of the current system on employers, and make recommendations accordingly. Full details of this review are at: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/dwp/2002/health-safety/eli-review/index .htm.

Small Retail Businesses

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant, to the answer of 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 248W, on small retail businesses, how many work-force jobs are accounted for by small retail businesses. [97778]

Mr. Wilson: The following table shows estimated employment in the UK at the start of 2001 in sector 52 (retail trade except of motor vehicles). SMEs (0 to 249 employees) accounted for approximately 37 per cent., and small businesses (0 to 49) 33 per cent., of all employment in this sector. These figures are based on a total business population of about 3.75 million (about 7,000 of these are large businesses) with total employment of about 22.6 million (about half of which is in SMEs).

Table 1: Amount of employment (000s) in the private sector and public corporations[1]

UK number	*All*	*SMEs*[2]	*Small*[3]
52 Retail trade, except of motor vehicles	2,875	1,071	952

[1] Figures from SME Statistics 2001
[2] Businesses with less than 250 employees
[3] Businesses with less than 50 employees
Source:
Small Business Service

Wind Farms

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many planning consents are being sought for *(a)* offshore and *(b)* land-based wind farm projects in (i) England, (ii) Wales, (iii) Scotland and (iv) Northern Ireland; and if she will list the locations. [97068]

Mr. Wilson: The following table lists the number of wind farm planning consents currently being sought. This list covers those applications which are the responsibility of central Government, and does not include smaller developments which fall under local planning authorities.

	(a) Offshore wind farms	*(b) Onshore wind farms*
England	8	1
Wales	0	0
Scotland	1	7
Northern Ireland	0	5

The applications for offshore wind farms in England are located at Kentish Flats (off Whitstable, Thames Estuary), Lynn (off Skegness, Lincolnshire), Inner Dowsing (off Ingoldmells, Lincolnshire), Cromer (off Mundesley, Norfolk), Gunfleet Sands (off Clacton-on-Sea, Essex), Barrow (off Walney Island, Cumbria), Burbo Bank (off Crosby, Merseyside) and Shell Flats (off Cleveleys, Lancashire).

There is also one application for an onshore wind farm in England and Wales, under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989, under consideration at Little Cheyne Court, Romney Marsh, Kent. Proposals for wind farms in England and Wales with a capacity of 50 MW or below fall to be determined by the local planning authority under the normal planning regime.

Powers under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 as they apply to Scotland have been devolved to the Scottish Executive. The onshore wind farms under consideration in Scotland are located at the Windy Standard extension (Dumfries and Galloway); Whitelee (East Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and East Ayrshire); Paul's Hill (Moray); Black Law (North Lanarkshire, West Lothian and South Lanarkshire); Farr (Highland); Braes o'Doune (Stirling) and the Crystal Rig extension (Scottish Borders).

There is one offshore project under consideration by the Scottish Executive at Robin Rigg (Solway Firth).

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for Northern Ireland are currently dealing with applications for onshore wind farms at Bin Mountain (Strabane, County Tyrone), Omagh (in the townlands of Lough Hill, Castlecraig, Curraghmacall and Drummahon, County Tyrone), Fermanagh (in the townlands of Garrane, Mullaghfad, Corraleek and Corragiint, and Rosslea, County Fermanagh), Fermanagh (in the townlands of Callagheen and Garrison, County Fermanagh) and Fermanagh (in the townlands of Glenarn, Stranahone and Stranadarriff, Tappaghan Mountain and Lack, County Fermanagh).

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate she has made of the contribution to be made by *(a)* off-shore and *(b)* land-based wind farm projects over the next ten years as a percentage of overall electricity generation. [97070]

Mr. Wilson: The Government have not made estimates for the contribution that onshore and offshore wind farms will make to our overall electricity generation over the next 10 years. The Government's target for renewable energy is that, by 2010, 10 per cent. of electricity should be supplied from sources eligible under the Renewables Obligation. While we expect both onshore and offshore wind to make a substantial contribution to this target, no specific targets have been set in relation to the contribution of any particular form of renewable energy to the overall 10 per cent. target.

NORTHERN IRELAND

A29

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will identify the automatic traffic monitoring sites situated along the A29 route. [97011]

Angela Smith: I have asked the Chief Executive of Roads Service to write to the hon. Member in response to this question. A copy of the letter will be placed in the Library.

Air Quality Plans

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures he is taking to assist local authorities in Northern Ireland in adopting ambient air quality plans; how many local authorities have completed ambient air quality *(a)* plans and *(b)* assessments; and if he will list them. [96556]

Angela Smith: District councils in Northern Ireland came under a statutory duty to undertake air quality assessment and management only with the recent enactment of the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002. The Order requires district councils to identify areas where air quality standards are not likely to be achieved within specified timescales and to draw up action plans setting out the proposals they, and other relevant authorities, have for the reduction of air pollution levels in those areas.

However, in anticipation of the new legislation, all 26 district councils had voluntarily completed an initial screening of pollution sources having a significant impact within the district council area in order to identify pollutants of concern locally. As a consequence, all 26 district councils are now engaged in a more detailed assessment of the pollutants identified in the initial screening. No district council has yet reached the stage of drawing up air quality action plans.

To assist with the review and assessment process, the Department of the Environment has provided grant-aid of some £1 million to district councils in the 2001–02 and current financial years. Similar provision has been made for continuation of the grant scheme in 2003–04.

The Department proposes to issue shortly technical guidance on the review and assessment process and on the preparation of action plans. This guidance has been drawn up by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in conjunction with the devolved Administrations. The Department also proposes in the near future to issue for consultation a policy guidance paper designed to assist district councils, and other relevant authorities, to meet their air quality management obligations.

Belfast International Airport

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures he is taking to encourage Belfast International Airport Ltd. to introduce low emission vehicles in its operations. [96554]

Angela Smith: There are no measures aimed specifically at introducing low emission vehicles specifically into airport operations within Northern Ireland. In broader terms, there are national polices in place to reduce emissions from vehicles generally, such as the Powershift programme, administered by the Energy Saving Trust. This programme was established in order to stimulate the market for clean fuel vehicles in the UK. Financial support is available under the programme to help with the purchase of vehicles which are proven to offer emissions benefits and which have shown to be technically viable.

In addition, the European Auto-Oil programme has introduced tighter European vehicle emission and fuel quality standards. These are reflected in the Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The key elements of the programme are:

stringent emission standards for cars and light vans, which applied to all new vehicles sold from 1 January 2000 (known as Euro III standards);

more stringent standards applying from 1 January 2006 (Euro IV standards);

tighter fuel quality specifications which applied to all petrol and diesel sold from 1 January 2000, with a further tightening of the specification to apply from 1 January 2005; and

a ban on general marketing of leaded petrol since 1 January 2000.

A further element of the Auto-Oil programme established a more stringent emissions standard for heavy-duty diesel engines from 2000. These engines are used in a wide range of vehicles, including lorries and buses. From 2005 almost all heavy-duty diesel vehicles will effectively be fitted with particulate traps—which can reduce particle emissions (PM_{10}) by up to 90 per cent.

Care Services

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much was spent in Northern Ireland in providing *(a)* occupational and physiotherapy, *(b)* home help and *(c)* district nursing services in each of the last three years. [96782]

Mr. Browne: The following table details the amounts spent in providing the services:

£000

	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Occupational/physiotherapy	12,716	14,726	15,759
Home helps	41,999	44,033	44,608
District nursing	26,904	28,611	32,321

Gardner Report

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will place in the Library the findings of the report on education by Professor John Gardner commissioned by the Northern Ireland Assembly prior to its suspension. [88798]

Jane Kennedy: The Assembly Education Committee commissioned Professor Gardner to undertake research to assist its consideration of the review of post-primary education but did not have the opportunity to consider the report prior to suspension. I understand that, until the Committee has had an opportunity to consider and approve the report, it cannot be made publicly available and I am, therefore, unable to place a copy in the Library.

Historical and Cultural Buildings

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will bring forward legislation to prevent the destruction and diminution of important historical and cultural buildings in Northern Ireland. [96391]

Angela Smith: The Department of the Environment has powers under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 to list buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Once listed, it is an offence to execute, or cause to be executed, any works for the demolition of such a building, or for its alteration or extension in any manner that would affect its character as a building of special historic or architectural interest. The

Department also has powers to control the demolition of buildings in Conservation Areas designated under the Order.

The draft Planning (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, will introduce some important new enforcement powers and increase from £5,000 to £30,000 the maximum level of fine that can be imposed on a person on summary conviction for breaching a Listed Buildings Enforcement Notice. The draft Order will also introduce the possibility of custodial sentences, for those found guilty of an offence, of up to six months on summary conviction and up to two years on conviction on indictment. The draft order was laid at Westminster on 16 January 2003, and was debated in the House of Commons Select Committee on 4 February 2003. The draft order is due to be debated in the House of Lords on 13 February 2003 and, subject to Lords' agreement it is expected that it will be taken at the February Privy Council meeting.

In addition, the draft Order will introduce a fast track mechanism for listing buildings of special architectural or historic interest, which are considered at risk of demolition or adverse alteration. It will also introduce a new control over the demolition of buildings, by making it clear that demolition comes within the meaning of development for planning purposes. For the time being, however, it is my intention to apply this new control over demolition only to the demolition of buildings in Areas of Townscape/Village Character.

I have no plans at present to bring forward any further legislation on this subject.

Housing Executive Tenants

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the rent increases for Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants have been, expressed as a proportion of GDP, for each year since 1997. [96787]

Mr. Browne: Northern Ireland Housing Executive rent increases from 1997 are as follows:

	GDP (Percentage)
1997–98	GDP (2 per cent.) + 2 per cent. = 4 per cent.
1998–99	GDP (2.8 per cent.) + 2 per cent. = 4.8 per cent.
1999–2000	GDP (2.5 per cent.) + 2 per cent. = 4.5 per cent.
2000–01	GDP (2.5 per cent.) + 2 per cent. = 4.5 per cent.
2001–02	GDP (2.5 per cent.) + 0.5 per cent. = 3 per cent.
2002–03	GDP (2.5 per cent.) + 0.5 per cent. = 3.5 per cent.
2003–04	GDP (2.25 per cent.) + 1 per cent. = 3.25 per cent.

IFI Belfast Plant

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* discussions with and *(b)* representations to the Irish Government have taken place over its handling of the closure of the IFI Belfast plant since the workers ended their sit-in at the plant. [96779]

Mr. Pearson: I have made regular representations to the Irish Government since the difficulties at IFI first became known and these have continued following the ending of the workers' sit-in at the Belfast plant. These representations have included correspondence to and, recently, separate meetings with both Mary Harney TD, Irish Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and one of her senior officials.

Through these meetings and in my correspondence I have consistently expressed my concerns about the treatment of the Belfast work force and I have sought the assurance of the Irish Government that they are doing everything they can to ensure their treatment is fair and equitable.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people it is estimated are eligible for Minimum Income Guarantee in Northern Ireland. [96857]

Mr. Browne: At October 2002 there were 76,101 people claiming the Minimum Income Guarantee. At present, the proportion of people who are eligible but have not claimed cannot be precisely estimated.

It is hoped that information from the new Family Resources Survey, will start to become available in the autumn. This information will enable take-up to be estimated.

The Social Security Agency continues to actively encourage uptake of Minimum Income Guarantee to ensure that all people claim and receive all the help they are entitled to.

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people have applied for the Minimum Income Guarantee in Northern Ireland in each year since its introduction. [96858]

Mr. Browne: Minimum Income Guarantee was introduced in April 1999. Since then, almost 50,000 pensioners have applied.

The figures in the following table set out the number of applications made each financial year.

Year	*Applications*
1999–2000	10,923
2000–01	15,904
2001–02	14,721
2002 up to December	8,297

Old People's Dwellings

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many old people's dwellings in Northern Ireland have been allocated to people under 60 years of age. [96854]

Mr. Browne: Currently some 6,500 properties out of a total 17,500, one or two bedroomed bungalows have been let to people under the age of 60, some of whom have a disability. In addition there are approximately 5,000 ground floor flats which are considered to be suitable for the elderly but figures on age profile of the occupants is not readily available.

Public Transport (Free Fares)

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans there are to introduce free fares on public transport for women aged 60 and over in Northern Ireland. [96855]

Angela Smith: Currently under the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme both men and women over 65 are eligible for free travel on public transport. Under equality legislation any reduction in the eligibility age would have to apply to both men and women. However, we have no plans at present to reduce the age of eligibility from 65.

Senior Citizens

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what funding has been provided by Belfast Regeneration Office to projects and programmes dealing with senior citizens in each financial year since 1997. [96853]

Mr. Browne: Detail of funding provided by Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) to those projects and programmes which benefit senior citizens are listed in the following table.

Financial year	*Total amount of funding allocated to senior citizens by BRO (£)*
1997–98	7,475.45
1998–99	3,100.00
1999–2000	2,623.00
2000–01	9,670.00
2001–02	977.71
2002–03	0

Sports Council

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money was allocated to the NT Sports Council in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 2000–01, *(d)* 2001–02 and *(e)* 2002–03. [96953]

Angela Smith: The total amount of money allocated to the Sports Council in the years listed is as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	3.009
1998–99	2.558
2000–01	4.618
2001–02	3.778
2002–03	5.748

Traffic Volume (Moy Village)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will commission a new survey for traffic volume in Moy village. [97012]

Angela Smith: I have asked the Chief Executive of Roads Service to write to the hon. Member in response to this question. A copy of the letter will be placed in the Library.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH

Colombia (Human Rights)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent discussions he has had with the US Administration regarding *(a)* developments and *(b)* the abuse of human rights in Colombia; and if he will make a statement; [97480]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Government of Colombia regarding *(a)* abuses of human rights and *(b)* persecution of human rights workers; and if he will make a statement; [97510]

(3) what discussions he has had with UK and UN representatives at the UN regarding human rights surveillance by the United Nations in Colombia; and if he will make a statement. [97481]

Mr. Rammell: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave her on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 354W.

Arms and Drugs Trafficking

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information exchange systems there are between *(a)* UK and *(b)* EU agencies to monitor and tackle arms and trafficking. [97488]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK regularly exchanges information with its EU partners, both bilaterally and in multilateral fora such as the EU Committee on Conventional Arms Export Policy (COARM), the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, the Australia Group and within the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Under the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, which relates to conventional arms, there is a Denial Notification (DN) system. EU Code of Conduct DNs are issued for all military listed and dual-use goods which have been refused a licence for export by a member state. No member state may export essentially identical goods, without first consulting the member state that issued the denial notification. Member states also contribute information about their arms export policy and licensing activity for inclusion in an annual report.

Only a minority of EU member states have legislation which controls the trafficking of arms.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Overseas Law Enforcement Liaison Officer network has taken to co-ordinate efforts to tackle arms and drugs trafficking. [97491]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Drug and other law enforcement liaison officers represent a range of UK law enforcement agencies and are funded and tasked to combat specific aspects of organised crime. If in the course of their duties, liaison officers discover information that is relevant to the work of other UK law enforcement agencies, that information is shared rapidly as appropriate.

Bermuda

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Bermuda on constitutional change. [96670]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My noble Friend Baroness Amos discussed the constitution review process with the Premier of Bermuda, the Attorney General and Senator David Burch in London in September 2002.

British Indian Ocean Territory

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the use of British Indian Ocean Territory in relation to the international war against terrorism. [96669]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Diego Garcia, part of the British Indian Ocean Territory, is the location of a US defence facility which was used as an important strategic staging post for coalition forces during the military campaign in Afghanistan; it contributed to the defeat of Taleban and al-Qaeda forces.

British Prisoners Overseas

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the countries in which British *(a)* men and *(b)* women are serving a prison sentence. [96611]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The following table lists the countries in which British men and women are imprisoned and gives the numbers of men and women detained in each as at 31 December 2002. The figures represent those prisoners who either requested consular assistance or who gave permission to the local authorities to notify the British Consul of their arrest.

British nationals detained overseas as at 31 December 2002

Country	*Number of prisoners*	*Males*	*Females*
Albania	1	—	1
Antigua and Barbuda	7	3	4
Argentina	4	3	1
Australia	127	122	5
Austria	10	10	—
Bahrain	1	1	—
Belgium	25	25	—
Belize	1	1	—
Brasil	15	12	3
Bulgaria	2	2	—
Cambodia	2	2	—
Canada	4	4	—
China	7	7	—
Colombia	2	2	—
Cyprus	11	11	—
Denmark	11	9	2
Dominican Republic	1	1	—
Ecuador	6	5	1
Egypt	5	5	—
Ethiopia	2	2	—
Fiji	1	1	—
Finland	5	5	—
France	176	168	8
Germany	110	104	6
Ghana	1	1	—
Greece	13	12	1
Grenada	17	11	6
Guyana	2	2	—
India	17	14	3
Indonesia	9	8	1
Ireland	80	72	8
Israel	2	2	—
Italy	19	16	3
Jamaica	134	83	51
Japan	37	33	4
Kenya	2	2	—
Kuwait	2	2	—
Lebanon	1	1	—
Luxembourg	3	3	—
Malawi	1	1	—
Malaysia	2	2	—
Malta	8	4	4
Mexico	2	2	—
Morocco	7	7	—
Nepal	1	1	—
Netherlands	42	40	2
New Zealand	14	13	1
Nigeria	1	1	—
Norway	5	5	—
Oman	2	2	—
Pakistan	4	4	0
Panama	8	5	3
Peru	15	14	1
Philippines	23	22	1
Poland	1	1	—
Portugal	14	13	1
Qatar	3	3	—
Republic of Kiribati	1	1	—
Romania	2	2	—
Russia	1	1	—
Saudi Arabia	10	10	—
Singapore	8	6	2
South Africa	11	10	1
Spain	262	240	22
Sri Lanka	1	1	—
St. Kitts and Nevis	1	1	—
St. Lucia	3	3	—
St. Vincent and Grenadines	3	2	1
Sweden	18	16	2
Switzerland	3	3	—
Syria	2	2	—
Thailand	30	29	1
The Gambia	1	1	—
Trinidad and Tobago	20	19	1
Turkey	4	3	1
United Arab Emirates	3	3	—
USA	679	603	76
Yemen	4	4	—
Yugoslavia	1	1	—
Zambia	1	1	—
Total	2,097	1,869	228

Burma

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which people elected at the last elections in Burma are under house arrest there. [97119]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our latest information is that there are no MPs-elect from the 1990 election in Burma currently under house arrest.

However many MPs-elect continue to be subject to close surveillance, checks, general infringement of civil liberties and harassment from the police and security services.

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which people elected at the last national elections in Burma are political prisoners in Burma; and what information he has collated regarding the location of each prisoner. [97120]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Information about Burmese political prisoners is hard to obtain and often incomplete. My latest information is that there are 18 MPs-elect currently detained on political grounds in Burma. The prison sentences quoted are often only arbitrary figures. It is common for prisoners to be kept detained long after their notional sentences have expired. Many political prisoners are also detained even when suffering serious ill-health.

Of the MPs listed, U Doe Htaung and U Khin Maung Swe have each served more than their seven year term but have still not been released. And U Kyaw San, Dr. Than Nyein, Daw May Win Myint, U Ohn Maung, U Sein Hla Oo, and U Toe Po all have serious health problems.

The MPs' details are as follows:

Name	*Prison term*	*Prison*
U Min Soe Lin (Dr.)	7 years	Unknown
U Min Kyi Win	7 years	Unknown
U Yawsi	Unknown	Myitkyina
U Khun Myint Tun	7 years	Kalay
U Kyaw Khin	Unknown	Unknown
U Ohn Maung	Unknown	Insein
U Soe Myint	42 years	Insein
U Zaw Myint Maung	25 years	Myitkyina
U Ohn Kyaing	17 years	Taungoo
U Kyaw San	Unknown	Insein
U Mying Naing	25 years	Thayet
U Doe Htaung	7 years	Mandalay
U Toe Po	7 years	Thayawady
U Nine Nine	21 years	Insein
U Than Nyein (Dr.)	7 years	Insein
Daw May Win Myint (Dr.)	7 years	Insein
U Sein Hla Oo	20 years	Myitkyina
U Khin Maung Swe	7 years	Myingyan

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information he has collated about the number of British tourists who visited Burma in each of the past two financial years. [97252]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is our policy not to encourage tourism to Burma. We have drawn to the attention of travel organisations the views of the Burmese democratic opposition that tourism is inappropriate at present due to the political and human rights situation there. As part of this policy, Burmese tourism officials are included in the European Union visa ban and asset freeze.

HMG does not have figures for the final destination of those who travel from the UK. Official Burmese figures, which are often unreliable, indicate that 8,424 UK visitors passed through Rangoon in 2001 and 8,620 in 2002. However these figures include all categories of visitors, including UK passport holders of Burmese origin who are visiting family members.

Capita

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to his answer of 9 January, *Official Report*, column 351W, on Capita, if he will give the *(a)* start and finish date, *(b)* value, *(c)* evaluation mechanism for successful delivery and *(d)* penalty charges for failure to deliver for each contract; whether penalty charges have been incurred; what the service level agreements were; what the contract numbers were; and if he will make a statement. [97339]

Mr. Rammell: Our two contracts with Capita relate to staff recruitment services. One is for the recruitment of administrative assistants (contract PC-R 1/00)and the other for the recruitment of specialist staff (contract PC-R 2/00). The value of the contracts over their lifetime is estimated at £917,000 and £1.06 million respectively, £861,000 of which is taken up by expenditure on advertising.

Both contracts commenced on 1 November 2000 and will end on 31 October 2003. They comprise a number of separate recruitment campaigns and we routinely assess performance after each one has been completed. No arrangements for penalty charges are included in the contracts, but we have the option to terminate them if the company were to default on its commitments. Performance levels to date have been satisfactory.

Chechnya

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Russian Government on the future referendum to take place in Chechnya. [97538]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not, as yet, raised this issue with the Russian government. However, we do intend to discuss the matter at official level during the next round of our human rights dialogue with Russia, scheduled for early March.

Commonwealth Institute

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who the *(a)* directors and *(b)* trustees of the Commonwealth Institute are. [96882]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since January 2000 the affairs of the Commonwealth Institute have been conducted by a charitable company limited by guarantee: Charity Registration Number 1078736; Company Registration Number 3736792 (England and Wales).

The Trustees of the Charity, who are also the Directors of the Company, are Miss Judith Hanratty,

Right Hon. Lord Fellowes,

HE The High Commissioner for Barbados Mr. Peter Simmons,

HE The High Commissioner for Malta Dr. George Bonello Du Puis,

HE The High Commissioner for New Zealand, Right Hon. Paul East QC (appointed 7 December 2000, resigned 14 February 2002),

HE The High Commissioner for New Zealand Hon. Cedric Russell Marshall,

HE The High Commissioner for Nigeria Dr. Christopher Kolade,

HE The High Commissioner for the United Republic of Tanzania Mr Hassan Omargumbo Kibelloh,

HE Right Hon. Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary General,

Mr Algy Cluff,

Mrs. Helen Robinson OBE.

Computer Fraud

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many cases of computer *(a)* hacking, *(b)* fraud and *(c)* theft his Department recorded in 2001–02; and on how many occasions computer systems have been illegally accessed by computer hackers (i) within and (ii) outside his Department. [97559]

Mr. Rammell: The number of cases of *(a)* computer hacking detected was three in 2001 and one in 2002. All of these were perpetrated by persons outside the Department.

No cases of *(b)* fraud have been detected in 2001 or 2002.

The number of cases of *(c)* computer theft detected was three in 2001 and none in 2002. The perpetrators are unknown.

Kimberley Process

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to recommend the introduction of certification schemes similar to the Kimberley Process for *(a)* timber and *(b)* coltan. [92054]

Mr. Rammell: There are no firm plans to introduce arrangements similar to the Kimberley Process to regulate the trade in timber or coltan. It is not yet clear that something akin to the Kimberley Process, which was developed for a very specific purpose and has only been implemented since 1 January, could be effective in preventing the exploitation of other natural resources.

Energy Supplies (Security)

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) which countries he has identified as posing a threat to the security of energy supplies; [92175]

(2) what current international security risks he has identified as posing a threat to energy supplies. [92178]

Mr. Rammell: There are uncertainties in the world oil market, including concerns about supplies from Iraq. However, currently the only loss of supplies is from Venezuela, and OPEC has already announced that it will increase output to help alleviate the shortfall. OPEC has also reaffirmed its commitment to general market stability. In addition, the International Energy Agency stands ready to take action if the need arises—for example, on the occurrence of a significant supply disruption—including co-ordinating a release of oil stocks by its members.

EU Budget Information Company

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to his answer of 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 381W, on EU Budget Information Company, how many officials participate in the management committee on the expenditure of EU information budget funds in candidate countries; how often they meet; and if he will place the agenda and minutes of their meetings in 2002–03 in the Library. [96173]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

The Phare Management Committee is responsible for oversight of EC pre-accession aid programmes. The Information and Communication Programme is one of these and the 2003 financing proposal was agreed at the recent Management Committee meeting on 7 February 2003. One official was present. The Commission will administer this programme, both in Brussels and through its in-country delegations. I will arrange for the agenda of that meeting, and the minutes once they have been ratified, to be placed in the Library. We do not expect the Phare Management Committee to have any further involvement in this programme in the current year.

External Consultancies

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92227]

Mr. Rammell: The cost of consultancy services from external consultants is as follows:

£000

	FCO	*BBC World Service*	*British Council*	*Wilton Park*
1995–96	17,650	n/a	72	8
1996–97	11,800	n/a	459	26
1997–98	15,800	662	1,618	13
1998–99	14,500	499	1,643	3
1999–2000	14,000	242	1,797	4
2000–01	17,900	98	2,397	4
2001–02	20,100	42	2,280	4
2002–03 (Forecast)	23,000	87	1,991	12

The BBC World Service could only provide figures for 1995–96 and 1996–97 at disproportionate cost.

These figures cover the usual consulting roles e.g. for advising on options and feasibility in the initial stages of a project. They exclude the cost of whole projects being implemented by outside consultants e.g. Cap Gemini/ Ernst Young who are main contractors for the installation of the FCO's PRISM project.

So far as the FCO is concerned, the vast majority of expenditure is associated with our major Information Communications Technology (ICT) and Estate construction programmes. Consultants have also advised on legal, financial and personnel issues and provided support in areas where we have skills shortages. Increasing expenditure over the last three years is

associated with the growth of our ICT programme which is being used to support business change. Such projects include FTN, a new global telecommunications network and PRISM, a new integrated management information system covering finance, personnel, procurement and payroll.

Iain Hook

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to receive the official report from the Israeli authorities into the death of Iain Hook on 22 November 2002. [96772]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We understand that an Israeli internal report is almost complete. We have consistently made it clear that the Israeli authorities should provide a full written account of Mr. Hook's death to his family.

International Court

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people *(a)* have been tried at the International Court in The Hague and *(b)* are in custody who will in the near future be put on trial at the International Court; and if he will make a statement. [97533]

Mr. Rammell: The 18 judges (including Mr. Justice Fulford from the UK) of the International Criminal Court were elected on 7 February and they will be sworn in on 11 March. The Prosecutor of the Court is expected to be appointed in April; until then the Court is not able to issue indictments. There have been no trials as yet; neither are there any detainees. We are continuing to work with other States Parties to identify a Prosecutor for this important new institution.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the proposals of the Greek Presidency of the EU for an emergency summit to be convened on Iraq. [96923]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Greek Presidency have called meetings of Foreign Ministers and of heads of Government for 17 February. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary look forward to attending.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many pages of documents the Government passed on to the *(a)* UNMOVIC and *(b)* IAEA inspectorates since 24 September 2002. [96925]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have shared a large amount of information with the UN inspection teams by various means, including paper documentation and through personal briefings. It is not possible to say precisely how many pieces of paper have been passed over without commissioning someone to question people on how many pieces of paper they have given or received.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what discussions he has had with the United Nations regarding their estimates of the number of *(a)* children under five at risk of death, *(b)* mothers and children needing food and *(c)* people needing shelter in the event of a war in Iraq; and if he will make a statement; [97552]

(2) what discussions he has had with aid organisations regarding the possible impact of a war against Iraq on existing food aid deliveries; and if he will make a statement; [97550]

(3) what discussions he has had with Save the Children regarding research they have carried out on the impact of any impending war against Iraq on Iraqi children; and if he will make a statement. [97551]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No decision has been made to take military action against Iraq. As such my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not recently discussed Iraq with the aid organisations.

North Korea

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the risk to international security from North Korea; and what action his Department is undertaking to re-introduce international inspectors to the country. [97089]

Mr. Rammell: We deplore North Korea's recent actions, including the expulsion of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitors from Yongbyon, and the stated intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We have repeatedly made clear that North Korea must re-admit the inspectors and comply with its international obligations in full. We are working closely with the United States and regional partners, and through the IAEA, for a peaceful solution. The IAEA Board of Governors met on 12 February to discuss the matter further.

Organised Crime

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made since the 2002 London Conference on organised crime with the development of an EU wide, co-ordinated approach to tackle arms, drugs and people trafficking. [97490]

Mr. MacShane: At the London Conference the EU reached agreement with the countries of South Eastern Europe and the wider international community on an international strategy (the London Statement) for tackling organised crime in the region. This focused on raising standards, building public support for action against crime, and improving regional cooperation. Each of the countries of the region additionally agreed to take a series of priority measures to deliver this strategy.

The Greek EU Presidency, working closely with the European Commission and EU member states, has put the issue high on their agenda. It will be an important theme at the EU's Thessaloniki summit with Balkan countries in June.

The next EU Presidency (Italy) has clearly indicated its intention to maintain a high priority for this subject.

UN Resolutions

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to update his Department's Table of 1998 of Draft Resolutions in the United Nations Security Council that have been vetoed by Members. [97083]

Mr. Rammell: The table is currently being updated. It will be complete and available on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website by June.

UN Security Council

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on granting India a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; and what steps he is taking in relation to this. [97642]

Mr. Rammell: The UK supports enlargement of the Security Council to a maximum of 24 members, including expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent membership.

We fully support India's candidacy for a permanent seat on the Security Council: the requirement to make their case lies primarily with the aspirants.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the British Government have had with European partners concerning the French Government's invitation to President Mugabe for the Franco-African Summit in Paris on 19–21 February; and if he will make a statement. [96363]

Mr. Rammell: We are in regular contact with our EU partners about this issue. It was discussed at the GAERC on 27 January. It has subsequently been discussed by Permanent Representatives to the EU on 30 January, 5 February and on 12 February. We have argued consistently for the most robust rollover of measures possible, including the travel ban.

HEALTH

Care Homes

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Social Services Inspectorate have required Lancashire county council to close older people's residential care homes. [96742]

Jacqui Smith: Neither the Department nor the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) has required Lancashire county council to close care homes. The decision to close a care home rests with the council or, if it is a privately owned home, the owner of the home.

I have received a number of representations about the situation in Lancashire and I have asked the SSI to keep me updated on any developments or decisions made by the council about the future of the residents involved.

Child Protection

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much funding his Department has allocated in 2003 to advertising for child protection social workers in *(a)* England and *(b)* abroad; and in which countries the advertisements will be placed. [96077]

Jacqui Smith: The Department launched the national social work recruitment campaign in October 2001, backed by funding of £1.5 million. The campaign comprises national advertising, leaflets, posters, local and national public relations activity, a helpline and a website. It is intended to raise the profile of all social work and does not solely focus on child protection. No attempt is being made through the campaign to recruit social workers from abroad.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Canadian Government regarding the recruitment of child protection social workers. [96078]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has not held discussions with the Canadian Government regarding the recruitment of child protection social workers. The recruitment and employment of social workers, whatever their specialism, is the responsibility of individual employers.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent guidance was issued to employment agencies regarding working in local authority social services departments in child protection. [96079]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has not issued guidance.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are in each local authority social services department in England for child protection social workers. [96088]

Jacqui Smith: We do not hold central information on vacancies in each local authority social services department in England for social workers.

A survey undertaken by the employers organisation found that, across all local authority social services departments in England as at 30 September 2001, around 10 per cent. of all field social worker posts were vacant. The rate was slightly higher for children and family field social worker posts, at 11.3 per cent.

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many basic grade social work vacancies there have been in field work teams dealing with child protection work in each local authority area in each year since 1997. [97090]

Jacqui Smith: We do not hold central information on vacancies in each local authority social services department in England for social workers.

A survey undertaken by the employers organisation found that, across all local authority social services departments in England as at 30 September 2001, around 10 per cent. of all field social worker posts were vacant. The rate was slightly higher for children and family field social worker posts, at 11.3 per cent.

The only historical data is for 2000, when the rate was 16.0 per cent.

Children in Care

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he *(a)* has taken and *(b)* is planning to take to encourage children in care to become involved in local community projects. [96121]

Jacqui Smith: The Quality Protects programme, launched in 1998, aims to ensure better life chances for children in care and £885 million has been provided over five years to support the objectives of the programme.

The Government want to see improved opportunities for vulnerable young people in local community projects involving leisure, the creative arts and sporting activities. The Government encourage councils to form partnerships between the Quality Protects programme and other local projects in the community to make sure that this happens. A key Quality Protects principle is to listen and take account of the views of young people in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services.

Children Trusts

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many bids he has received from local authorities to become pilot projects for children trusts. [97139]

Jacqui Smith: The deadline for applications from local authorities to become pilot children's trusts is 31March 2003 and so we have yet to receive any formal applications.

There has, however, been a significant level of interest shown at all three of the information conferences on children's trusts that we held for local authorities and their partner agencies in December 2002 and January 2003.

Delayed Discharges

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the response to his consultation into delayed discharge; and what aspects of the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Bill were altered to take into consideration the views of those who submitted their views to the consultation. [97144]

Jacqui Smith: An analysis of responses to the consultation document was carried out and a summary of this has been placed in the Library. I have taken these responses fully into account when developing policy on delayed discharge.

Medium-Secure Units

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients are awaiting transfer from high security hospitals to medium-secure units; and what proportion of these patients have been waiting for more than three months. [95904]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 February 2003]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

High secure hospital	*Number of patients awaiting transfer from high secure hospitals to medium secure units*	*Number of patients waiting for transfer for more than three months*
Ashworth	6	6
Broadmoor	22	20
Rampton	10	9

These figures relate to patients for whom an alternative placement has been agreed with a receiving facility and in respect of whom the Home Secretary's consent to a move has been obtained where necessary.

The latest available figure as at September 2002 of the number of patients who have already moved to other secure units from the three high security hospitals under the accelerated discharge programme was 65.

Operation Cancellations (Hull and East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations were cancelled for non-clinical reasons in Hull and the East Riding in each year since 1997; what percentage of operations were cancelled as a proportion of admissions in each year; and what is the national average for the number of operations cancelled for non-clinical reasons. [92848]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is available in the Library.

Secure Mental Health Beds

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were available in secure mental health wards in *(a)* West Sussex, *(b)* East Sussex and *(c)* Surrey in each of the last five years. [96098]

Ms Blears: The information requested is not collected centrally at this level. Statistics on the availability of beds in secure units are collected yearly on a national basis. Figures for the south east region are shown in the table.

This information is available on the website (www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity/statistics).

Ward classification: mental illness (excluding residential care) secure unit—south east region

Year	*Available beds*	*Occupied beds*	*Percentage occupancy*
1996–97	222	180	81.1
1997–98	243	227	93.4
1998–99	251	225	89.5
1999–2000	240	224	93.4
2000–01	281	258	91.7

Social Workers

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many social workers working with vulnerable children have been dismissed in each of the last five years in *(a)* Haringey social services, *(b)* Ealing social services, *(c)* Brent social services and *(d)* Enfield social services. [96042]

Jacqui Smith: It is the responsibility of the individual local authority, as the employer, to maintain records relating to their employment policies, procedures and actions in relation to dismissals. The Department does not collect data centrally.

Written Questions

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many named day written parliamentary questions tabled between 15 October 2002 and 5 February 2003 received *(a)* a substantive answer on the named day and *(b)* a holding answer; [97816]

(2) how many named day written questions were tabled between 15 October 2002 and 5 February 2003; how many that received a holding answer were given a substantive answer *(a)* within three days, *(b)* within seven days, *(c)* within 14 days, *(d)* within 28 days and *(e)* over 28 days. [97795]

Ms Blears: The Department received 803 named day written parliamentary questions between 15 October 2002 and 5 February. 258 were answered by the day named, 13 have yet to be answered, and 532 have been replied to substantively after being given a holding answer. The further breakdown requested is shown in the table.

Interval (in calendar days after the holding answer) within which the substantive answer was given	*Number of PQs*
0–3	212
4–7	157
8–14	55
15–28	62
Over 28	46
Total	532

PRIME MINISTER

Anglo-French Aircraft Carrier

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his announcement in Le Touquet, how his plan for France and the United Kingdom to have one aircraft carrier permanently available will work in practice. [97177]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom already maintains at least one of its three aircraft carriers (CVS) available for operations at any time.

One of the aims of closer UK-French carrier co-operation is to maximise the availability of aircraft carriers from European nations. The two countries intend to achieve this by exploring mechanisms for harmonising activity cycles. For example, it would be sensible to ensure that major maintenance periods were planned, where possible, so that the maximum number of assets (both hulls and air groups) could be available at any one time.

A series of joint working groups will explore how best to achieve this aim. These discussions, which have already begun, are expected to continue as the new UK and French carriers are brought in to service.

Chequers

Nick Harvey: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what have been the running costs of Chequers in each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement; [95527]

(2) how many *(a)* full time, *(b)* part time and *(c)* temporary staff have been employed at Chequers in each of the last five years; if he will list their principal duties; what percentage of the total budget for the running costs of Chequers has been made up by the annual grant from public funds in each of the past five years; if he will list the dates he has been in residence at Chequers in each of the past two years; and to what uses Chequers has been put when he has not been in residence. [95526]

The Prime Minister: Chequers was established under the Chequers Estate Acts 1917 and 1958 and is administered by independent trustees who receive an annual grant from public funds towards its maintenance and to cover civilian staff employed at Chequers in accordance with the Acts. In the last five years the grant has been:

Year	*£*
1997–98	259,218
1998–99	317,645
1999–2000	326,661
2000–01	327,183
2001–02	393,018

The Government have agreed to contribute 50 per cent. of the cost of a new roof at Chequers and the grant from 1998–99 onwards includes £50,000 per annum towards the roof fund. The grant for 2001–02 includes £25,000 towards urgent heritage repairs.

The Government also pay for service staff stationed at Chequers. Over the same period expenditure-net of VAT refunds-has been:

Year	*£*
1997–99	215,191
1998–99	232,570
1999–2000	270,186
2000–01	285,592
2001–02	241,448

Responsibility for staff at Chequers rests with the administrative trustees of the Chequers trust. The annual grant is not a fixed percentage of running costs. As a private trust the accounts are confidential.

My family and I have used Chequers in a variety of ways, both official and private, consistent with the wishes of the donor, Lord Lee, and the Chequers Estate Acts.

Union Celebrations

Mr. Swire: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the union of England and Scotland in 2007. [94270]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answers given to him by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport today.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Child Poverty

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will set a universal indicator of child poverty to be used by the Government. [94637]

Malcolm Wicks: We launched Measuring child poverty: a consultation document in April 2002. We will publish preliminary conclusions from the consultation in the spring. Further technical work, with experts in the field will be necessary before finalising the detail of any new measure.

Child Support, Pension and Social Security Act

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how much money in total has been withheld by way of retention or kept back by way of deprivation in relation to orders made pursuant to sections 62 to 66 of the Child Support, Pension and Social Security Act 2000; and what the total administrative costs incurred through such orders are; [91012]

(2) when he will answer the question of 15 January 2003 from the hon. Member for Woking, concerning moneys withheld by deprivation; [95069]

(3) when he will answer the question of 15 January 2003 from the hon. Member for Woking concerning breaches of community orders. [95074]

Malcolm Wicks: The community sentence and benefits measures aim to encourage greater compliance with community orders. Therefore, sanctions only apply when people receiving the relevant benefit do not comply with their orders. The provisions were introduced in four pilot areas from 15 October 2001. A full and independent evaluation is being conducted which will inform any decision on future national implementation.

As at 15 January 2003, the cost to the Department of administering the Community Sentences and Benefits pilots running in four Probation Service areas was £403,736, of which approximately £262,000 relates to one-off start-up costs, including changes to the national computer systems.

Information on the total money withheld as a result of benefit sanctions following a breach of community order is not available. Information of the number of people who have lost benefit as a result of breaching their community orders, and the average weekly loss of benefit, is in the table. The figures for the average loss of weekly benefit should be used only as a guide to loss of benefit for individual offenders.

Benefit	*Number of individuals*	*Average weekly loss of benefit (£)*
Income Support	230	15.28
Jobseeker's Allowance	320	[1]48.29
Total	550	—

[1] After having a sanction imposed, 90 people have made successful hardship claims. This reduces the amount of benefit they have lost. If these hardship claims are taken into account, the average overall reduction in benefit is £33.19 per person per week.

Notes:

1. Data are based on clerical returns received at the DWP Information Centre by 13 January 2003, and relate to the period from 15 October 2001 to 6 December 2002.
2. Average weekly loss of benefit has been calculated on an individual recipient basis using the Jobseeker's Allowance payment system (JSAPS) and the income support computer system (ISCS).
3. There are four probation service pilot areas: Derbyshire, Hertfordshire, Teesside and West Midlands.

Source:

DWP Information Centre: CS Stats forms 1 and 2 (Withdrawal of Benefits Pilot).

Pensions (Protected Rights)

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions under what circumstances a member of a pension scheme can benefit from the protected rights part of the pension fund before the age of 60. [97319]

Mr. McCartney: The only circumstances in which a member can benefit from the protected rights part of their pension fund before age 60, is where the trustees or managers of an occupational scheme are satisfied that the member has a life expectancy of 12 months or less. However, the Green Paper, "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement" (Cm 5677) published on 17 December 2003, includes a proposal to lower the age restriction on protected rights so that they may be taken at the same time as other rights. On the same date, the Government published "Simplifying the taxation of pensions: increasing choice and flexibility for all" which proposes to extend to personal/stakeholder pensions the provision allowing benefits to be taken early in the case of serious ill health.

Benefit Claimants

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how his Department will treat benefit claimants who fail to respond to requests to inform the Department what method of payment they have chosen. [92625]

Mr. Oliver Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on how his Department will treat those benefit claimants who fail to respond to requests to inform the Department about the method of payment they have chosen. [93585]

Malcolm Wicks: The Department is contacting customers and providing them with information (including letters and leaflets), which clearly sets out the account options as part of the move to Direct Payment. Customers will then be able to consider the options available and choose the account that best meets their needs and circumstances. They will be asked to provide

details of their chosen account so that the Department can begin to pay their benefit or pensions by Direct Payment.

Over the next two years orderbooks will be phased out and Direct Payment will become the normal method of paying benefits and pensions from April 2003. From 2005 orderbooks will no longer be an option and customers will have to be paid by an alternative method.

It has always been recognised that there will be some customers who are unwilling or unable to use any of the banking options or the Post Office card account. For these people we are currently exploring the options available to ensure they receive their benefit at outlets which will include the Post Office.

Benefit/Pensions

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate, for each major benefit and pension, how much of the expenditure of his Department is received by each decile within the UK income distribution; and if he will make a statement. [97355]

Mr. McCartney: Such information as is available is presented for Great Britain in the table.

Proportion of expenditure on major benefits by equivalised income decile (Great Britain)

Percentage

Benefits/decile	*First*	*Second*	*Third*	*Fourth*	*Fifth*	*Sixth*	*Seventh*	*Eighth*	*Ninth*	*Tenth*
Before housing costs										
Retirement pension and/or MIG	10	14	15	15	12	10	8	6	6	5
Income support	17	32	23	13	7	4	4	1	1	0
Housing benefit	11	23	25	19	9	5	5	2	1	0
Council tax benefit	20	24	21	15	8	5	4	2	1	0
Jobseeker's allowance	38	29	11	8	3	5	3	1	0	0
Disability living allowance	5	6	13	18	17	14	11	8	4	3
Attendance allowance	2	8	13	18	17	16	16	6	3	2
Incapacity benefits	11	15	17	18	13	9	7	5	3	2
Child benefit	11	14	12	11	11	10	9	8	7	7
After housing costs										
Retirement pension and/or MIG	5	13	17	13	12	10	10	7	7	6
Income support	21	38	18	9	5	5	2	1	0	0
Housing benefit	24	33	21	8	6	4	3	1	0	0
Council tax benefit	22	30	21	9	6	5	4	2	1	0
Jobseeker's allowance	52	19	8	7	5	4	2	2	1	0
Disability living allowance	4	5	13	19	16	13	10	10	6	4
Attendance allowance	2	4	12	16	18	15	20	7	4	3
Incapacity benefits	10	16	16	16	13	9	8	6	4	2
Child benefit	12	15	12	12	11	10	9	7	7	6

Notes:

1. The estimates presented show expenditure by equivalised income deciles based on 'Households Below Average Income' (HBAI) for the financial year 2000–01. The series is derived from the Family Resources Survey which does not include Northern Ireland. The latest year for which data are available is 2000–01.
2. The estimates are presented both for income Before Housing Costs (BHC) and for income After Housing Costs (AHC), in line with HBAI conventions. Households are assigned to income deciles according to their income including all benefits.
3. All results are estimates, and may be affected by sampling error, reporting error and any differences between groups in their willingness to respond to the Family Resources Survey. Results are presented as percentages; estimates of total expenditure, by benefit, from this survey may not match actual expenditure.
4. Housing and community charge/council tax benefit figures are total amounts paid to beneficiaries, irrespective of the source of funding. Therefore the figures include benefit spending reimbursed by DWP, spending on rent rebates financed within local authorities' Housing Revenue Accounts, benefit spending financed from local authorities' general funds, and benefit spending within the National Asylum Support Service budget.
5. Retirement pension and MIG are shown together as the latter may be misreported as the former, in the Family Resources Survey.
6. In accordance with HBAI methodology, no allowance has been made for any extra costs facing disabled people, when assigning their households to an income decile.

Child Benefit

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the proportion of child benefit decisions that were correct in the last five years; when he started setting targets on child benefit accuracy; and what the targets are. [92626]

Malcolm Wicks: Performance targets for benefit delivery and accuracy have been set for many years. The current Child Benefit Centre business plan includes an accuracy target of 98 per cent. for new claims.

Payment accuracy figures for child benefit show a consistently high level of achievement by Child Benefit Centre.

Year	*Payment accuracy*[3]
1997–98[1]	99
1998–99[1]	100
1999–2000[2]	98
2000–01[2]	98
2001–02[2]	99

[1] Figures for 1997–99 reflect the finding of the Chief Adjudicator Officer, who was responsible for reporting on standards of decision making in the Department. Following introduction of new Decision-Making and Appeals (DMA) legislation in 1999, the function of the Chief Adjudication Officer ceased.

[2] Child Benefit Centre findings.

[3] Payment accuracy refers to the payment of the correct amount of benefit to the correct person.

In addition, under DMA legislation, the Secretary of State now has a legal obligation to report on the standards of decision making in the Department for Work and Pensions. The Secretary of State's first DMA report was for the year 2000–01. He reported that 57 per cent. of child benefit decisions were correct. For child benefit, this report was concerned only with the decision making process, not with the outcome—accuracy of payment. It is quite possible for there to have been a technical error in the process but for the payment to be entirely correct. This applies with particular regard to evidence, in particular the retention of original documents required by the monitors when checking decisions made on review.

Decisions resulting from such reviews were classed as errors regardless of whether the award itself is correct. Figures for 2001–02 have not yet been reported but indications are that around 77 per cent. of decisions were correct, again reflecting a DMA monitoring specification that concentrated on the process and not on the outcome—payment accuracy. For 2002–03, the DMA monitoring specification closely aligns the process and payment accuracy to give a more realistic indication of decision-making standards. Emerging findings indicate an accuracy level of 99.6 per cent. for 2002–03.

Child Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions which areas are piloting the child support reforms IT system; and of those areas, which are testing cases calculated using the *(a)* existing rules and *(b)* new rules. [91294]

Malcolm Wicks: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Doug Smith to Mr. Steven Webb, dated February 2003:

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in replying to your recent parliamentary question about the Child Support Agency promised a substantive reply from me.

You ask which areas are piloting the child support reforms IT system; and of those areas which are testing cases calculated using the *(a)* existing rules and *(b)* new rules.

All offices which process child maintenance applications now have access to the new IT system. It is being used to process a small proportion of cases on the basis of existing rules. No offices are directly involved in testing the application of the new rules.

Andrew Selous: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many driving licences have been removed from non-resident parents for failure to pay child support to parents with care since this measure was introduced; and what the date was in each case. [94430]

Malcolm Wicks: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Doug Smith to Mr. Andrew Selous, dated February 2003:

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in replying to your recent parliamentary question about the Child Support Agency promised a substantive reply from the Chief Executive.

You ask how many driving licences have been removed from non-resident parents for failure to pay child support to parents with care since this measure was introduced; and what the date was in each case.

There have been 2 non-resident parents who have been disqualified from driving for failure to pay child support. The intention of the relevant legislation is however to use the existence of this power to encourage more parents to meet this responsibility with out a court appearance. I believe that it is having this beneficial effect.

Child Support Agency (Scotland)

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many cases are being dealt with by the Child Support Agency; and how many cases were received in each of the last five years in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Fife. [93556]

Malcolm Wicks: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from D. Smith to Mr. J. MacDougall, dated February 2003:

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in replying to your recent parliamentary question about the Child Support Agency promised a substantive reply from the Chief Executive.

You ask how many cases are being dealt with by the Child Support Agency; and how many cases were received in each of the last five years in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Fife.

The number of cases currently being dealt with by the Child Support Agency is 1,349,213.

I'm afraid I do not have precise numbers with relation to the amount of cases received in the last five years in Scotland and Fife. My best estimate is:

Year to 31 March	*Scotland*	*Fife*
1999	43,000	1,400
2000	32,500	850
2001	31,000	800
2002	31,000	500

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93047]

Malcolm Wicks: The Department treats very seriously any suspicion of misuse of computer systems by staff and takes firm action in any cases that arise. All such cases, if proven, result in disciplinary action being taken against the offender leading to either a disciplinary penalty or dismissal. In addition over the last five years three members of staff have been prosecuted for computer misuse offences.

The table provides details of the number of proven cases by category in each year. All these cases have resulted in disciplinary action being taken. Machinery of Government changes make year on year comparisons difficult.

Computer misuse

Category	*Number of proven cases*				
	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Unauthorised access to computer systems	30	72	56	86	29
Use of unauthorised software	0	8	3	5	3
Manipulation of computer systems	0	7	0	14	2

1. The figures provided for 2002–03 cover the year to date and represent proven cases only. Several investigations are ongoing, but have not been included, as the results are not known yet.
2. Only the figures for 2002–03 relate to the Department for Work and Pensions. Previous figures relate to the Department of Social Security.

Definition of Categories

Unauthorised access to computer systems.
This is generally where staff access records and there is no genuine business need to do so.

Use of unauthorised software.
This includes the loading and use of non-departmental approved software onto departmental systems. This could include games or other programmes downloaded from the internet or brought in from home.

Manipulation of computer systems.
Where the perpetrator has manipulated computer programmes or data dishonestly e.g. to alter or substitute records, to destroy or suppress records, or to duplicate or create spurious records.

Demography

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what recent discussions he has had with European colleagues regarding a EU-wide approach to problems arising from changes in the average age of the population of Europe; [88874]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with European colleagues regarding pension reforms; and what issues were addressed and what conclusions were reached. [88876]

Malcolm Wicks: Whenever possible, we take the opportunity to exchange views with European Union counterparts on the challenges of ageing populations to employment strategy, social protection and social inclusion. The principal discussions in this area have been on the effect of demographic changes on the sustainability of pension systems where we regularly take the opportunity to exchange views with European Union counterparts on respective national approaches to pensions issues. The Lisbon European Council in March 2000 identified this as a significant issue in the context of its programme for economic reform. The United Kingdom has contributed to the voluntary exchange of information and good practice by member States within a framework of common objectives covering adequacy, financial sustainability and modernisation agreed during the Swedish Presidency of the EU.

As part of this process the European Commission publiched a Draft Joint report on Adequate and Sustainable Pensions in December 2002 based on national contributions. The draft Joint Report is due for adoption at the Employment and Social Afairs and Ecofin Councils on 6 and 7 March 2003, prior to presentation to Heads of Government at the Spring Council.

Departmental Budget

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the increase in his Department's budget in each year since 1980–81, in real terms; and if he will make a statement. [96814]

Mr. McCartney: The Department for Work and Pensions came into being on 1 April 2001. Consequently, there are no comparable figures prior to this date. The final provision for 2002–03 has yet to receive parliamentary approval and therefore a comparison with expenditure for 2001–02 cannot be made. The current expenditure plans of the Department for Work and Pensions are contained in Tables 1 to 11 of the Departmental Report, "The Government Expenditure Plans 2002–03 to 2003–04" (Command 5424).

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many applicants for disability living allowance were *(a)* granted on first application and *(b)* successful on review in the Orkney and Shetland constituency in each of the last five years. [96759]

Maria Eagle: The number of disability living allowance claims which were *(a)* granted on first application and *(b)* successful on review in the Orkney and Shetland constituency in the last five years, is detailed in the table.

Thousands

	Granted on initial claim	*Granted on review*
1 September 2001–31 August 2002	[1]0.1	[2]—
1 September 2000–31 August 2001	[1]0.1	[2]—
1 September 1999–31 August 2000	[1]0.1	[2]—
1 September 1998–31 August 1999	[1]0.1	[2]—
1 September 1997–31 August 1998	[1]0.1	[1]0.1

[1] Figures are less than 500 and subject to a high degree of sampling variation and should only be used as a guide to the current situation.
[2] Nil or negligible.

Source:
IAD information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people claim Disability Living Allowance in *(a)* Haltemprice and Howden, *(b)* the East Riding of Yorkshire and *(c)* England; and if he will break down the figures by disabling condition. [97736]

Maria Eagle: Entitlement to DLA is based on the extent to which a severely disabled person requires attention, supervision or watching over by another person and/or has walking difficulties as a result of their disabilities not on a particular diagnosis or condition.

The information requested is contained in the following tables.

Number of DLA recipients in the parliamentary constituency of Haltemprice and Howden by disabling condition as at 31 August 2002

	Thousand
All	*2.2*
Arthritis	0.5
Muscle/Joint/Bone Disease	[1]0.2
Blindness	[1]0.1
Stroke-related	[1]0.1
Learning Difficulty	[1]0.1
Other mental health causes	[1]0.1
Epilepsy	[1]0.1
Malignant Disease	[2]—
Back ailments	[1]0.2
Heart Disease	[1]0.1
Parkinsons Disease	[2]—
Diabetes Mellitus	[1]0.1
Skin diseases	[2]—
Other	0.5

Number of DLA recipients in the East Riding of Yorkshire by disabling condition as at 31 August 2002

	Thousand
All	*12.2*
Arthritis	2.8
Muscle/Joint/Bone Disease	0.9
Blindness	[1]0.3
Stroke-related	[1]0.4
Learning Difficulty	1.3
Other mental health causes	1.0
Epilepsy	[1]0.3
Deafness	[1]0.1
Malignant Disease	[1]0.3
Chest Disease	[1]0.3
Back ailments	1.3
Heart Disease	0.8
Parkinsons Disease	[1]0.1
Diabetes Mellitus	[1]0.2
Renal disorders	[2]—
Skin diseases	[1]0.1
Other	19

Number of DLA recipients in England by disabling condition as at 31 August 2002

	Thousand
All	*1,924.7*
Arthritis	383.0
Muscle/Joint/Bone Disease	154.4
Blindness	49.9
Stroke-related	77.7
Learning Difficulty	196.7
Other mental health causes	254.4
Epilepsy	44.5
Deafness	24.7
Malignant Disease	45.2
Chest Disease	63.0
Back ailments	170.3
Heart Disease	115.7
Parkinsons Disease	11.5
Diabetes Mellitus	37.4

Number of DLA recipients in England by disabling condition as at 31 August 2002

	Thousand
All	*1,924.7*
Renal disorders	8.9
AIDS	6.3
Skin diseases	11.0
Other	270.1

[1] Figures are under 500 and therefore are subject to a high degree of sampling variation and should only be used as a guide to the current situation.
[2] Nil or negligible
Notes:
1. Figures taken from a 5 per cent. sample at 31 August 2002.
2. Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.
Source:
IAD Information Centre

Government Information (Disabled People)

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to improve access to government information about disabled people for organisations in the voluntary sector which have been contracted to deliver *(a)* Workstep, *(b)* Job Broking and *(c)* other programmes under the New Deal for Disabled People. [95702]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Department's statistical publications provide a very wide range of information about disabled people. Arrangements are in place for making additional and more detailed results available on request, subject to restrictions of confidentiality and data quality.

All personal information held in social security records is regarded as confidential, and will not normally be disclosed to third parties without the consent of the person concerned.

We have no plans to change these arrangements.

Greater London Assembly

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what financial assistance his Department gave to the Greater London Assembly in 2002; and for what projects. [95845]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Department for Work and Pensions did not provide any financial assistance to the Greater London Assembly in 2002.

Health and Safety

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what advice Ministers have received from the Health and Safety Commission on the responsibility of company directors for health and safety, as referred to in the DETR document "Revitalising Health and Safety-a strategy statement", of June 2000; and what plans he has to introduce legislation to make this a statutory responsibility. [92097]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Government and the Health and Safety Commission are committed to encouraging boards of directors to take responsibility and provide leadership for ensuring that health and safety is properly managed.

The Health and Safety Commission published guidance in July 2001, "Directors' responsibilities for health and safety". The guidance has attracted considerable interest among private, public and voluntary sector organisations.

The HSC is carrying out research to evaluate the effectiveness of the guidance in helping to promote greater board responsibility for health and safety. Preliminary findings reveal that the Government and HSC strategy together with a number of other factors are encouraging boards to take a greater interest and responsibility for health and safety. HSC has undertaken to report to Ministers in summer 2003 on the effectiveness of this strategy, the success of the voluntary approach and the need for further legislation.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many successful new claims for Incapacity Benefit and its predecessor benefits were made by *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the last 25 years; [94238]

(2) how many new claims for Incapacity Benefit and its predecessor benefits were refused because of inadequate contribution records for *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the last 25 years. [94241]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The available information is in the tables.

The following table shows the IB disallowed at onset figures due to failing the contribution conditions, as a percentage of all new claims.

	New claims to IB	*New claims to IB disallowed at onset*	*Disallowed claims as a proportion of total new claims to IB (%)*
13 April 1995 to 31 March 1996	1,054,340	382,445	36.3
1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997	1,062,815	439,645	41.4
1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998	1,012,980	435,095	43.0
1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999	930,000	398,605	42.9
1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000	907,595	393,585	43.4
1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001	873,490	374,640	42.9
1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002	823,650	350,890	42.6

Notes:
1. Disallowed at onset figures may still result in an award of IB credits.
2. CDU new claims figures may not result in an award of benefit or credits, as they include "accident declarations" etc.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest five.
4. Figures are not collected by gender.

Sources:
1. Figures for claims disallowed at onset (due to failing the contribution conditions) are 100 per cent. counts of the Incapacity Benefit computer system.
2. Figures for new claims to Incapacity Benefit are from DWP Central Data Unit, 100 per cent. counts of all claims received.

Sickness Benefit, Invalidity Benefit and Incapacity Benefit new claims by gender

Period	*Total*	*Men*	*Women*
7 June 1976 to 4 June 1977	9,182,000	6,691,000	2,491,000
6 June 1977 to 3 June 1978	9,982,000	7,131,000	2,851,000
5 June 1978 to 2 June 1979	10,490,000	7,279,000	3,210,000
4 June 1979 to 31 May 1980[1]	9,208,000	6,165,000	3,043,000
2 June 1980 to 30 May 1981	7,465,000	4,872,000	2,593,000
1 June 1981 to 29 May 1982	6,981,000	4,454,000	2,527,000
5 April 1982 to 2 April 1983	5,813,000	3,665,000	2,149,000
4 April 1983 to 31 March 1984[2]	1,141,000	794,000	347,000
2 April 1984 to 30 March 1985	1,094,000	758,000	336,000
1 April 1985 to 5 April 1986	1,137,000	778,000	359,000
7 April 1986 to 4 April 1987	737,000	506,000	231,000
6 April 1987 to 2 April 1988	810,000	518,000	292,000
4 April 1988 to 1 April 1989	805,000	509,000	296,000
3 April 1989 to 31 March 1990	839,000	540,000	299,000
2 April 1990 to 30 March 1991	850,000	562,000	288,000
1 April 1991 to 4 April 1992	926,000	617,000	309,000
6 April 1992 to 3 April 1993	918,000	606,000	312,000
5 April 1993 to 2 April 1994	904,000	588,000	315,000
4 April 1994 to 12 April 1995	978,000	635,000	343,000
1 March 1995 to 29 February 1996[3]	874,000	565,000	308,000
1 March 1996 to 28 February 1997	836,000	540,000	296,000
1 March 1997 to 28 February 1998	804,000	511,000	293,000
1 March 1998 to 28 February 1999	740,000	457,000	283,000
1 March 1999 to 29 February 2000	688,000	434,000	254,000
1 March 2000 to 28 February 2001	690,000	436,000	255,000
1 March 2001 to 28 February 2002	642,000	403,000	239,000

Notes:
1. From September 1980, spells of less than four days ceased to be classed as a claim to benefit except under certain circumstances.
2. Statutory Sick Pay was introduced on 6 April 1983 for the first eight weeks of illness, this was extended to the first 28 weeks of illness from 6 April 1986.
3. Incapacity Benefit replaced Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit from 13 April 1995.
4. Figures include 'Credits Only' cases.
5. Figures include claims that have subject to linking. Linking provisions exist to protect people who qualified for Incapacity Benefit under their previous contribution conditions where they move into work and return to benefit within the linking period.
6. Figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

Sources:
1. 2 per cent. sample of the Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit caseload to 1977–78.
2. 1 per cent. sample of the Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit caseload to 1995.
3. From April 1995 a 5 per cent. extract from the Incapacity Benefit computer system, which excludes a small number of cases held clerically.

Notes:
1. Figures are not collected by gender.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest five.

Source:
100 per cent. count of the Incapacity Benefit computer system.

Independent Schools (Health and Safety)

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps are taken to ensure that asbestos surveys are carried out by experts and that their safety guidance is found in independent schools. [94386]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 2002, which have recently been made, will from 21 May 2004, place a new duty on those who manage asbestos in non-domestic premises. This includes independent schools. It requires them: to assess whether those premises contain asbestos; to assess the risk from asbestos; and to take action to manage the risk from asbestos. The duty does not specifically require a survey. However, if duty holders decide, as part of their assessment and management process, that a survey is necessary, and that they need independent expertise, the Health and Safety Executive publishes guidance on verifying the competence of a surveyor.

Although the specific duty to manage regulation does not come into force until 21 May 2004, employers have for many years, had a general duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to protect employees and others from the risks posed by asbestos.

Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the estimated cost is of a case-law change exercise in *(a)* correcting Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit records and *(b)* notifying claimants; and if he will make a statement. [95512]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information is not available. The cost of correcting Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit records following a change in the interpretation of the law by a Social Security Commissioner or the courts can vary greatly depending on the nature of the change and the number of people affected by the change.

Maternal Support

Andrew Selous: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent assessment he has made of the financial support available to women with children under 3 years. [97611]

Malcolm Wicks: Women with children under three are entitled to Child Benefit provided they are the main carer. In addition, there is a wide range of benefits available to women with children under three, depending on their individual circumstances.

New Deal

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people on the *(a)* New Deal for Young People and *(b)* the New Deal for 25 Plus have had their jobseeker's allowance reduced in each year by *(a)* two weeks, *(b)* four weeks, and *(c)* 26 weeks; and whether anyone has suffered more than one 26 week sanction. [91977]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The information requested is not available. We only record the total number of sanctions imposed, not the number of people sanctioned.

A breakdown of the length of sanctions imposed is not available, as the data requires further work to improve its validity and reliability. Officials have begun work to provide more detailed and robust information on the sanction regime in the future.

New Deal for Disabled People

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many disabled people found jobs through the New Deal for Disabled People in *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002 in (i) Scotland and (ii) Fife; how many of these people are still in employment; and what plans he has to review the effectiveness of the service. [93564]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) is the first national programme designed specifically to help people with health conditions and disabilities move into and keep jobs. A comprehensive programme of evaluation is in place to assess its effectiveness. Reports on different elements of the evaluation will be published between early 2003 and 2004; a series of synthesis reports will bring together the available evidence at various points during the evaluation programme.

After a slow start, the performance of job brokers in Scotland has improved significantly. In support of this, a recent exercise was conducted to increase coverage and 20 organisations are now involved with the delivery of NDDP in Scotland, ensuring greater choice and availability to customers. In the financial year to April 2002, there were 44 authorised job entries in Scotland. By the end of November'2002, this figure had increased to 479 (a percentage increase of 91 per cent.). The available information is in the table.

NDDP performance in Scotland

	July 2001 to December 2001	*January 2002 to November 2002*	*Total*
Numbers entering employment	29	595	624
Numbers sustaining employment[2]	n/a	61	61

Notes:

1. Information is not available broken down by local authority or Government office region.
2. Data for sustained employment (defined as remaining in paid work for 26 weeks out of a 39-week period) was not collected until January 2002.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to the Speaker's Statement of 20 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 645, whether he has reviewed his Department's handling of parliamentary questions; and if he will make a statement. [91746]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have, with my Permanent Secretary, reviewed arrangements for handling parliamentary questions. During the last session we answered around 4,000 questions, and although there can be no absolute safeguard against error, we are satisfied that we have robust arrangements in place to ensure we discharge our obligations to Parliament.

Pensions

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the cost of raising the basic state pension to the level of the minimum income guarantee; and if he will make a statement. [97359]

Mr. McCartney: If the maximum rate payable of the basic state pension was increased to the level of the minimum income guarantee and all other payments increased proportionately, we estimate that this would cost in the region of £8.3 billion in 2003–04.

Under this proposal the poorest pensioners are no better off. The increase in the basic state pension is completely offset by a withdrawal of income related benefits. The biggest gainers are better off pensioners.

Notes:

1. Figures are in 2002–03 price terms, rounded to the nearest £100 million.

2. The estimate takes into account offsetting savings in income related benefits. Income related benefit offsets are calculated using the DWP Policy Simulation Model 2003–04.

3. For modelling purposes, Pension Credit is assumed to be in place throughout 2003–04. In fact, Pension Credit will begin in October 2003.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the annual cost of increasing the basic state pension by the rate of average earnings growth for each of the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [97364]

Mr. McCartney: The information requested is set out in the table.

As a result of measures introduced since 1997, virtually all pensioner households are better off than they would have been with an earnings link in the basic state pension.

This year the Government are spending an extra £6 billion in real terms on pensioners as a result of policies introduced since 1997. This includes £2.5 billion more on the poorest third of pensioners. This is three times more than an earnings link since 1998 would have given them.

Estimated cost of increasing the basic state pension by average earnings from April 2004

£

Year	Cost
2003–04	340 million
2004–05	900 million
2005–06	1.4 billion
2006–07	1.9 billion
2007–08	2.5 billion
2008–09	3.1 billion
2009–10	3.7 billion
2010–11	4.4 billion
2011–12	5 billion
2012–13	5.7 billion

Notes:

1. Figures are in 2002–03 price terms rounded to the nearest £100 million, except 2003–04 which is rounded to the nearest £10 million.
2. The estimates take into account offsetting savings in income-related benefits. Income-related benefit offsets are calculated using the DWP policy simulation model.
3. The maximum rate payable of the basic state pension is assumed to increase by average earnings and all other payments proportionately.
4. Average earnings assumptions are consistent with the pre-Budget report assumptions.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the cost of increasing the basic state pension to the level of the minimum income guarantee for those *(a)* 75 and above and *(b)* above 80, net of savings in means-tested benefits and additional income tax revenue. [97380]

Mr. McCartney: Increasing the basic state pension for older pensioners would not target resources on those who are most in need. While it is true that older pensioners tend to be poorer on average, income inequality is far more pronounced across the whole pensioner population than between pensioners of different ages. For example, the median net income of the richest fifth of pensioner couples is around four times that of the poorest fifth.

If the basic state pension was increased to the level of the minimum income guarantee for pensioners aged 75 and over in 2003–04, we estimate that the increase in public expenditure could be around £2.9 billion. This is calculated on the generous assumption that consequent savings in other benefits and any additional tax yield are channelled back into the basic state pension.

If the basic state pension were increased to the level of the minimum income guarantee for pensioners aged 80 and over in 2003–04, we estimate that the increase in public expenditure could be around £1.7 billion. This is calculated on the generous assumption that consequent savings in other benefits and any additional tax yield are channelled back into the basic state pension.

Notes:

1. Estimates are in cash terms for Great Britain and are rounded to the nearest £100 million.
2. The estimate takes account of offsetting savings in income related benefits and additional tax yield. Income-related benefit offsets are calculated using the Department for Work and Pensions Policy Simulation Model for 2003–04. Additional tax yield is calculated by the Inland Revenue based upon the Survey of Personal Incomes 2000–01, projected to 2003–04.
3. Calculations assume the maximum rate payable of the basic state pension is increased to the level of the minimum income guarantee and all other payments proportionately.
4. For modelling purposes, pension credit is assumed to be in place throughout 2003–04. In fact, pension credit will begin in October 2003.
5. For modelling purposes we have assumed that the savings reward threshold remains unchanged.

Source:

Department for Work and Pensions calculations.

Benefit Fraud Hotline

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many calls the National Benefit Fraud Hotline received in each month since January 1997; [92503]

(2) how many calls were made to the National Benefit Fraud Hotline in each year since 1997. [92504]

Malcolm Wicks: The information is in the table.

Calls received by the National Benefit Fraud Hotline, January 1997-December 2002

Month	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
January	17,981	17,206	13,925	14,272	17,340	18,621
February	27,075	15,780	13,798	19,285	18,191	15,871
March	27,073	15,345	16,901	23,118	28,093	18,199
April	18,563	19,007	11,996	12,815	17,261	16,403
May	19,272	13,149	11,303	21,674	18,461	17,355
June	16,272	13,692	13,415	18,212	14,086	12,987
July	18,808	15,512	10,491	17,440	13,360	16,675
August	14,755	11,104	10,336	20,289	14,503	11,985
September	16,236	13,694	12,971	15,851	25,001	13,511
October	13,202	12,805	9,291	13,980	21,363	14,280
November	11,770	14,285	14,683	15,243	19,535	11,578
December	10,829	12,160	10,906	9,073	9,738	7,781
Total	211,836	179,736	156,014	207,251	222,932	181,247

Note:

Figures include calls received by the Call Centre Bureau, which since May 2000 has been contracted to answer calls outside normal working hours when the main hotline unit is closed.

Source:

National Benefit Fraud Hotline

Tobacco Smoke

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what percentage of workers reported that their workplace was smoke-free in 2001; [96308]

(2) how many workers in England and Wales have been exposed to second-hand tobacco smoke in the workplace *(a)* regularly and *(b)* occasionally in each year since 1997. [96309]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Department does not hold data on worker exposure to tobacco smoke in the way requested. In a 2001 survey on smoking behaviour and attitudes undertaken by the Office for National Statistics, 47 per cent. of the workers questioned said that there was a ban on smoking in their workplace. This survey also revealed that 38 per cent. of workers had smoking restricted to designated areas in their workplace, and 6 per cent. of workers worked alone. Nine per cent. of workers in this survey reported that there were no smoking restrictions at all in their workplace.

Top-up Fees

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment his Department has made of the likely effect of the proposed introduction of university top-up fees on the pension contributions of those under 40 years of age. [95648]

Mr. McCartney: Student loans are repaid on an income contingent basis, which means that the amount repaid is affordable and does not prevent graduates from making other investments such as contributions to pension schemes.

We are committed to encouraging people to consider their pension saving options early. Each person needs to decide where the balance between current and future needs lies for them. There will be times in many people's lives when they cannot afford both to contribute to a pension and meet their current needs, but it is important that people save when they can afford to do so. That is why the Green Paper "Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement" (Cm 5677), published on 17 December 2002, sets out the Government's proposals to work with employers and the financial services industry to provide:

A simple framework to help people understand their choices:

Financial education and awareness to navigate the system, including access to generic financial advice for the mass market;

Personalised information tailored to individual circumstances, so people can make rational choices and a choice of suitable products.

In addition, the Sandler review recommended a suite of tightly regulated products, including a pension product that could be sold through a simplified sales process.

On 5 February 2003, the Government issued a consultation document on the design specification for these products.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what sources of funding will be used after the 2003–04 financial year to continue projects that have been funded by the Windfall Tax. [93999]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The continuing funding for the welfare-to-work initiatives, previously funded by the Windfall Tax, formed part of the 2002 Spending Review settlement for the Department for Work and Pensions.

Workplace Health and Safety

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his answer of 7 January, *Official Report*, column 10W, on workplace health and safety, on what basis the Department for Work and Pensions was able to set public service agreement targets on health and safety. [95011]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Department's PSA targets for improving workplace health and safety are made up of the intermediate targets agreed by the Government and Health and Safety Commission (HSC) in 2000, as part of the Revitalising Health and Safety strategy. These require the Health and Safety Commission and Executive (HSC/E) by 2004 to achieve:

A 5 per cent. reduction of the incidence rate of fatal and major injury accidents;

A 15 per cent. reduction of the number of working days lost per 100,000 workers from work related injury and ill health; and

A 10 per cent. reduction of the incidence rate of cases of work-related health.

In developing the targets, HSE took account of responses to an earlier public consultation on development of a national occupational health strategy (Securing Health Together), forecast changes in the labour market and HSC's experience in developing outcome targets for certain industry sectors.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Brownfield Sites

Llew Smith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the impact of the requirements of the water framework directive upon the cost of clean-up of brownfield land for re-use in his sustainable communities plan. [96928]

Mr. McNulty: The Government do not consider that there will necessarily be any impact on the clean-up costs of previously developed land arising from the water framework directive. The standard for clean-up under both the contaminated land provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the planning system is the removal of unacceptable risk, so as to make a site suitable for its existing and future uses respectively. This will ensure that all receptors of potential discharges from a site are protected, including humans, surface and groundwater, flora, fauna and buildings. This approach is already advised in draft planning technical advice for England, which was issued for consultation in February 2002 and which will be

finalised later this year. The Government consider that this approach will be consistent with the requirements of the water framework directive as regards water quality.

Broxtowe Local Plan

Mr. Allen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects the Broxtowe Local Plan Inspectors' report to be available. [96703]

Mr. McNulty: Although Broxtowe Borough Council did not enter into a Service Agreement with the Planning Inspectorate for the delivery of the report, the provisions of the standard Service Agreement are deemed to apply. On that basis, the delivery of the Inspector's report is promised no later than Thursday 25 September 2003.

Capital Projects

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will place the evaluations for Capital Modernisation Fund projects in his Department since 1998 in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [97032]

Mr. Raynsford: An evaluation report on the development of the Planning Inspectorate's Planning Portal Programme, which was part funded by the Capital Modernisation Fund and which formally closed in October 2002, is being prepared. It will be placed in the Library of both Houses shortly.

This is the only Modernisation Fund project within the remit of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister which has been completed.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Diana Organ: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which district and city councils in Gloucestershire have awarded Disabled Facilities Grants; and how much was spent by each in each year since 1998. [97245]

Mr. McNulty: Records indicate that the total eligible expenditure on Disabled Facilities Grants by the six Gloucestershire local housing authorities since 1998–99 is as follows:

£000

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Cheltenham	372	326	331	320
Cotswold	269	311	523	260
Forest of Dean	231	171	198	218
Gloucester	365	519	488	268
Stroud	208	175	180	173
Tewkesbury	232	240	300	247

Source:
2002 HIP Housing Strategy Statistical Index

Domestic Violence

Margaret Moran: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the data on local authority performance provided to the Audit Commission on the extent of domestic violence refuge provision in 2001–02. [97913]

Mr. McNulty: Information on local authority performance for 2001–02, including data on the number of domestic violence refuge places provided or supported by local authorities, was placed in the Library of the House in December 2002.

Havering Borough

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what plans he has to visit the London Borough of Havering; [96207]

(2) what discussions he had during January 2003 with representatives of the London Borough of Havering regarding the grant settlement for 2003–04; and if he will review the level of grant. [96206]

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley met with a delegation representing the London Borough of Havering on Thursday 8 January 2003 to discuss the provisional localgovernment finance settlement for 2003–2004. Three written representations were also received from Havering during consultation on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals. These representations have been carefully considered alongside all others, as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister took final decisions on the settlement.

Parliament has now approved the settlement which provides an increase in formula grant of £2.25 billion or 5.9 per cent. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has ensured that all local authorities receive a grant increase on a like for like basis which is at least greater than inflation. The London Borough of Havering has benefited from this guarantee. It will receive £154.4 million in general grant in 2003–04, which is an increase of £5.2 million.

There are currently no plans for my right hon. Friend Deputy Prime Minister to visit the London Borough of Havering. I myself visited the London Borough of Havering on September 2002.

Lionheart Industrial Estate, Alnwick

Mr. Beith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will call in the planning application by Northumberland County Council for a waste transfer station on the Lionheart Industrial Estate, Alnwick. [97260]

Mr. McNulty: Northumberland County Council, as waste planning authority, granted itself planning permission subject to a number of conditions on 5 February 2003, for the construction of a waste transfer station and household waste recovery centre at the Lionheart Enterprise Park, Alnwick.

Prior to that decision, my right hon. Friend, the Deputy Prime Minister, received representations which included a request for him to call-in the planning application. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister concluded that there was not sufficient conflict in this case with national policies or any other sufficient reason to warrant call-in of the application.

A copy of the non-intervention letter giving the reasons for this decision will shortly be placed on The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's web-site at http://www.planning.odpm.gov.uk/callins/index.htm. However, officials will forward a copy to the right hon. Member.

Local Government Finance

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister for what purposes he has held back part of the local government grant settlement; and if he will make a statement [97936]

Mr. Raynsford: None of the grant to be distributed by the 2003–04 local government finance settlement will be held back. Each local authority and specified body will get the grant allocation agreed by Parliament on the 5 of February, unless Parliament agrees an amending report at a later date.

Local Government Recruitment

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what action he is taking to increase *(a)* graduate recruits, *(b)* recruits from the private sector and *(c)* recruits from the voluntary sector into the senior management of local government; and if he will make a statement. [97599]

Mr. Leslie: Recruitment and retention is a key part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's capacity building programme for local government. Both the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the LGA have committed additional funds to expand the work of the local government specified bodies as part of this programme. As a direct result, the Employers Organisation (EO) is to increase the number of students on their National Graduate Recruitment and Development Programme in 2003–04.

As well as recruitment, it is equally important that local government employees get the support to encourage them to stay. In collaboration with Warwick University, the EO will run a number of support programmes for aspiring middle and senior managers. A new accelerated development programme based on the Civil Service's "Fast Stream" scheme will provide support to staff aiming for senior management positions through the key stages of their career. In addition, the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) has developed an Advanced Leadership Programme to develop the skills of aspiring senior managers in local government.

These initiatives, along with the wider modernisation agenda, will improve the image of local government. This will make it a more attractive option for people from all areas, including the voluntary and private sector, with whom authorities already work in partnership.

North West Regional Assembly

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what central Government funding the North West Regional Assembly received in each year from 1998 to 2003. [97199]

Mr. Raynsford: The North West Regional Assembly first received Government funding in 2000, when they were appointed as the Regional Planning Body for the North West. Funding is currently channelled through top tier local authorities. The Regional Assemblies Preparation Bill, currently before Parliament, contains provision that would enable the money to be paid directly to the Assembly. The amounts involved are as follows:

	£
2000–01	800,000
2001–02	850,000
2002–03	840,000

In the Spending Review 2000, the Government announced that they would make £15 million available to all the Regional Assemblies over a three year period (2001–04), to enable them to carry out their scrutiny of the Regional Development Agencies, to co-ordinate regional strategies and to undertake other activity to benefit the region. The NWRA's share of this is as follows:

	£
2001–02	500,000
2002–03	600,000
2003–04	600,000

Planning Enforcement

Mr. Wood: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he plans to publish a response to the consultation exercise on the effectiveness of planning enforcement; and what process will follow. [97641]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is currently considering the 482 responses received to the "Review of the Planning Enforcement System in England" consultation paper. We will be making an announcement on our conclusions and how we intend to take them forward as soon as possible.

Rough Sleepers

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what methodology is used to count the number of rough sleepers; when the last count took place; and how many rough sleepers there were in *(a)* Portsmouth, *(b)* Southampton and *(c)* Fareham at that date. [94923]

Mrs. Roche: Guidance was first published in 1996 on counting methodology developed in partnership with charities and voluntary organisations helping people sleeping rough. Independent evaluation has confirmed that the methodology remains the most robust method for measuring relative levels of rough sleeping and of change over time.

Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that the counts are undertaken and that the methodology is followed. The snapshot counts should take place on a single night, between 12 am and 6 am. The definition of people who should be included in rough sleeper counts is clearly set out in the guidance. It is: people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air (such as on the streets, or in doorways, parks or bus shelters); people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, or stations). Guidance is also given on the appropriate timing of rough sleeper counts—which will depend on the level of rough sleeping reported and on local circumstances.

Portsmouth last carried out a count in May 2002 and found one rough sleeper; Southampton last carried out a count in November 2001 and found six rough sleepers; and Fareham last carried out a count in February 1998 and found 13 rough sleepers. Since 1998, Fareham has reduced its numbers of rough sleepers and in the Housing Investment Programme return, July 2002, returned an estimate of 0–10.

Sustainable Communities (North-East)

Vera Baird: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will announce a housing market renewal pathfinder project in the Tees Valley. [97216]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is promoting a new, long-term approach to tackling housing low demand and abandonment. Nine pathfinders have been identified, focused on the areas most acutely affected. Although we are not seeking to establish further pathfinders at this time, in our action programme, "Sustainable Communities: building for the future", we explained that we would use the lessons learned from the pathfinders to help all areas with declining demand to tackle the problems better.

Waste Disposal

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will establish a special fund for the allocation of resources to the most affected local authorities for dealing with fly tipping, tyres, obsolete refrigerators and abandoned cars; and if he will make a statement. [94517]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

The Government do not have any plans to establish a fund specifically targeted at local authorities most affected by fly tipping of tyres, since this would be against the polluter pays principle and may create a perverse incentive for people to fly tip tyres safe in the knowledge that the public purse will fund any clearance. However, the Environment Agency has set up the Tyre Watch campaign to help tackle the problem of fly tipped tyres and to support a sustainable recovery and disposal system. The DTI is also exploring alternative routes for disposing of tyres, given the forthcoming ban from disposal to landfill under the Landfill Directive.

We have provided additional finance of £46 million to local authorities to cover their costs of disposing of refrigerators. Also, interim funding has been agreed for local authorities to help with the implementation of the End of Life Vehicles Directive, which may lead to an increase in levels of abandoned cars. The DTI will meet the additional costs and have secured three years funding (£25 million for 2003–04, 2004–05 and 2005–06) which was agreed in Spending Review 2002.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Lay Magistrates

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many lay magistrates there were in 1997; and what the most recent figure is. [95490]

Yvette Cooper: On 31 December 1997, our records showed that there were 26,018 magistrates in England and Wales excluding the Duchy of Lancaster (where the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is responsible for appointments). On 1 April 2002, there were 24,526[1]. However, the figures are not comparable because all records were re-validated in 2001 when a computer database was introduced and it became apparent that the previous figures had been inaccurate.

[1] Record-keeping changed to financial years in 2000–01.

Civil and Family Courts

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when she will launch the consultation on "Modernising the Civil and Family Courts". [97218]

Yvette Cooper: Consultation on "Modernising the Civil Courts", (which sets out the vision for civil and family business) took place between January and April 2001. A subsequent report entitled "Modernising the Civil and Family Courts" was published in May 2002. This report was a response to those who responded to the earlier consultation paper and also outlined the progress made.

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department *(a)* when and *(b)* how the local consultation in Dorset on modernising the civil and family courts will take place. [97223]

Yvette Cooper: Consultation on Modernising the Civil Courts, (which sets out the vision for civil and family business) took place between January and April 2001. A subsequent report entitled 'Modernising the Civil and Family Courts' was published in May 2002. This report was a response to those who responded to the Modernising the Civil Courts Consultation paper and outlined the progress made during that year.

My Department also plans to consult specifically on the proposed model of the estate set out in the May report. No timetable has yet been set, but the consultation document will be tailored specifically to the needs of local communities. The views of all those with an interest in the future status of civil justice in Dorset will therefore be canvassed. This will include Members of Parliament.

Departmental Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will list consultations the Department has conducted since 1997; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [97431]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Written Consultation applies to all formal written national public consultation documents issued by Departments from 1 January 2001 and the information requested is not available before that date. Listed as follows are the LCD Consultation Papers.

Name of Consultation Paper	Opening date	Closing date
Representative Claims—proposed new procedures	1 February 2001	1 May 2001
Community Legal Service—Financial Conditions for Funding by the Legal Services Commission	12 March 2001	1 May 2001
Pre-Action Protocol for Judicial Review	15 March 2001	7 June 2001
E-conveyancing—A draft order under section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000	19 March 2001	25 June 2001
Distress for Rent	8 May 2001	3 August 2001
Report of the Review Group on the Royal Peculiars	18 July 2001	1 October 2001
Enforcement Review Green Paper	19 July 2001	12 October 2001
The Administrative Court: Proposed changes to Primary Legislation following Sir Jeffrey Bowman's Review of the Crown Office List	31 July 2001	23 October 2001
Payments into Court in Satisfaction of Claims	16 August 2001	12 November 2001
Report of the Review Tribunals by Sir Andrew Leggatt	16 August 2001	30 November 2001
General Pre-Action Protocol	12 October 2001	31 January 2002
The House of Lords—Completing the Reform	7 November 2001	31 January 2002
Payments to Witnesses	5 March 2002	31 May 2002
Damages for Future Loss: Giving the Courts the Power to Order Periodical Payments for Future Loss and the Care Costs in Personal Injury Cases	13 March 2002	7 June 2002
Electoral Registers—Access Supply and Sale	13 March 2002	13 June 2002
Freezing Injunctions and Search Orders in Civil Proceedings	21 March 2002	12 June 2002
Promoting Inter Agency Working in the Family Justice System	27 March 2002	5 July 2002
Selection Procedures for the Circuit Bench and Recordership	8 April 2002	5 July 2002
Making Decisions: Helping people who have difficulty deciding for themselves	10 April 2002	9 July 2002
'In the Public Interest'—Matters arising for the Government from the OFT report on Competition in the Professions	31 July 2002	22 November 2002
Third Parties—Rights Against Insurers	6 September 2002	29 November 2002
The Rule Against Excessive Accumulations	6 September 2002	29 November 2002
Execution of Deeds and Documents	9 September 2002	29 November 2002
Commonhold Proposals for Commonhold Regulations	7 October 2002	6 January 2003

Independent Appellate Authority

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Independent Appellate Authority notified the Home Office of its decision to reject the Home Office's appeal to the tribunal in the case of Mrs. T. B. (TH/22817/2001; B1010649). [97676]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Notification that Leave to Appeal to the tribunal had been refused was sent to the Home Office on 27 November 2002.

Libra Project

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the costs of her Department's Libra project are *(a)* as originally estimated and *(b)* as currently predicted. [97711]

Yvette Cooper: I shall write to the hon. Member as soon as possible.

Online Sales/Purchases

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what *(a)* products, *(b)* goods and *(c)* services were (i) bought and (ii) sold online by her Department in each of the last five years. [97453]

Ms Rosie Winterton: My Department launched Money Claim Online on 4 February 2002. This service enables users to make claims online to recover money owed to them. Up to 28 January 2003, 16,659 claims had been issued using this service.

We do not currently purchase or offer other goods or services online. However, we intend to commence pilot projects for the procurement online of forms, stationery and rail tickets in the near future.

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers were employed (i) full-time, (ii) part-time and (iii) on a contract basis by her Department in (A) 2001–02 and (B) 2002–03. [97946]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I shall write to the hon. Member as soon as possible.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which companies supply timber and timber products to his Department. [95701]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The major supplies of timber to my Department are for furniture, and the suppliers are with the following Office for Government Commerce contracts: Senator International, Interiors, Godfrey Syrett Ltd. and Fray Design Ltd.

Vehicle Fleets

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each category of (i) vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel, on an annual basis, over each of the past three years, in renewal of his Department's and agencies' vehicle fleet on a lower emission basis. [96448]

Ms Rosie Winterton: My Department does not hold information relating to the improvement in vehicle emission standards of its fleet over the past three years. However, we will do so in the future as part of our approach to the Sustainable Development Plan.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the annual rate is

at which his Department has renewed its vehicle fleet, by *(a)* volume and *(b)* percentage for each category of (i) vehicle, (ii) type of power unit and (iii) type of fuel over the last three years. [96449]

Ms Rosie Winterton: My Department purchased 52 replacement cars in 2000, 31 in 2001 and 235 cars in 2002. Details are provided in the table. In future we will only lease duel fuel vehicles and they will be replaced every four years.

	2000		*2001*		*2002*	
Cars	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Petrol	0	0	0	1	1	0.5
Diesel	49	94	30	97	233	99
LPG	3	6	1	3	1	0.5
Total	52	100	31	100	235	100

Witnesses

Tim Loughton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many court cases failed to take place in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 2002–03 because (i) the accused and (ii) witnesses failed to turn up; and what action he has taken to combat failure of court cases because of non-attendance of parties. [96005]

Yvette Cooper: In 1997–98 56,116 cases were listed for trial in the Crown Court of which 1,967 (3.50 per cent.) failed to take place due to the accused, and 3,848 (6.85 per cent.) due to the witness(es), failing to attend.

Between April and September 2002 (the most recent data currently available) 27,427 cases were listed for trial in the Crown Court. 1,024 (3.73 per cent.) failed to take place due to the accused, and 1,717 (6.26 per cent.) due to the witness(es), failing to attend. Data on why cases fail has only been collected nationally by magistrates' courts from 1 April 2002.

For the six month period April to September 2002 81,437 trials were listed for trial in the magistrates' court, of which 6,780 (8.32 per cent.) failed to take place due to the accused, and 2,875 (3.53 per cent.) due to the witness(es), failing to attend.

Action is being taken across Criminal Justice Agencies to reduce the failure of court cases due to non attendance of witnesses, in particular the use of video links for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, and the introduction of Victim Support into all courts.

My Department is currently undertaking a Case Preparation Project with CIS partners which includes work on identifying reasons why defendants and witnesses fail to turn up for hearings

Youth Court Cases

Tim Loughton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many youth court cases in 2002–03 have had to be abandoned because the accused and witnesses failed to turn up. [96006]

Yvette Cooper: 81,437 trials were listed in the magistrates courts during the period April 2002 to September 2002, of which 2,875 (3.53 per cent.) did not continue due to the absence or withdrawal of a witness. 6,780 trials (8.32 per cent.) became ineffective due to the absence of the defendant. It is not possible to break down these figures into those relating specifically to youth cases.

My Department is currently undertaking a Case Preparation Project with CJS partners, which includes work on identifying reasons why defendants and witnesses fail to turn up for hearings.

INDEX TO THE

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 399**

SESSION 2002–2003

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Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'ws' indicate written statements.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting, is a written statement or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - ~~*Chamber Debates* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions~~ to debates);
  - *Debates Westminster Hall Debates* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Written Statements* (consisting of ministerial statements issued in writing); and
  - *Questions* (which includes all written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division
- (HL)=Bill starting in House of Lords
- (SP)=Bill in Scottish Parliament.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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